

## **The relationship between NRMs rejection of popular culture and respect to the law**

*Why do some NRMs reject popular culture and turn their backs on society? Does a world renouncing or world denouncing mindset mean they will not respect the law and civil authority?*

The term New Religious Movements (NRMs) refers to emerging religions. Each NRM is unique so classification is difficult. One method of classification is to compare the degree to which the NRM associates with the world. Wallis defines three types of NRMs: world affirming, world accommodating and world rejecting (Aldridge, 2007, p. 50). World affirming religions seek salvation through an inward focus to achieve enlightenment that is possible for anyone. They are rarely accused of breaking up families but may conflict with professional groups. For example, Scientology conflicts with psychiatrists (Aldridge, 2007, pp. 53, 55-56). World accommodating religions are indifferent to the world and are rarely controversial. They are concerned with inner spiritual life through spiritual exercises and not political activities (Aldridge, 2007, pp. 56-57). World rejecting religions claim their members can only be saved by obeying their system of belief since they are possessors of the truth. They may also expect an imminent collapse or destruction of the world (Aldridge, 2007, p. 51). Not all NRMs can be grouped into these categories, but this framework helps to highlight the diversity of NRMs and demonstrates that not all NRMs isolate themselves from the world. This essay will discuss some reasons that NRMs become world rejecting and will analyse the relationship between the degree to which an NRM is world rejecting and their obedience to the law.

There are many reasons why an NRM might reject the world. One of the main reasons it does is a result of its beliefs (Millikan, 2011, p. 16). A belief that the world is evil or contaminated will lead members to reduce interaction with the world in order to stay pure. The Family had

a red line near their doors to remind them that they were entering into the dominion of Satan (Millikan, 2011, p. 16).

There are social factors within the group and outside the group that may encourage an NRM to isolate itself. The stigma received from the media is an example of outside pressure which may drive an NRM to isolation. The media reports only what is newsworthy, which generally involves an event that is negative, rare and something their target audience would resonate with (Cowan & Hadden, 2004, p. 69). Generally, news stories about NRMs do not include details about their religious beliefs but instead use a basic narrative and provocative vocabulary to describe events. For example, Waco is a “cop story,” Aum Shinrikyo are “terrorists” and the Family are “child abusers” (Cowan & Hadden, 2004, p. 67). Although there may be some truth to these accounts the media does not report about NRMs when they are going well, since this is not considered newsworthy (Cowan & Hadden, 2004, p. 70). This results in a disproportionate number of negative stories about NRMs in the news.

General society only knows as much about NRMs as the media reports. The unbalanced reports regarding NRMs committing crimes leads to the perception that all NRMs commit crimes. This allows people to project their own fears onto them (Possami & Lee, 2004, pp. 342-343) and in turn may lead to stigma. This may result in a group that does not commit crimes living within their own communities with people who do understand them to avoid the stigma.

The Amish, the Bruderhof and the Exclusive Brethrens see fit to break away from society and live in their own communities but this alone does not mean they will reject the civil laws. More factors must be considered to determine whether an NRM will cause civil disruption. These factors include a group’s devotion to their leader and their teachings; whether they have apocalyptic teachings or teachings that justify breaking the law; a history of violence

and whether they have unfamiliar customs (Millikan, 2011, p. 36). Having one of more of these traits still does not indicate an NRM will reject the law, although the likelihood is increased.

Aum Shinrityo is a group well known for its rejection of civil laws. Twice releasing sarin gas with the express purpose of murder and being involved in the murder of a lawyer are demonstrations of their disobedience to the law (Shimazono, 2006, p. 50). Aum Shinrityo isolated themselves from the world falling into the world rejecting classification but there were other indications that the group would be violent. Their teachings included the imminent end of the world and a justification of violence that would help them advance spiritually (Shimazono, 2006, p. 51). Their history of smaller violent crimes was an indication that they could participate in a more dramatic event like the Tokyo Subway Disaster.

Wiccans on the other hand live in closely tied covens and believe that the divine is all around them and humans, gods and nature are all interconnected (Pearson, 2006, p. 683). Their belief is one of doing whatever as long as it causes no harm to another. They believe that what they do to someone else they will receive threefold back (Pearson, 2006, p. 684). Although Wiccans isolate themselves from the world and are perceived to be witches, their teachings indicate they are unlikely to become violent.

The leader of an NRM plays an important part in determining if the group will respect the law. The leader needs to establish their own legitimacy within the group otherwise their power will be undermined and the group will dissolve or become unstable. In reaction to this instability they may become violent (Dawson, 2008, p. 161). In order to advance their own power a leader may demonize enemies and call into question other authorities, which in turn encourages solidarity within the group (Dawson, 2008, p. 158). A leader might test their follower's loyalty by asking them to perform rituals that end their own lives, such as the

Peoples Temple (Dawson, 2008, p. 158). If a group starts to be violent they may continue on a downward spiral due to an increase in fear, paranoia or becoming accustomed to act in a way so that the leader may exploit the feelings of the group to increase their power (Dawson, 2008, p. 161). These increasingly violent acts may even be seen as successes for the group.

NRMs leave society for an identity which gives the members both meaning and a belonging to a community that society has turned its back on (Moeller & Rutt, 2005, p. 134). Even though some NRMs isolate themselves from the world, this does not mean they will be violent. Other factors must be considered, such as their belief, the nature of their leader, their history and their teachings before conclusions are drawn.

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