

Tasting the Gumbo

A Response to Guy Lancaster

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A Review Essay Response

[1] In the current issue of this journal, Guy Lancaster offered “What Constitutes New Religious Movements: A Question of Typology,” a meditation on what is meant by “new” in “new religious movement,” and a critique of a few titles that attempt to shed light on the modern American spiritual landscape. This list included my own book, *The Devil is a Gentleman: Exploring America’s Religious Fringe*.

[2] Lancaster appears to prefer either literary efforts of limited scope, or academic treatments of large scope that limit themselves to deft typologies. This strikes me as perfectly appropriate: for those trained in thesis-driven academic writing, I imagine it is a hard and fast rule that one should not bite off more than one can reasonably chew. Less appropriate, I think, is Lancaster’s criticism of my book in terms of its thread, that it is also a biography of William James.

[3] If Lancaster is truly interested in the typology of religion, it seems he ought to be a bit more interested in the thinker who pioneered just such kinds of distinction-making. Most famously, James broke religion into two categories, the “healthy-minded folk” and the “sick souls.” As well, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* offered distinctions between religious organization and religious experience, and between what James called the “right” and “wrong” sides of religion’s account. This last distinction, I believe, has to do with Lancaster’s interest in what is “new.”

[4] Why does he care about what constitutes “new?” What is gained by perpetuating the moniker “new religious movement?” It seems to me that beyond becoming an acronym that rolls nicely off the tongue, it is actually pretty useless as a designation or a type. Indeed, its

primary purpose – and this may be entirely noble all by itself – seems to be to battle back against the stigmatization of “cult,” a word which I was forced to address and explain in many of the interviews I did in the promotion of *The Devil is a Gentleman*.

[5] What is a cult? Or better, what do people mean when they use “cult” in the way we are all concerned about? Here is one idea: when people use the word “cult,” they are talking about religions that are probably new (at least to them), probably small (relatively), and fail to celebrate individuality and/or creativity (as they understand these things). Certainly this is a definition that fails in all kinds of ways – even Lancaster would probably agree that all attempts to define religion are begging to fall short – but I think it is workable at least for the purposes of this discussion. What I would propose is that “new religious movement” has emerged precisely because we want to emphasize that there are religions that may be small, or may be new, but which do, in fact, celebrate individuality and/or creativity.

[6] This returns to the difference between James’s “right” and “wrong” side of religion’s account. Most simply put, he approached the matter differently, and in a way that deemphasized both the size and age of a religion. James acknowledged that religion had to be held accountable. Certainly the Inquisition and the Crusades were matters that deserved to be laid at religion’s feet. That is the wrong side of its account. At the same time, he wanted to assert that religion was also responsible for the best feelings human beings were capable of. This is the right side of religion’s account, and was, to his mind, more likely to be found in religious experience than religious organization. If what is meant these days – and I would argue that this is exactly the case – is that “cult” is used to identify those religions on the wrong side of religion’s account, then James would be quick to point out that it is often very old and very large religions that find themselves on that same side of the ledger. Indeed, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is an exploration of the new and fringe movements of James’s time which makes it clear that it is these religions that offer the hope of balancing the books.

[7] I make this point because I feel that Lancaster has unfairly suggested that in recreating James’s strategy in *The Devil is a Gentleman* I have offered a sensationalistic portrait of modern spiritual America. For him, this returns to the question of what is “new.”

[8] Lancaster has what might be called “Ecclesiastian” issues. To him, there are no new religions under the sun because he believes that there are but variations on themes. He regrets both that some are duped by the idea that a religion can be new at all, and that there are writers like myself who, to his mind, are ready to exploit what is strange to others but familiar to him. His myopia on this point has the benefit of being interesting outside the context he intends. When we consider the “new religious movement” label, we would do well to note that new is relative and that this relativity is crucial to understanding religion. To some, wicca, Scientology, and the Church of Satan are entirely new – indeed, they are beyond ken. I reject Lancaster’s claim that I have opted for sensationalism by focusing on the fringe. The fringe is exactly what James focused on, and he did so because he recognized that the newness, and even the strangeness, of a religion was precisely what gave it, for some people, its initial appeal. It seems self-evident to me that beliefs that we have not before encountered will strike us as strange. As experts, we might become immune to this, but alas,

the religious life is not best measured by expert pilgrims taste-testing the gumbo of the world's religious variety.

[9] In *The Devil is a Gentleman*, I announced quite openly that mine was a literary and not a scholarly venture. Lancaster would clearly have preferred a different book to my own. But his solution would not satisfy the problem he describes. Academics will always prefer the microscope to the telescope, but there's a weakness to looking at something like religion in just one way. While the genome map of an elephant may be useful, it cannot be said that the map itself resembles the elephant. And as long as we have elephants we will want, from time to time, to remind ourselves what they actually look like. At these moments it will be valuable to thumb through the sketches of the larger picture. It is in this spirit that I wrote *The Devil is a Gentleman*.