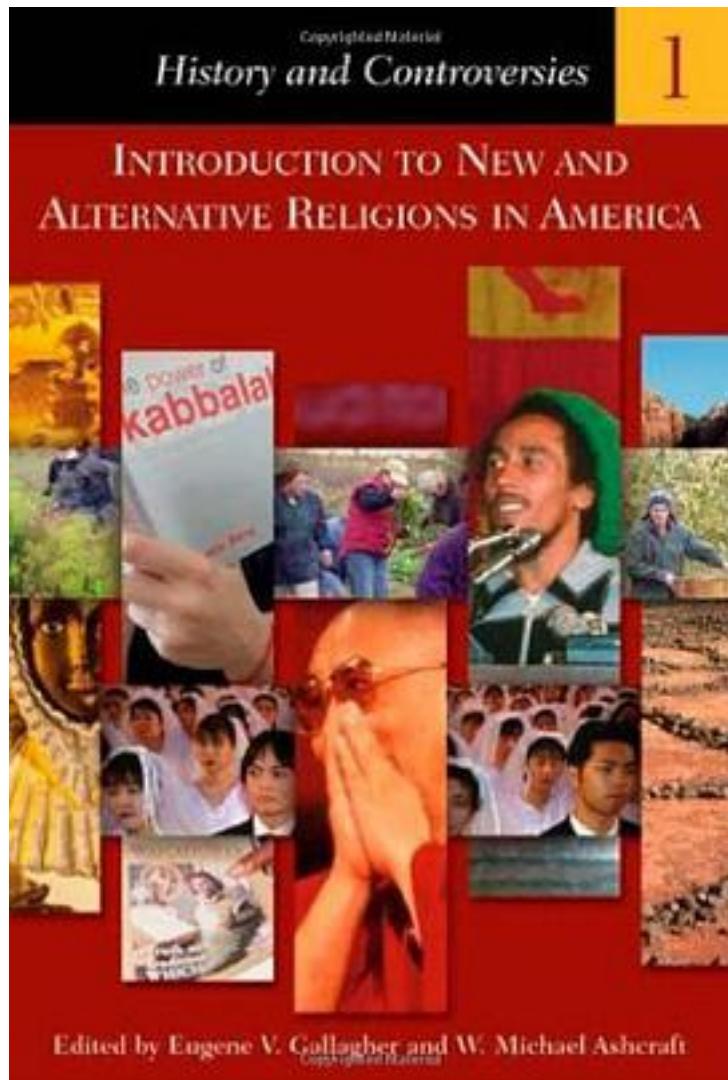


Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America



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Most new or alternative religions are gravely misunderstood by members of the religious mainstream. Labeled "cults" or "sects," groups and their members are often ridiculed or otherwise disregarded as weird and potentially dangerous by the populace at large. Despite their efforts at educating the general public, the various anti- and counter-cult activists have in fact promoted much more misunderstanding than accurate understanding of the religious lives of some of their fellow citizens. Consequently, they have helped to create a very hostile environment for anyone whose religious practices do not fit within a so-called "mainstream." This set rectifies the situation by presenting accurate, comprehensive, authoritative and accessible accounts of various new and alternative religious movements that have been and are active in American society, and it addresses ways of understanding new and alternative religions within a broader context. Determining what actually constitutes a new or alternative religion is a subject of constant debate. Questions arise as to a new faith's legitimacy, beliefs, methods of conversion, and other facets of a religious movement's viability and place in a given culture. How a religion gains recognition by the mainstream, which often labels such new movements as cults, is fraught with difficulty, tension, and fear. Here, experts delineate the boundaries and examine the various groups, beliefs, movements, and other issues related to new faiths and alternative beliefs. Readers will come away with a fuller understanding of the religious landscape in America today. Volume 1: "History and Controversies" discusses the foundations of new and alternative religions in the United States and addresses the controversies that surround them. This volume helps readers better understand what makes a new or alternative belief system a religion and the issues involved. Volume 2: "Jewish and Christian Traditions" explores the various new religions that have grown out of these two Abrahamic faiths. Groups such as the Shakers, the People's Temple, the Branch Davidians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others are examined. Volume 3: "Metaphysical, New Age, and Neopagan Movements" looks at Shamanism, Spiritualism, Wicca, and Paganism, among other movements, as they have developed and grown in the U.S. These faiths have found new and devoted followers yet are often misunderstood. Volume 4: "Asian Traditions" focuses on those new and alternative religions that have been inspired by Asian religious traditions. From Baha'i to Soka Gakkai, from Adidam to the Vedanta Society, contributors look at a full range of groups practicing and worshiping in the U.S. today. Volume 5: "African Diaspora Traditions and Other American Innovations" examines the various traditions linked to the African diaspora. Chapters include: Shamanism; Wicca; Black Israelites; Santeria; Scientology; Elan Vital; Hare Krishna; Soka Gakkai; and many more.

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