

## Spiritual Kinship and New Religions

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### **Introduction**

On a global scale, the number of extant new religions is staggering.<sup>1</sup> Just covering Europe and North America, for example, a recent study identified over sixty individual groups and movements (Barrett 2001: 9), but it barely touched upon Islamic or Chinese new religions operating in the West within ethnic communities (Williams 1988; Haddad and Smith 1993; Kepel 1997). Japan has witnessed (and occasionally exported) its own post-war explosion of new religions (Earhart 1970; Clarke 1999a; Clarke 1999b; McFarland 1967; Thomsen 1963), and the number of new religions operating throughout Africa (with its mixture of traditional religions, Christianity, and Islam) and within India (amidst Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, and others) seem uncountable (Wilson 1973; McKean 1996; Doniger 1999: 799-807). Indeed, it is entirely likely that many new religions appear then die with little or no attention paid to them beyond small circles of adherents.

Scholarship on new religions is uneven, with many groups (especially ones that flourish in the West) receiving extensive analysis, while others attract little or no academic attention. Scholars and the popular press have examined groups theologically, sociologically, psychologically, historically, and thematically, looking at everything from belief-systems to cash flow. In that vast scholarship, however, no one (to my knowledge) has discussed new religions in the context of their spiritual lineage claims.

By “spiritual lineage” I mean the religious traditions to which new religions attempt to place themselves, or in which outsiders attempt to place them. Note that spiritual lineage—the more established religions to which new religions claim kinship—often is a contested issue, with new religious groups attempting to locate themselves within the spiritual landscape very differently than do their opponents or even outside observers. Indeed, much can be at stake in the battle over “legitimate” kinship claims, so the battle itself is worthy of academic attention.

This article focuses on struggles involving new religions as they, their opponents, and their commentators use “spiritual kinship” claims to locate these groups within frameworks of legitimacy. It argues that the very nature of

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<sup>1</sup> As a heuristic term, “new religions” covers “independent groups that have arisen from the encounter of existing religious traditions, particularly through the latter part of the postcolonial period” (Smith 1995: 771).

new religions' origins and ongoing charismatic dynamics heighten their need to legitimize themselves, even as their opponents attempt to discredit them, and researchers try to classify them. Using numerous primary and secondary sources on and by new religions themselves (and mostly ones that operate in the West), this study identifies a number of sites of contestation involving new religions and their spiritual kinship claims. While other researchers may undertake studies similar to this one through the perspective of theology, I will stay within the confines of social science. Perhaps this thematic focus will lead to additional work on how new religions attempt to legitimize themselves, since the strategy of claiming kinship with established traditions likely is only one of many that various groups use.

### ***At Stake in the Contests Over Spiritual Kinship Lineages***

Contests over spiritual kinship lineages can be quite intense primarily because much appears to be at stake. Fundamentally, from the perspective of the believers, nothing less than salvation lies at the heart of the struggle. Some new religions often claim that they and they alone have found the true path, but they make this assertion in the face of religious traditions that have operated for centuries if not millennia. Others (especially contemporary New Age groups) specifically deny any single salvific path by claiming the primacy of the "Self" in any process of spiritual unfoldment (Heelas 1996: 21). Regardless, however, of the type of spiritual claims they make, all new religions make such claims within social and particularly religious environments that may be antagonistic to these new salvational assertions.

Closely connected with the new claims to salvation are the constellations of activities and beliefs around the new religious founders. Commonly these founders are charismatic leaders—people who attract adherents in accordance with their unique claims about having access to supernatural forces or powers (see Weber 1978: 1112). These charismatic leaders need to perform frequent demonstrations of their reputedly spiritual or supernatural powers, and if they are successful in doing so then their followers construct norms that reinforce their group's distinctiveness (Weber 1978: 1112-1113; see Cartwright and Kent 1992: 335 & n. 19). Intimately wrapped up in that distinctiveness are claims that these charismatic leaders provide the path to salvation for their followers (if not for the entire world). In this highly charged atmosphere, the location of charismatically-directed new religions within wide contexts of spiritual kinship can contribute significantly to their legitimacy or marginality.

