

Who and what belongs where – and when and why? Boundary construction, maintenance and change in new religious movements

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Both the physical and the social world may suggest, but neither dictates the boundaries that people draw to distinguish different phenomena. Drawing on the work of Mary Douglas, it is assumed that, while categories are necessary for cultural life, where they are drawn is arbitrary, or at least relative to those who draw and/or recognise them. Boundaries may be strong or weak; they may be precise, or fuzzy; they may be more or less permeable and more or less negotiable; and they will always be more or less changing. No two people perceive the world in the same way, but systematic differences are observable according to the beliefs, practices and interests of different groups.

This paper will consider the construction, characteristics and consequences of some of the boundaries utilised both within new religious movements (NRMs) and to distinguish them from the rest of the society in which they exist.

Boundaries constructed by *new* NRMs tend to be strong, clear and non-negotiable, defining unambiguous distinctions between, for example, Godly and Satanic, good and bad, right and wrong, before and after, and, perhaps most significantly, them and us. As such, they function both to control and to protect the membership. In so far as they challenge pre-existing boundaries, they are frequently seen as a threat by different sections of the wider society. ‘Counter cultists’, who object to the movements’ heretical beliefs, see the redrawing of what, for example, is considered Christianity as threatening their conception of ‘real Christianity’; ‘anti-cultists’, who object to the movements’ deviant practices, protest against what the NRMs consider to be permissible (or non-permissible) behaviour.

However, NRMs tend to change more rapidly and radically than older, more established religious movements, and – if they survive – will frequently ‘denominationalise’ with boundaries becoming weaker and more negotiable. This may be due to internal factors, such as failures of prophecy or inevitable shifts in demographic profile, or to external factors, such as the arrival of the Internet, which has facilitated both the strengthening and the undermining of authority structures and communication networks.