

Chapter 1

Philosophy and New and Alternative Religious Movements: Should They Be Introduced?

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A Personal Statement of Faith?

If you are a stranger to rejection letters from academic journals, then the chances are you are not an academic. In brief, when an academic submits their research paper to a journal, in the hope that their paper will be published, sometimes they receive a letter from the editor of said journal explaining why their hopes have been misplaced. Usually such letters can be quite insightful and helpful (for, by informing you what was wrong with your paper, they help you avoid such mistakes in the future). However, I must admit to having been somewhat befuddled upon receiving the following letter from a well-known multidisciplinary journal in the area of new and/or alternative religious movements (or NARMs):¹

Dear Morgan,

I am writing regarding your research note on 'Aliens and Atheism: The Central Raelian Argument for the Non-existence of God', which you submitted to the *Journal of XXXXX*.

We have received virtually instant referee feedback. Your research note is not recommended for publication. The main reasons for this is that the text shows no signs of an in-depth study of Rael's 'atheistic' philosophy and that it is a personal statement of faith rather than a piece of academic work.

If you have any questions, please let me know.

Best wishes,

XXXXX

¹ Please note that I am deliberately not attempting to define NARMs in this introduction. This is largely because George D. Chryssides focuses upon this issue in Chapter 2.

The paper in question was an earlier (but largely similar) version of the paper included in this collection (now entitled ‘Raelianism: What is the “Central” Raelian Argument for the Non-existence of God?’). In this paper I critique a particular argument for the non-existence of God presented by a NARM known as Raelianism (which is an atheistic religion). The source of my befuddlement was the claim that the paper was ‘a personal statement of faith rather than a piece of academic work’. In this introduction I wish to explore some of the possible reasons this comment may have been made, and then explain why this experience motivated me to produce this collection.

One Possible Explanation of the Reviewer’s Comment

My first guess as to how the reviewer had arrived at the conclusion that my paper was a personal statement of faith was that they were thinking along the following lines:

1. The paper critiques an argument against theism.
2. Anyone who critiques an argument against theism is a theist.

Therefore,

3. The paper is a reflection of the author’s faith in theism.

The conclusion to this argument, if true, would come as something of shock, as I’ve never considered myself a theist.

Although I am conscious that this may sound like sour grapes, I am quite sure this argument is not a good one. It is entirely possible for someone to critique an argument for a conclusion they believe is true. For example, although I believe apples are edible, I would critique any argument that suggested they are edible because they are really bananas in disguise. What is more, within philosophy of religion it is not at all uncommon for atheists to be critical of arguments for atheism, or for that matter, theists to be critical of arguments for theism. I suspected there was a better explanation of the reviewer’s comment.

A Second Possible Explanation of the Reviewer’s Comment

I reported this incident to a colleague in the field of religious studies, who was able to offer an alternative explanation of the incident. During the 1970s, he explained, most people in the western world were very wary of NARMs or, as they

were often called then, ‘cults’. In one respect this was quite understandable, for at the time the popular image of a ‘cult’ involved such activities as brainwashing, mind control, sexual abuse and mass suicide. Since then many academics (but by no means all (Zablocki, 1997; Zimbardo, 1997; Singer, 2003)) take such reports of brainwashing and mind control to be largely unfounded (Richardson, 2003), and, although instances of sexual abuse and mass suicide do occur, they do so in only a very small minority of these groups. Nevertheless, as a result of this popular image, NARMs were the subject of over-inflated criticism – perhaps most notably from the Christian counter-cult movement. In view of this, many academics (most especially sociologists) have been working hard to redress this imbalance.

Given that my paper was critical of a NARM, my colleague explained, it might appear to some to be a throwback to a period where Christians (predominantly) criticized NARMs. This might explain the suggestion that my paper was the work of someone of presumably religious faith. The thought would be as follows:

1. In the past, the group most critical of NARMs were Christians.
2. This paper is critical of a NARM.

Therefore,

3. The paper is a reflection of the author’s faith in Christianity.

Although I certainly understand this inference, I’m not sure it does the reviewer’s comment justice either. For even if it were true that I was Christian, this wouldn’t necessarily make my paper a statement of faith. There must be something else the reviewer had in mind when making the comment.

A Third Possible Explanation of the Reviewer’s Comment

Perhaps it was not religious faith that the reviewer was referring to, but faith in the particular type of reasoning I adopted to critique the Raelians. This line of thought is quite pronounced within postmodernism, a post-enlightenment project that questions the objectivity of social ‘facts’. And postmodernism has been especially influential in the field of sociology, where NARMs tend to be most commonly studied.

