Religion & New Religious Movements and Contemporary Crises Show Notes & Major Questions

Overview

This episode of Religion & delves into how contemporary religious movements address urgent political, cultural, and environmental crises, from technological transformation to ecological collapse. Looking across a wide array of new religious movements, participants will investigate how these movements reimagine ancient practices for modern concerns while creating new frameworks for living. Join us for a lively discussion at the intersection of modern-day crises and the ways religion shapes and is shaped by these shifts in religious tradition.

Host: Kelly E. Hayes, Professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University Indianapolis

Panelist: Knut Graw, Friedrich Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg

Panelist: Daria Hartman, PhD candidate at the University of Münster

Panelist: Benjamin Zeller, Professor of Religion at Lake Forest College (Chicago, USA)

Resources Mentioned in Webinar

QAnon: From Conspiracy Theory to New Religious Movement by Marc-André Argentino

Question 1: What defines a new religious movement in your work, and do they differ from established religions in their approach to modern crises?

Benjamin Zeller: Much like the term "religion" it is impossible to come to a single definition. Eileen Barker is probably one of the most preeminent scholars of New Religious Movements (NRMs) and uses a chronological definition. A NRM is either born in the last two maybe three generations, or she says there is a post war one (post WWII). I think this is helpful because what is interesting about NRMs is how they can respond rapidly, in a way that longer established religions cannot, they can also respond to what is going on around them. They are also different from established religions in social ways, they tend to be smaller, communal, and intensive.

Daria Hartmann: I just read *From Conspiracy Theory to New Religious Movement* by Marc-André Argentino, I think there are some people who would argue that QAnon is a religious movement. I sometimes find the term difficult to work with, I tend to look at it as more of, like what Benjamin said, a temporal distinction. I wonder if there really is such a huge difference between religion and NRM or if it is how we categorize these terms.

Knut Graw: The term NRM is a comparative one; we are comparing the "new" to the established. Contemporary has always felt like a better term because I see a lot of continuity or

“new” religious groups pulling from tradition. There are some groups who are both new and traditional.

Kelly Hayes: One definition I have used with my work in Brazil puts some of the emphasis on that NRM emerge in the modern period. So, they reflect the epistemological structures of the modern world, post enlightenment. I find thinking about NRMs as they are responding to this huge epistemic shift in terms of epistemology but also ontology that the modern period brings.

Question 2: How, from your own field of specialty, do crises play into the formation of the groups you study?

Benjamin Zeller: A lot of my research deals with UFO groups and groups responding directly to technology. What I find fascinating is you can track whatever is going on in the world in terms of what the UFO religions religious content is about. The first waves of these groups were responding to the first flying saucer sightings, nuclear weapons, energy, and war. The idea is that once the technology was advanced to make the bomb, the aliens came to tell us to advance spiritually as well, or else, you risk destroying the world. Later, the Raëlians, another UFO religion, started focusing on concerns for the environment and a fascination with bio tech or hacking.

Daria Hartmann: QAnon is very digital, it emerged in a digital space, a lot of the practices I look at ar fundamentally shaped by the tech platforms they are on. When we look at platforms like TikTok or YouTube, there are a lot of changes occurring in the way people use the platforms for religious uses. When it comes to how it responds to crises, we see QAnon evolve from/around conspiracy theories which are a response to different crises. For example, political corruption, institutional distrust, deep state, etc. For me it is interesting to look at QAnon because it touches a lot of these very important changes we see now.

Question for Daria from Kelly: Can you talk about how we might think about QAnon as a new religious movement and is that a useful approach?

Daria Hartmann: I think it is a valid way of looking at QAnon, overtime it has become more like a religion, as it evolved. During the pandemic it was interesting because there were a lot of religious motifs and ideas within QAnon but also in certain churches there have been other aspects adapted. I think there is a way to look at QAnon and see how it resembles a religion increasingly but from my perspective, it is interesting to look how conspiracy theories or groups may resemble religions in their functionality, similar fulfillments, truth constructing, meaning making in a broader context. What these ideas and groups provide are frames of understanding and thinking which are very powerful because they influence people's actions and practices. It functions in providing a master narrative, a set of practices, and institutions developed around them. But the institutions are smaller and online.

Question 3: How are crises dealt with within your work and study of divination practices?

Knut Graw: In a way, divination is always a means to deal with crises. The means they use divination tends to be more traditional, but the need is contemporary. Migration is one crisis that I saw involved in almost all divinations. When we look at the term crisis, it means something like evaluating, judging, or making a decision. It is a situation that makes us make a decision. What NRM does is expressive of a certain decision being taken in relation to a situation. A person going to a diviner already decided to go but they are brought there for a reason.

Question 4: Is there a role or appeals to hidden knowledge and what role does that play in NRMs or something like QAnon?

Benjamin Zeller: I think you could break down NRMs into the esotericist or non esotericist categories. Some groups also claim special knowledge that is there and accessible; you just have to have the right tools or mindset; the text just needs to be interpreted. On a psychological level, I think there is a certain appeal to having access to special knowledge. People often jump to these people being crazy or brainwashed to follow a group, but maybe they get something out of it.

Daria Hartmann: I would agree with what Benjamin said. With QAnon I see a lot has to do with interpretation. All the information or theories are online for people to access, but there are differences in how "good" people are at decoding it or interpreting it. One becomes part of an enlightened minority, and they feel more like part of a special small group. Trying to decode a hidden truth is central to QAnon.

Knut Graw: Maybe divination is the most paradigmatic practice; people trying to read signs to interpret the relationship with life. There is also a lot to do with the unknown in divination practices. In cowrie shell divination, the diviners are not the authors of the divinatory statements; knowledge emerges from the shells, through the diviner and then to the client. In divination practices there is usually a direct crisis that people see and feel, whereas in a larger more established religion that may be opaquer.

Question 5: Are there specific crises that we see NRMs routinely responding to? Are there people that are drawn to these ideas more often than others?

Benjamin Zeller: One way we see people joining is the deprivation model, people who were lost, missing something, or deprived of something. Then it became relative deprivation. It is not necessarily a theory we use anymore, but the idea at the core is that people who join groups like NRMs or cults are socially liminal. They tend to be looking for answers to questions. See Kelly's work on the Valley of the Dawn.

Daria Hartmann: I agree; what draws people is a combination of things. They [conspiracy theories] can provide something for people, especially if there is anxiety or ambiguity around a topic or situation, a feeling of loss of control. The last few decades have been very destabilizing for a lot of people, economic disparities, political polarization, etc. Conspiracy theories often have someone or thing to blame, giving people a place to put frustrations and fears on. Another aspect here is digitalization and globalization.

Question from Kelly to Daria: Is it the same kind of people that Benjamin was talking about that you find are drawn to conspiracy theory movements?

Daria Hartmann: There are some intersections; some narratives travel into different spaces with those people. It often comes down to a distrust that brings people together in conspiracy groups.

Benjamin Zeller: I was just teaching the Book of Job, and this is a similar situation to the idea of theodicy, of suffering and finding reason for that suffering and situation. How come the world is the way it is and how come it's so crumby. Established religions, NRMs, and even conspiracy theories offer answers to these questions people ask.

Knut Graw: What has been useful for me to keep in mind is that religious life functions on a micro and macro level. Looking at both the individual and the world around them. Individuals have a concern but then it may also be a larger community problem, and when a religion or group can answer those questions, it draws people in.