PREFACE

This book is about one of the more familiar, but still little understood, developments that has taken place in American religion in recent years—experimentation with movements largely outside the Judeo-Christian faith. These movements, and the less organized values and beliefs associated with them, have aroused curiosity because they emerged at a time when many observers were predicting the death of God and a gradual dispersal of his followers. Attention has focused on the new religions also because they seem to appeal to some of the groups that traditional religion has had difficulty attracting—for example, college students, young people, and the educated. Perhaps the most important reason why these movements have drawn attention, however, is because they seem to harken to the ancient religions of the East, to the occult and the psychic, and to humanistic creeds more often than to the religious traditions of the American past.

The aim of the present book is to make a modest contribution to the understanding of these movements by presenting some empirical data bearing upon them. These data will shed additional light on some of the questions that have remained largely unanswered about the new religions. Why are some people attracted to them and others not? What sorts of values and experiences tend to be associated with religious experimentation? Why have some people defected from conventional religion and remained non-religious or only nominally religious?

A sociological approach is taken in attempting to answer these questions. The data examined are from random-sample surveys conducted by professional interviewers. Admittedly, such data are poorly adapted to understanding many aspects of religious commitment, a fact that becomes increasingly apparent to anyone who works with them for very long. But for all its limitations, a sociological survey still remains a useful way to determine how many people in a population express particular kinds of religious commitments; it remains an efficient way to collect relatively uniform information from a large enough number of people that systematic comparisons of differences can be made; and it remains perhaps the only way to pin down relations among various sorts of commitments and other factors with

some degree of statistical precision. A sociological perspective also informs the manner in which questions are framed here, as it does the kinds of answers sought. The concern underlying much of the discussion is to find out what it is about American society that has stimulated the growth of new religions.

In the end, it may seem that we are as far from having an answer as when we began, or it may seem that more questions have been raised than have been answered. That, of course, is how it should be in exploring something about which little is known. It should be kept in mind, however, that the exploration is largely limited to certain kinds of social factors, such as education or age or background, and to certain kinds of social implications. This is *not* a study of the inner composition of religious movements, of the psychology of people who join religious movements, or of the theological or philosophical teachings of these movements. Such studies are highly valuable and more of them need to be done. My own impression, however, is that the internal aspects of religious movements are often written about, if for no other reason than that members and former members write about their experiences, while the larger social contexts of religious movements are often neglected. Hence the focus of the present study.

While affirming the utility of a sociological perspective and attempting to maintain this perspective in the present volume, I have made no effort to adhere faithfully to any single sociological theory. In part this has been necessitated by the kinds of data I have had available. But, more to the point, it has been necessitated by the new religions themselves and by our present state of knowledge about them. A theory that proves helpful for understanding why people become involved with yoga, for example, doesn't seem very helpful for explaining attraction to astrology (as we shall see), nor does the theory that explains astrology shed much light on the reasons why some folks have psychic experiences and others don't. For this reason, the chapters forming the present study should probably be regarded, not as elements of a single argument, but as essays bearing only a loose relation with one another, each attempting to illuminate some rather specific aspect of religious experimentation and defection. It should also go without saying that no attempt has been made to be comprehensive in the problems treated.

My interest in new religions dates from my earliest days in graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley, where I was first able to combine a long-standing personal interest in religion with sociological concepts and tools of inquiry under the tutelage of Charles Glock, Guy Swanson, and Robert Bellah, each of whom served as a provocative mentor and, in combination, provided one of the most creative atmospheres for

learning and reflection that one can imagine. At their inspiration, my still amorphous interests in religion quickly became directed toward exploring the new religious currents that were becoming increasingly visible in the Berkeley area at that time. Many of the ideas and quasi-theories in the present study were initially formed in those early explorations.

The chance to devote my full energies to the study of new religions came in 1971, when Professors Glock and Bellah received a sizable grant to support graduate students interested in doing research on new religious consciousness. Between 1971 and 1974, an intensive program of research was carried out at the Survey Research Center on various forms of new religious consciousness, and, since 1974, many of us who participated in that project have continued to pursue these interests. It was also from that project that the idea was born for a series of monographs on new religious consciousness under the general editorship of Professors Glock and Bellah. The present volume is a part of that ongoing series.

The greatest debt I have incurred in preparing this study, as the foregoing bears witness, is to Charlie Glock and Bob Bellah, both for their ideas, which have deeply influenced my own thinking about religion, and for their continued support and encouragement. I also wish to express my appreciation to the staff of the Survey Research Center and to the other members of the religious consciousness project for their assistance in designing and conducting the research and for many constructive suggestions in the course of the analysis.

Three of the chapters are based on papers that have been published previously. Parts of Chapter 2 initially appeared as "Astrology and Marginality," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 15 (June 1976), 157-168. Parts of Chapter 5 are taken from "Peak Experiences: Some Empirical Tests," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (1977). And parts of Chapter 6 were published in "Recent Patterns of Secularization: A Problem of Generations?," *American Sociological Review*, 41 (October 1976), 850-867. I wish to thank the editors of these journals for permission to reprint this material. Each of these papers has been extensively revised.

Glen Mellinger, who is the co-author of Chapter 7, made available the data on which that chapter is based. He and his staff at the Institute for Research in Social Behavior have been most helpful over the years, not only in sharing the results of their research, but in their continued enthusiasm for investigating the peculiarities of new consciousness and alternative life styles.

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Larry Blackwood assisted with much of the computer processing and read most of the chapters for methodological accuracy. My many conversations with him contributed greatly to the enjoyment of pursuing the research as well as to the product itself.

Finally, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my wife, Sally, to whom the book is fittingly dedicated, and to my daughters, Robyn and Brooke, for their patience and love. People who write books search in vain for ways of acknowledging these forms of personal sentiment without seeming trite. For it is only in personal relationships, not in the printed word, that such feelings can truly be expressed.

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