These spiritual kinship claims also can help influence people who are potential converts along with those who already are following the new spiritual direction. While not wishing to reduce conversion merely to a rational choice

model (where people calculate the costs versus benefits of joining), it nonetheless remains true that potential converts must decide whether the “new way” really is better than the older, “established” way. Likewise, current members need to maintain the belief that their involvement within a new religion provides unique spiritual payoffs. With converts and fresh batches of members, new religions can sustain themselves and grow. Without them, they die. Consequently, claims of spiritual kinship can play major roles in the eyes of the current and future members, just as established faiths may need to stem the tide of defectors and apostates who are flocking to the new faiths.

One of many factors that potential and current members evaluate is the social room that particular new religions give to gender roles. In various ways, all religions address gender questions—through ideology, mythology, rituals, official policies, and daily social life. Spiritual kinship lineages play a role in how religions—new and old—approach gender issues, since the lineages to which religions associate provide models for the religious roles of women and men (Bednarowski 1980; Wessinger 1993). The way, therefore, in which these kinship-claiming religions attend to gender roles through the lineages they and their opponents select can have profound impacts upon membership’s gender composition and social attractiveness.

Salvation, charismatic authority, and membership are basic intra-group issues that spiritual kinship lineages can impact. At the same time that new religions are wrestling with these issues, they also may be facing legitimation struggles with authorities in the societies in which they operate (Kent 1990). These struggles may involve very practical financial issues such as tax relief or property inheritance, but in societies that privilege or discriminate against certain religious traditions, issues of spiritual kinship may impact legitimation efforts and the groups’ public profiles.

### ***Strategies of New Religions Concerning Spiritual Kinship Lineage Claims***

Among new religions’ strategies to resolve these and other disputes is to make claims about spiritual kinship lineages that connect their current situations and doctrines with larger dimensions and dynamics. It remains an open question as to whether these kinship claims represent deeply held convictions on the part of those who propound them, or simply are cynical attempts to establish groups beyond critical scrutiny. Indeed, examples of both are not hard to find. Likewise, the social milieu in which new religions flourish and the social composition of leaders and members also might influence the type of strategies that they undertake. Regardless of the motives of the claimants, however, or the social conditions under which they make their claims, various kinship legitimation assertions appear with sufficient frequency

and fervor that researchers at least can identify the various types. It matters little whether the spiritual kinship lineage claims actually are "true," but it matters a great deal whether people believe them to be true and act accordingly.

*1. Claims By New Religions of Spiritual Kinship Lineages with Major Religious Traditions*

The greatest rewards for new religions may come if they insist that their doctrines, beliefs, and behaviours share important spiritual connections with existing major faiths. If outsiders (including leaders within the existing major faiths) accept the reality of those connections, then the new religions will receive benefits and status similar to what society bestows on the established and respected traditions. If, by contrast, prominent social players (including mainstream religious leaders) reject the claims about spiritual kinship connections, then the weight of opposition likely will descend harshly and extensively against the aspiring groups. Examples from new religions indicate that some groups have been more successful than others at utilizing this strategic plan.

One new religion (at least for the West) that has gained grudging acceptance of its major kinship lineage claims is the Hare Krishna organization—the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Brought to North America in 1965 by its founder, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada (1896-1977) (Goswami 1980), the radical lifestyle changes that its (mostly educated, Caucasian) converts underwent gained the organization the image of a "cult." As, however, immigration from India continued to grow throughout the West in the 1970s and 1980s, an increasing number of Hindu immigrants turned to Krishna temples as a connection with their homeland and their religious tradition. Consequently, throughout the West, the Krishnas have become an ethnic congregation (Carey 1983). On the level of local temples, the few Caucasian members who remain in the organization frequently provide services to people in the Hindu diasporic community. In essence, "association with the Asian-Indian immigrants has led ISKCON to the mellowing that has made the group less objectionable to many Americans and is moving toward identification as a Hindu denomination" (Williams 1988: 136-137).