It would not be unusual, my colleague explained, for someone influenced by postmodernism to be hostile to the underlying logic, or way of thinking, that fuelled my critique of the Raelian argument against theism. This is because certain postmodernists hold that this way of thinking, or ‘meta-narrative’, may be no more

legitimate than alternatives that find the Raelian argument to be perfectly good. 'All such claims to objectivity and truth', as Hicks reports (2004, p. 16), 'can be deconstructed.' In other words, although the norms of reasoning I used to evaluate the Raelian argument may find it wanting, there may be other legitimate norms that do not. This provides us with an alternative explanation as to why my paper might be 'a personal statement of faith':

1. The paper assumes certain western norms of reasoning are true.
2. No single type of reasoning can be demonstrated to be true.

Therefore,

3. The paper is a reflection of the author's faith in western norms of reasoning.

This seems a much more robust explanation of the reviewer's comment. I was indeed guilty of assuming a particular standard of reasoning in my criticism of the Raelian argument (in fact, the Raelians themselves seem to assume the same western/scientific norms). However, this will be true of nearly every analytical philosopher of religion; for such philosophers are usually happy to admit that their work assumes certain norms of reasoning hold. Perhaps then, the comment had less to do with my paper per se, and more to do with a tension between postmodernism and analytical philosophy.

A Fourth Possible Explanation of the Reviewer's Comment

Another possible reason why a postmodernist might be hostile towards my critique of the Raelian argument is because this type of critique, my colleague informed me, might be seen as unjust and thus un-academic. This is because my paper builds upon a dominant power structure (that is, western standards of argumentation) to further marginalize a minority group (that is, the Raelians). 'Reason and power', as Jean-François Lyotard states (1984, p. 11), 'are one and the same.'

My paper, my colleague explained, may appear to be contrary to the principles of postmodern education (albeit an extreme version of), which suggests academics should attack the dominant paradigm (which in this case would be theism) rather than critique an already persecuted minority. As Hicks reports (2004, p. 18), some postmodernists hold that education

should focus on the achievements of non-whites, females and the poor; it should highlight the historical crimes of whites, males, and the rich; and it should teach children that science's method has no better claim to yielding truth than any

other method and, accordingly, that students should be equally receptive to alternative ways of knowing.

If the reviewer shared this commitment, it may be understandable that my paper could be viewed as ‘a personal statement of faith rather than a piece of academic work’. The argument would be as follows:

1. The paper critiques a marginalized group.
2. Any paper that critiques a marginalized group further marginalizes it, and so is not a piece of academic work.

Therefore,

3. The paper is not a piece of academic work.

However, there is more than one way for a NARM to be further marginalized.

One way to further marginalize NARMs might be for philosophers of religion to harshly scrutinize them in much the same way many of them already analyse Judeo-Christian theism. Another is by not scrutinizing them in this fashion at all. Philosophers of religion, in particular analytical philosophers, rarely focus their attention on NARMs. Rather, their attention is for the most part on Judeo-Christian theism. This is hardly surprising given the central place of this type of theism within western philosophy, and the number of people in the world who adhere to it. What is more, many philosophers of religion focus upon Judeo-Christian theism because they take it to be, at least when compared to alternative religious worldviews, the most likely to be true (this may hold even if the philosopher in question is an atheist). The practical upshot is that NARMs could be considered as being further marginalized as a result of philosophers not bothering to scrutinize them – they are just not taken seriously enough to be worth the effort.

So, given the postmodernist’s commitment to not further marginalizing minority groups, what should philosophers of religion do? Take NARMs seriously enough to critique them? Or not critique them for fear of further marginalization? On this occasion, I follow Oscar Wilde in his suggestion that there is ‘only one thing in life worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about’. In other words, I am denying premise 2 of the above argument – sometimes the critiquing of a marginalized group should be viewed as an act of inclusion, rather than an instance of further marginalization.

Of course, all this is mere conjecture; the reviewer may have had completely different motivations for the comment. Nevertheless, it does provide a useful segue to the rationale behind this collection of papers.

Getting Involved

Most academics who study NARMs are sociologists. And sociologists and philosophers have very different projects. It may be usual for sociologists to describe what members of NARMs believe. They might also describe the arguments used to support those beliefs. However, it would be less common for them to critique these arguments and pronounce them good or bad. Yet this type of activity commonly occurs within philosophy.

This difference in projects leads to an interesting problem. If most philosophers of religion are not interested in NARMs, and most academics interested in NARMs are not interested in philosophy of religion, who might be interested in the kind of research typified by my paper? One somewhat oblique answer is that perhaps my paper, and the others like it gathered together in this collection, might help to generate this interest. A second, less oblique answer is that perhaps the adherents of NARMs themselves might welcome such attention.

