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Over the last few years, several books labeled as “companions,” “handbooks,” or similar terms have been published by different publishers on a variety of academic areas. In line with this trend is the present book, which covers the area of new religious movements. It is presented as “an essential resource for students of religious studies, history of religion, sociology, anthropology, and psychology of religion,” and it promises to discuss “key features of NRMs from a systematic, comparative perspective, summarizing results of forty years of research” (p. i). Some of the most well-known international scholars in the field have contributed to the book.


First, there is much to appreciate in this book, both for the scholar of new religious movements and for students. The book collects works of several very good scholars and writers. I especially appreciate some of the chapters in part three, where the authors succeed in combining an exceptionally thorough knowledge of the subject of their study with a very structured outline, which
makes the chapters a real joy to read. I also welcome some of the more unusual subjects concerning new religious movements in this part of the book. One is Jihadism, which is discussed in a very well written and interesting chapter that highlights links with previous religious expressions of Islam, as well as similarities with “classical” new religious movements such as being in a state of tension with society and a tendency to legitimate one’s position by referring to continuity with the past. Another interesting chapter is the one on Neo-Sufism, which discusses different currents of Sufism and Neo-Sufism in the context of new religious movements. Furthermore, the two chapters about new religious movements in Russia and in sub-Saharan Africa add an additional value to the book. These four chapters especially put the area of new religious movements in perspective, and raise many fundamental questions about the academic area in question. The chapter about new religious movements and the internet also feels like a fresh one with interesting perspectives.

Some of the chapters in the other two parts are also highlights in the area and combine strong expertise with a talent to explain and give different perspectives on complicated subjects. However, these kinds of summarizing chapters are much more difficult to write than the monographic kind of chapters in the third part. One reason is that the area of new religious movements is a sprawling one, and it is not always easy to construct, apply, and transmit structures that are both simple and meaningful. Not all of the chapters in the first two parts are easy to follow, and there are even some parts that do not move much beyond boring enumerations. Even if you know the subject well, it is easy to lose focus.

A potential criticism of the book, which I would like to raise, is the question of selection of themes for the different contributions. A book of the “companion” or “handbook” variety demands a lot of consideration as to what themes and new religious movements on which to focus. The criteria by which the themes and new religious movements are chosen, those which are to be included and excluded, become a crucial issue. The question of selection is of course an open one: there is not only one “right answer.” A “companion” or “handbook” may be structured in a number of different ways, presenting a number of different orientations in themes and religious groups. I think, however, that a book of this kind would have benefited greatly from an initial discussion about what parts of the field were chosen to be included and excluded, and, additionally, a discussion of why certain themes were chosen and highlighted while others were dismissed. In this context, it would also have been interesting to know something about how the field of new religious movements, for the purpose of this book, was delineated.