It seems likely that the appeal of a new religion to a sizeable ethnic community is a determining factor in societal acceptance of its spiritual kinship claims regarding a major religious faith. This likelihood would help to explain why another ethnically based new religion—the North American Sikhs who belong to the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO) and its affiliate, the Sikh Dharma Brotherhood, did not attain the same acceptance among Punjabi immigrants as did the Krishnas with the Hindus. In the early 1970s, a few thousand Westerners converted to the Sikh-yogic teachings of Harbhajan Singh

Puri, known to his followers as Yogi Bhajan. Adopting white turban dress and other visual and ceremonial symbols of the Sikh faith, "[i]n some ways it appeared that the new converts were more religious than those born into the religion . . ." (Williams 1988: 147-148). The converts, however, could not engage the Punjabi culture and political concerns (about Khalistan) of the immigrants, and many Punjabi Sikhs felt uncomfortable with the Westerners' devotion to a yogi as well as some of the group's beliefs and practices. Punjabi Sikhs, therefore, pay little attention to Bhajan's Western converts. His group's claims about spiritual kinship lineage to Sikhism have not helped it legitimize to any great degree, and it is likely that Bhajan's followers will remain a small, declining movement (Williams 1988: 149-150). Cultural preoccupations, therefore, within the Punjabi community diminished community members' receptivity to a foreign version of their faith. This diminishment, in turn, greatly reduces any hopes by the 3HO group of widespread acceptance as an ethnic denomination. It seems likely, therefore, that spiritual kinship claims about lineage with an established major faith are most likely to succeed when the faith has an outreach tradition (like Hinduism does) that recognizes the need for cultural adjustments outside of the group's country of origin.

## *2. Claims By New Religions of Spiritual Kinship Lineages with Minor, Non-Traditional, But Widely Recognized Religious Traditions*

Lineage connections with major religions can provide new religions with significant social status, legitimation, and other benefits, but a major drawback (at least for many people) of such an association is that most dominant faiths are patriarchal. While some of these mainstream faiths are engaged in discussions about the role of women in them, several traditions—especially Spiritualism, Theosophy, and Christian Science—have long histories of female leadership.

Spiritualism, a movement claiming that "mediums" could contact the recently dead, began in 1848 with sisters Margaret and Kate Fox claiming to communicate with a spirit who had been making noise in their house (Hanegraaff 1998: 435). Theosophy began in 1875 under the direction of former medium and spiritualist, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), who claimed (among other things) to receive spiritually advanced messages from "Brothers, Adepts, and Masters," whom Theosophists considered "all-good, all-knowing persons who had passed through numerous incarnations and the highest occult initiations" (Paolini and Paolini 2000: 186). Reputedly these Masters "were part of a secret organization called the Great White Brotherhood or White Lodge and had access to unlimited knowledge" (Paolini and Paolini 2000: 186). Just four years later, in 1879, May Baker Eddy launched Christian Science, whose tenets on overcoming illness through gaining "the

mind of Christ" presupposed that people could attain "a spiritual order of being" (Doniger 1999: 235; see Gill 1998). While various scholars have argued that these movements contributed to the rise of feminism through their teachings and examples about gender equality (Braude 1989; Owen 1989), they also produced religious doctrines that have influenced and at times legitimized numerous subsequent new faiths.

Among those new faiths that gain some degree of legitimation by their association with these earlier, female-led movements are Elizabeth Clare Prophet's Church Universal and Triumphant and J. Z. [Judy] Knight's channelling organization. Prior to Prophet's incapacitation from early-onset Alzheimer's, she claimed to receive messages from the Ascended Masters, including some from the Great White Brotherhood (Prophet 1976; Johnson 1994: 3; Paolini and Paolini 2000: 242, 252). Little surprise, therefore, that Prophet grew up as a Christian Scientist reading Blavatsky's works (Paolini and Paolini 2000: 241).

