

**James R. Lewis:** *Sects & Stats: Overturning the Conventional Wisdom about Cult Members*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2014, 209pp.

James R. Lewis's *Sects & Stats: Overturning the Conventional Wisdom about Cult Members* is an invaluable contribution to the ever-growing body of studies on new religious movements. As the title promises, Lewis challenges many common assumptions concerning the members and ex-members of new religious movements (NRMs). It should be mentioned to the reader who is familiar with Lewis's previous research that, although several of the chapters in this book have been published in previous forms in journals, they appear in updated versions here. Besides these there is also some completely new material, among them an article co-authored with his colleague from Tromsø University, Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen.

Lewis has divided the book into four parts, starting with the provocative main question of the introduction: 'Are meaningful generalizations about New Religious Movements members still possible?' The following sections seek to answer the question with data from longitudinal and quasi-longitudinal studies, surveys, and national censuses.

Lewis argues that there are common assumptions about NRMs and their membership that are based on outdated demographic data. The generalisations made on the data from the 1970s and 1980s are

no longer valid. Lewis argues that the dominance of qualitative studies has created a situation in which generalisations on movements and their members and ex-members are made using outdated quantitative data. It seems there is an assumption that although the world may change, NRMs remain the same and their membership profile remains constant and as youthful as thirty years ago. Lewis argues that the academic study of NRMs lacks an adequate empirical base. For this empirical base Lewis turns to the often neglected quantitative approach to information available on affiliates of new religions from current national censuses in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, as well as surveys and longitudinal studies on the Order of Christ Sophia, Scientology, the Hare Krishna movement, Pagans, Satanists, the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness, and others.

In recent decades alternative religions and spiritualities have become increasingly mainstream. This mainstreaming is connected to the ageing of the new agers and members of NRMs. This does not only mean that existing members are getting older, but also that the average age of initial contact with a movement has been increasing. There are several reasons for this, including the transformation of the movements themselves. Lewis presents an insight from Burke Rochford, who shows how the profile of an average member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness

has changed as the organisation has become less world-renouncing and more family-oriented since the 1980s.

Lewis shows that despite the common assumption of the youth of new members of NRMs, they are no longer in their early twenties but rather in their late thirties. Longitudinal studies also indicate changing patterns in how people are introduced to the new movements: face-to-face social networks of friends and relatives are losing their importance to on-line social media. Lewis has noted this change among the affiliates of the Order of Christ Sophia, where between 2008 and 2011 websites became second to friends as the most common initial contact. The internet and social media like Facebook may well now be the most important initial point of contact with alternative religions. Lewis's Satanist surveys, at least, indicate that the internet is the most common place where initial contact with Satanism occurs.

Lewis also turns his attention to the national census data available from the Anglophone countries. Population censuses are an invaluable source for data on alternative and minority religions, as other surveys tend to ignore minorities because of their small number of followers. Lewis's conclusions from the census data make clear that the percentage of the population affiliated with NRMs is actually very low. Furthermore, the population census data shows the diversity of the NRMs. It is also important that

censuses collect different data that can be used in profiling members of the movements. Lewis considers both age and gender. In comparing the data from different rounds of national censuses, it also becomes evident that while in some movements the average age of an affiliate is increasing there are some NRMs that continue to attract the same segment of society. Thus, Satanists and Rastafarians, for example, continue to be predominantly young males.

James R. Lewis's book is an extremely important addition to the discussion concerning the quantitative approach to the study of contemporary religion and especially minority religions. It may be time for academics again to turn seriously to numbers, statistics, and other available demographic data, because numbers *do* count, even in religion. National censuses provide a necessary background to surveys, and numbers form a framework and context for qualitative studies. Numbers place the common assumptions and rhetoric of the movements about their membership or affiliates in a more sober context. Sometimes they also have a sobering effect on the general public, who tend to take some claims and assumptions at face value. In 1999 the claims of the self-proclaimed leader of Estonian Satanists about the numbers of Satanists in Estonia almost created moral panic in the country. According to him there were thousands of Satanists in Estonia and at least four to five hundred of them were practising. When the national census

results for 2000 were published, the grounds for this panic was swept away: it turned out that there were only 43 Satanists in Estonia, mostly young Estonian males in their twenties.

In conclusion, I wish also to draw attention to the special issue of the journal *Religion* (Volume 44, Issue 3, 2014), edited by Abby Day and Lois Lee, which focuses on surveys, censuses, and religious self-identification in various countries. As Lewis remarks in his conclusion, survey and census data is a source for original research. However, there may be a danger in this, as the removal of the religious identity question from forthcoming censuses in some EU countries, including the UK and Estonia, has been discussed for several years. What would this mean for the study of minority religions? Presumably, it would result in the prevalence of new/old common assumptions and the dominance of conventional wisdom with little basis in reality.

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