

The Church of England in relation to New Religious Movements and Alternative Spiritualities

Introduction

The Church of England encourages openness, welcome and hospitality towards people of other faiths and none. However, the religious scene is changing in Britain, such that, in addition to established other faiths such as Judaism and Islam, there are many so-called New Religious Movements (NRMs) and alternative spiritualities now also present in Britain. The Church of England has two strands of work in relation to people of other faith and these are distinguished from each other. One strand of work relates to the inter-faith portfolios and the other to New Religious Movements and Alternative Spiritualities. This document relates to the work done in relation to NRMS and Alternative Spiritualities.

What is the difference between the historic World Religions, New Religious Movements and Alternative Spiritualities?

The Inter-faith portfolios relate for the most part to major world faiths other than Christianity. These include:

**Judaism,
Islam,
Buddhism,
Hinduism,
Sikhism,
Jainism
Zoroastrianism
Bahá'í¹**

These are major world historic religions and are characterised by:

- ♦ significant and identifiable history of the faith
- ♦ significant scripture or holy text
- ♦ significant history of sacred practice
- ♦ identifiable theology, mythic structure or philosophy within a developed tradition
- ♦ identifiable holy persons or exemplars of faith
- ♦ accountable authority or leadership, upholding right behaviour and practice within the community
- ♦ cultic integrity- the formation and sustaining of an identifiable faith community.

¹ These nine faiths (including Christianity) are recognized by the Inter Faith Network and the Faith Communities Consultative Council, and the Church of England works with them under the inter-faith portfolios. There are historic reasons for including the Bahá'í but this group is also described as a New Religious Movement. As such, information about the Bahá'í can be obtained from the New Religious Movements Adviser or the NRM diocesan network.

In the Church of England, through the inter-faith portfolios we have:

- ♦ Formal dialogue
- ♦ Advocacy
- ♦ Representation
- ♦ Sharing and exchange

Alternative Spiritualities and NRMs have different characteristics:

New Religious Movements are:

- ♦ In general less than 200 years old and often very recent groups
- ♦ Existing and changing over one to several generations
- ♦ Less easy to define, sometimes changing in style, name, theology or character
- ♦ Possessed of a religious character or processes
- ♦ Often derivative of established faiths (Christian, Hindu)

In addition, New Religious Movements may demonstrate as:

- ♦ reinvention of ancient practice
- ♦ Science fiction movements
- ♦ Personal development movements
- ♦ Small, esoteric, occult [ie secret] groups

Alternative Spiritualities are more functionally religious and may include:

- ♦ A sense of the sacred
- ♦ Different therapies and practices
- ♦ New Age groups

Some examples of NRMs which are Christian derivatives:

Some NRMs use Christian thought, language and tradition. Some seek to improve or 'finish' shortcomings in Christianity.

- ♦ Unification Church (also known as Moonies, Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, with offshoots such as the Universal Peace Federation)
- ♦ Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, (also known as Mormons, LDS)
- ♦ International Church of Christ (ICC)
- ♦ The Family (formerly known as Children of God)
- ♦ Jehovah's Witnesses
- ♦ Christian Science

Some examples of NRMs derived from Eastern religions:

- ♦ Sai Baba
- ♦ Sahaja Yoga
- ♦ ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness)
- ♦ Brahma Kumaris
- ♦ Osho (Rajneeshism)
- ♦ Elan Vital (Divine Light Mission)

Some examples of NRMs derived from Science Fiction or belief in extraterrestrial life:

- ♦ Scientology
- ♦ UFO cults (eg Aetherius)
- ♦ Raelians

Some examples of esoteric or occult NRMs

- ♦ Rosicrucians/Golden dawn etc
- ♦ Freemasonry
- ♦ Society of the inner light

Some examples of Personal Development Movements:

- ♦ Subud
- ♦ School of Economic Science (SES)
- ♦ *est* (now Landmark)
- ♦ The Emin
- ♦ TM (transcendental meditation)

Pagan traditions:

- ♦ Wicca
- ♦ Druidry
- ♦ Heathenry (also North Tradition)
- ♦ Shamanism
- ♦ Witchcraft
- ♦ Asatru

Alternative spiritualities, which may or may not involve the use of a practitioner:

- ♦ Therapies (especially healing therapies eg Reiki and other channelling energy rites)
- ♦ DIY Mind/Body/Spirit practices and rituals
- ♦ Belief in the powers of psychics and mediums
- ♦ Astrology
- ♦ Other forms of divination
- ♦ Some forms of Yoga with spiritual teaching

What do NRMs and Alternative Spiritualities want?

Many NRMs and Alternative Spiritualities want nothing from the Church of England. Others, however, want the same kind of relationship with the Church of England as the major historic world religions. They may be looking for:

- ♦ Acceptance
- ♦ Advocacy
- ♦ Dialogue
- ♦ Access
- ♦ Money

Some NRMs want the Church to intervene with government or other agencies to help them gain credibility. Many NRMs feel that being on the same platform with the Church of England can address bad PR or negative media coverage. Other NRMs invite the Church of England to stand

alongside them on thematic issues such as the environment or peace initiatives but then include this as endorsement for their group or to legitimate their interest in such concerns. Others want access to decision making bodies on matters such as sacred sites and locations, education policy, civic occasions, chaplaincy and interfaith dialogue.

Policy towards NRMs and Alternative Spiritualities

The Church of England does not have formal dialogue with any group of this kind or provide services to such groups.

The Church of England does not facilitate access, engage in advocacy or provide funds or access to funds.

The Church of England does attempt to listen, to encourage and support informal local contacts with groups, and to provide pastoral assistance where this is requested.

The Church of England uses and supports INFORM at the London School of Economics and some other information groups to resource its knowledge of NRMs and Alternative Spiritualities. INFORM also provides access to legal and counselling services, parents' and ex-members' groups.

The Church of England does *not* act to suppress groups, either directly or by supporting anti-cult or counter-cult groups.

Work pertaining to New Religious Movements and Alternative Spiritualities is staffed by the Archbishops' Adviser and the National Adviser, along with a network of diocesan advisers.

We provide

- ◆ Information and educational material
- ◆ Guidance for families who have people in NRMs and AS
- ◆ Guidance on the use of church buildings and church halls by NRMs and AS
- ◆ Guidance on the application of Canon B43
- ◆ Other specialist advice on ecclesiastical law in relation to NRM and AS issues
- ◆ Pastoral care for people involved with an NRM or AS issue
- ◆ Negotiation
- ◆ Support for family members
- ◆ Support for clergy, especially chaplains
- ◆ Access to specialist ministries (eg deliverance ministry)
- ◆ Investigation of complaints about churches or Christian groups which indulge in 'cult-like' behaviour.
- ◆ Advice on compatibility issues (eg Can I be both Christian and Pagan?)
- ◆ Advice on Christian parallel groups which adopt other beliefs and practices and may continue to be part of a worshipping congregation.