While Prophet produced messages allegedly from numerous historical and mythological characters who rest in higher spiritual planes, Knight only claims to channel one figure—Ramtha—whom she insists is a 35,000 year old warrior from the lost civilization of Atlantis (Knight 1987). The basic claim, however, about being able to receive communications from beings who are no longer living traces directly back to the Spiritualist tradition, and Knight is simply one among many types of channellers who have flourished in the contemporary period (see Hanegraaff 1998: 41). Certainly observers of these new religions (and many of the practicing members who moved in a "cultic milieu" of unorthodox religious ideas before joining) see the spiritual lineage connections with nineteenth century movements led by women, even if the groups and leaders themselves often may not draw attention to their religious predecessors.

Attempting to draw attention to one's spiritual predecessors, however, is not always a wise endeavor, since sometimes by doing so new religions find themselves locked into disputes with the very groups with whom they claim spiritual kinship. The faith to which a new religion turns for legitimation can reject the reputed association and the legitimacy that such an association might bring. Adherents of faiths to which new religious adherents are claiming spiritual connections simply may not want to be associated with groups whose doctrines or practices will do little to enhance their own status or accessibility to social benefits. Not surprisingly, for example, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints—the Mormons—distance themselves from numerous contemporary polygamist sects that operate throughout the North American West (Van Wagoner 1989: 189-200), partly because Mormonism de-emphasizes aspects of its own history that current members and the wider

society might find objectionable. Attempts, therefore, by new religions to claim spiritual kinship with existing, non-traditional but widely recognized religious traditions can lead to potentially damaging legitimization disputes.

### *3. Claims by New Religions of Spiritual Kinship Lineages with "Self" Traditions*

One set of new religions appear to reject any spiritual lineage connections, since their fervent emphasis on the necessity of experience serves as the basis for their doctrinal positions. These religions fall within a category called "New Age," and one of their more thoughtful commentators, Paul Heelas, speaks about their assertion that "authority lies with the Self" (Heelas 1996: 21):

Truth, not surprisingly, for those who see themselves as spiritual beings, must—at least first-and-foremost—come by way of one's own experience. For this alone provides direct and uncontaminated access to the spiritual realm. "Truths" provided by the dogmas of religious traditions, or by other people—parents, scientists, even putatively spiritual masters—might well be erroneous (Heelas 1996: 21).

Consequently, these New Age religions have a limited range of existing religious traditions in relation to which they can claim any spiritual kinship connection.

Within that limited range, however, are a few traditions—such as Jungian thought, some interpretations of Theosophy, and Gurdjieff's techniques—that also place the Self at their spiritual centres (Heelas 1996: 44-49; cf. Tacey 2001). Jung utilized therapy and religious symbols to unlock and enhance creativity and self-integration. Theosophy emphasized the acquisition of knowledge in order to foster personal spiritual growth, and Gurdjieff's followers experimented with the value of ordeals and hardships in order to attain spiritual insight (Barrett 2001: 351-352). Even if New Age leaders do not refer to these self-enhancement traditions, many participants are familiar with them and have explored them amidst their spiritual journeys. These earlier explorations help to legitimize various New Age foci on self-experience and self-development, even if the participants themselves often may not verbalize these spiritual kinship lineages.

### *4. Claims By New Religions To Have Rediscovered "Pure" or "True" Spiritual Kinship Lineages*

One strategy, however, that depends upon verbalized statements about spiritual kinship lineages involves new religions claiming to have rediscovered or found the purity or truth heretofore neglected or forgotten. The "truth" was lost; now it is found. Other traditions, even mainstream ones, simply cannot

offer the same spiritual rewards (so the argument goes), since their “truth” or “understanding” only is partial. Perhaps through revelation, perhaps through discovery, certain new religions can engage in innovative behaviours based upon somewhat novel ideas, all the while claiming legitimacy for re-establishing lost or ignored traditions.