The continual lack of attention given to NARMs by philosophers of religion is regrettable, as both philosophers and adherents to such religions have much to gain from each other. Philosophers are able to offer adherents a systematic means of scrutinizing the central tenets of their own religion, identifying major concerns, clarifying difficult concepts and developing rigorous apologetics; whilst religious adherents offer philosophers an abundance of new and often ingenious arguments for the truth of religious claims. It seems that a robust cross-fertilization is long overdue. Consequently, the aim of this collection is to illustrate to philosophers of religion, those interested in NARMs, and adherents of such movements, what such an engagement might look like.

The Papers

So what would a philosophy exploration of NARMs be like? In this collection a number of different approaches to the topic have been offered – which I shall now outline.

George D. Chrystides, in his paper ‘New Religious Movements: How Should New Religious Movements Be Defined?’, looks at what it is to be a new religious movement. He concludes that it is doubtful whether the category, as it is currently conceived, has much coherence.

Beverly Clack and Dan O’Brien, in their paper ‘Religious Naturalism: Does Religion Require the Supernatural?’, examine those religious worldviews that do not entail the supernatural, such as pantheism or some forms of paganism.

Religions, they conclude, need not centre upon a relationship with a transcendent being, but rather might focus upon one's own place in a wholly natural world.

John Bishop, in his paper 'New Atheism: Is New Atheism a New Religious Movement?' considers parallels between those beliefs espoused by prominent new atheists, such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, and religious believers broadly conceived. Bishop concludes that because such atheists commit themselves to a reality beyond the 'scientific', their faith in scientific naturalism can be accurately described as a type of new religious movement.

Andrew Fisher, in his paper 'The Word of Faith Movement: Are We All Little Gods?', looks at a popular movement which holds that humans are gods and are thus able to do exactly the same things Jesus did (such as miracles and atoning for the sins of the world). Fisher argues that the possibility of humans being able to atone for humanity is problematic. In addition, the approach undermines the place of faith within Christianity.

Michaelis Michael and John Healy, in their paper 'A Guru-Disciple Tradition: Can Religious Conversion be non-Cognitive?', examine cases of religious conversion within the Guru-Disciple tradition of Siddha Yoga. After examining a number of accounts of conversion from members of the group, Michael and Healy conclude that conversion in these cases to be largely (but not completely) governed by non-cognitive factors. What is more, they suspect this observation may be generalizable to many other religions.

Brian D. Smith, in his paper 'Scientology: What Is the Relationship between the Supreme Being, Thetans, and the Cosmos?', explores the relationship between God (as conceived within Scientology), the physical world and the spiritual beings that are held to inhabit it (known as thetans). Smith believes there is reason to think these three entities are logically incompatible with each other.

In my paper 'Raelianism: What is the "Central" Raelian Argument for the Non-existence of God?', I attempt to clarify one of the arguments Raelians have for atheism, an argument that hinges on the claim that the universe has no centre. I conclude that further arguments need to be presented before it can be found to be convincing.

Wylie Breckenridge, in his paper 'Mormonism: Is the Mormon Concept of God Problematic?', examines Francis Beckwith's objections to the Mormon concept of God. Breckenridge offers some possible replies to Beckwith's objections, and ultimately concludes that Beckwith fails to show that there are any problems for the Mormon view.

Eric Steinhart, in his paper 'Digital Theology: Is the Resurrection Virtual?', examines those groups who foresee the possibility of being resurrected within computer-simulated environments – attaining a type of digital immortality. After

evaluating four different means to reach this end, Steinhart concludes that even the most promising account still requires a fair degree of wishful thinking.

Finally, Andrew J. Dell'Olio, in his paper 'The Arica School: Towards a Logic of Unity?', considers whether Oscar Ichazo, the founder of Arica School for human development, is able to unify science and mysticism with a new logic referred to as 'Trialectics'. Although Dell'Olio admits that the logic is in need of development, he does conclude that it offers a promising articulation of a holistic point of view.

These papers offer a good indication of the range of approaches one might take to the philosophical exploration of NARMs. Some of the papers, such as Andrew Fisher's, Brian D. Smith's, Eric Steinhart's, and my own, critique some aspect of the movement they focus on. I've argued in this introduction that such critiques should not be necessarily viewed as an indication that the author is against the religion. In fact, such critiques might indicate a positive stance – for the author, at least in some respects, takes the religion seriously by engaging with it. However, I think it is important to stress that philosophical engagement with NARMs is not limited to critiques. Wylie Breckenridge's paper defends a NARM. Andrew J. Dell'Olio and Beverly Clack and Dan O'Brien's papers attempt to establish the coherence of the NARMs they focus upon. Michaelis Michael and John Healy's paper examines how one might convert to a NARM. And George D. Chrystides and John Bishop examine on what grounds a group might be considered a NARM. Such papers provide a good indication of breadth of approaches that a philosophical exploration of NARMs might provide.

I hope you enjoy the collection.²

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