No religion to have appeared in the last two hundred years has succeeded more than Mormonism, and it illustrates how a faith can claim to have rediscovered a pure or true spiritual kinship lineage. While some people might object to the inclusion of Mormonism in a study about new religions, an examination of the group remains important because it made the transition from “new religion” to denomination in a comparatively short period of time. If no longer a new religion, Mormonism at least still is a newer one that can teach us a great deal about new religions’ success strategies. One of those strategies involves its spiritual kinship lineage claim.

Theologically, Mormonism teaches an innovative doctrine that asserts the restorative nature of the (reputed) revelation known as the Book of Mormon. As a respected sociologist of Mormonism surmised:

[t]he Mormon Church was founded in 1830 by a young man of twenty-six [i.e., Joseph Smith], who, together with his followers, offered claims to combine a restoration of primitive Christianity, as it had been lived in the time of the Apostles with modern revelation from on high. The new religious group claimed nothing less than a reopening of the heavens and a resumption of divine revelation through the agency of its founder (O’Dea 1957: 2).

Specifically the Latter Day Saints claim that The Book of Mormon restores to the Bible sections that were deleted and poorly translated (“obscured”), and the golden plates that Joseph Smith reputedly translated contained “the Gospel in its purity” (Brooks 1960: 414).

Mormonism’s theological claim that its scriptures complete Christianity is one of the organization’s effective recruitment tools—a tool that Christianity itself has asserted in relation to Judaism. It allows converts to maintain “cultural continuity” with Christianity, only asking “Christians to add to their religious culture—not to discard the Old and New Testaments, but to add a third testament. Mormonism does not present itself as an alternative to Christianity, but as its fulfilment” (Stark 1987: 13). Converts, therefore, do not feel that they have to renounce their former spiritual kinship ties with Christianity when they join the Latter Day Saints. Indeed, the ability of converts to maintain these ties is one of several factors in Mormonism’s growth, as the group evolved from a controversial sect in the mid-nineteenth



century to a denomination in many parts of the world by the end of the twentieth century.

#### *5. Claims By New Religions to Subsume Many or All Spiritual Kinship Lineages*

Mormonism connected itself to one spiritual tradition—Christianity—and asserted that its teachings fulfilled dimensions of that faith that had been lost or obscured. Grandier than their assertions, however, are new religions which claim that their groups' theologies subsume or absorb several if not all existing spiritual lineages. In essence, these groups insist that their messages are the fulfillment of everything that has come before them. The beginning of the end of history has taken place within their theologies, and all other theologies are subsumed (so they claim) within their own. The risks, however, to their legitimization claims are substantial, since these subsuming new religions do not (and likely cannot) gain authority for their assertions from authorities in the other religions. Consequently, the grandiose claims of these the new religions seem aggressive, outlandish, or even megalomaniacal when they appear.

One controversial new religion of Western origins that claims to subsume several Eastern religious traditions is Scientology. Debate rages over the organization's religious and charitable-tax status in several countries (Kent 2001), as well as over its leadership's motivation for asserting religious claims despite its early pseudo-scientific orientation and numerous activities that appear to be secular in nature (Kent 1996; 1999a; 1999b; 1999c). Nevertheless, one aspect of the group's religious self-representation is that its teachings include key concepts from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, and that Scientology claims a more comprehensive, modern, and expeditious path to certain spiritual rewards than those offered by these other faiths. In various publications, Scientology's founder, L. Ron Hubbard (1911-1986), claimed close spiritual kinship lineages with these three Asian faiths by identifying Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist concepts that (he asserted) were similar to if not the same as important Scientology terms (Kent 1996: 22-30). Hubbard even published a book in which he strongly hinted that he was the Maitreya Buddha, who had returned to show civilization the way to salvation (Hubbard 1974).

What impact (if any) these subsuming claims have had on Scientology's relationship with representatives of various Eastern faiths is an open question, since the organization has achieved some success in the United States and elsewhere in representing itself as a minority religious faith. It is entirely likely, however, that Scientology's assertions of religious subsumption have the greatest impact upon some members, who gain from these claims a feeling of being part of a powerful and essential cultural movement.

More dramatic in its assertions about subsuming other spiritual kinship lineages is Reverend Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. Using arguments

similar to those challenging Scientology's exclusively (or even primarily) religious nature, critics of the Unification Church point to Moon's involvement in automobile manufacturing, fishing, various media-related businesses, and weapons-manufacturing as "proof" of the group's secular character. Nevertheless, the organization has religious dimensions, and Moon played to these dimensions in a major advertising campaign that he launched in July, 2002. In at least forty-seven of America's major newspapers (including *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Houston Chronicle*, and Moon's own *The Washington Times*), Moon placed a 7,000 word statement entitled, "A Cloud of Witnesses: The Saint's Testimonies to the True Parents [i.e., Moon and his current wife]" (Hertz 2002). (The "cloud of witnesses" phrase comes from Heb.12.1 in the New Testament.) A Unification Church organization, The Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, continues to provide this statement on the Internet, and distribute it around the world (Family Federation for World Peace International 2002).

This extraordinary document purports to be a proclamation written in heaven by leaders and representatives of five religions—Christianity, Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism, as well as Communist leaders. It concludes with "A Letter From God," signed by "Jehovah, the Lord of all humankind." The major religious leaders include Jesus, Confucius, Mencius, the Buddha, Muhammad, and Shankara, while the list of Communists includes Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, and Deng Xiao Ping. Accompanying each of the religious leaders are secondary figures such as Peter, Paul, John Calvin, Martin Luther, and St. Augustine (for Christianity), Mencius (for Confucianism), and Abu Bakr (for Islam). All of these primary and secondary figures issued proclamations that designated Moon as the fulfillment of their respective traditions.

In the document, for example, Jesus proclaims, "Reverend Sun Myung Moon! Thou art the Second Coming who inaugurated the Completed Testament Age!" Speaking for the Buddhists, The Buddha announces, "Reverend Sun Myung Moon! True Parents! . . . We pledge to attend God as the Parent of humankind and Reverend Sun Myung Moon as a True Parent, and to equip ourselves with the Unification Principle and Unification Thought." Not to be left out, Mohammad adds, "I cry out: Victory for God! Victory for Reverend Sun Myung Moon, the True Parent, Messiah and Savior!"

Concluding the accolades, Jehovah writes to Reverend Moon:

My Beloved True Parent, you dwell deep inside My heart, and my [sic] love for you is beyond description. You have been victorious on every level and have restored to its proper position everything that had fallen. Is it not fitting, therefore, that you be the Savior of

humankind, the Messiah and King of Kings? (Family Federation for World Peace International 2002).

Jehovah dated the letter "Midnight, December 28, 2001."

While it is difficult to obtain objective evidence about reactions of leaders and members of the traditions that Moon announced he had subsumed, the mild mockery present in a Christian magazine about the ads probably is very telling. It surmised, "[a]ll the testimonies are odd; some are little more than nonsense" (Hertz 2002). And after reporting on the presence of testimonies from the (former) Communists, the author of the same article concludes, "It's nice to know they're no longer atheists." (Hertz 2002)

#### *6. Claims by New Religions About Starting New Spiritual Kinship Lineages*

Occasionally new religions emerge that are relatively new creations. Unlike so many groups that borrow, assimilate, or modify existing religious strains, these new religions introduce unique material into the religious landscape that appears to have little if any cultural precedent. Perhaps creators of such religions have gained access to material from afar about which few others know, or perhaps the creators are unusually creative or peculiarly disturbed. However they do it, these innovators present religious material that few people ever have seen. If their ideas catch on, then they become the foundation of spiritual kinship lineages as others adapt and modify their initial creative visions.

Exemplifying the creation of a largely new spiritual kinship tradition was the appearance of the UFO cult phenomenon after the first modern report of what came to be known as a "flying saucer" in 1947. By the early 1950s, people such as George Adamski and Daniel E. Fry claimed to have had contact with space aliens, which included flights in their unearthly vessels (Hough and Randles 1994:108-118). Religious and quasi-religious organizations developed around some of the accounts in conjunction with the messages that the contactees allegedly received from the aliens. While observers point out that the post-war UFO phenomenon had some similarities to "the great airship" sightings of the 1890s (Cohen 1981), alleged contact with the dead in Spiritualism, and receipt of messages from reputedly Ascended Masters in Theosophy, the prominence of claims about outer space travelers was unique and (it turned out) creatively generative of numerous new religions.

As UFO religions appeared and evolved, they wove complex theologies that borrowed from science, science fiction, apocalypticism, popular theosophy, New Age doctrines, and even Christianity (Campbell and Kent 1998). While their prominence in popular culture had diminished by the end of the twentieth century, one UFO group, Heaven's Gate, attracted worldwide attention in 1997 and 1998 when forty-one of its members committed suicide

in the belief that they would attain “the Evolutionary Kingdom Level Above Human conventionally called Heaven” (Hall, Schuyler et al. 2000: 149), and board a spaceship reputedly flying behind the comet Hale-Bopp (Balch and Taylor 2002).

Recent scientific discussion about the feasibility and ethics of human cloning has brought another UFO group, the Raelians, into the public eye, since the group’s leader claims to have learned from space beings that an alien species created the human race in a laboratory (Palmer 1994: 159). The group declared that it was working actively on its own cloning project, and on March 28, 2001 the Raelians’ founder and leader testified about human cloning before the American congressional Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations (Rael 2001).

It seems likely that UFO cults will continue to appear as some people of every generation come to believe in humans’ inability to avoid self-destruction without assistance from a “higher intelligence.” Although only a half-century old, the spiritual kinship lineage of UFO believers now extends back into ancient history through various works which claim that pre-historical sketches and monuments indicate previous human/alien contact (Von Daniken 1968).

### ***Conclusion***

While this article concentrated almost exclusively on spiritual kinship lineage claims among new religions, a similar study of claims among larger, more established religions—much older than Mormonism—likely would produce similar findings. Indeed, students of comparative religion seem not to have undertaken studies that place spiritual kinship claims as their focus, yet such studies would provide rich information about groups’ self-representations and legitimization strategies.

Recently, the importance of understanding the strategies behind a group’s spiritual kinship claims became abundantly clear when the charismatic but dangerous al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden, justified terrorist attacks by claiming a spiritual kinship lineage dating back to the earliest days of Islam.

In February 1998, bin Laden and his associates issued a fatwah (legal opinion) that reviewed American political activities in the Middle East. It concluded that these actions were “crimes,” and then continued:

All these crimes and sins committed by the Americans are a clear declaration of war on God, his messenger [Muhammad], and Muslims. And ulema [Islamic scholars] have throughout Islamic history unanimously agreed that the jihad is an individual duty if the enemy destroys the Muslim countries... We—with God’s help—call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded

to comply with God's order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it. (bin Laden, al-Zawahiri et al. 1998).

Suddenly, the world had before it a dramatic example of spiritual kinship lineage claims applied to religio-global acts of terrorism. Apparently these claims resonated with truth among extremist Muslims and even some mainstream adherents to the faith (Esposito 2002: 25), and they have entered the debate currently raging in the West over whether Islam is, at core, a violent religion. The mere existence of these claims, however, reveals that even terrorist religious groups feel compelled to position themselves within spiritual kinship lineages that sanctify and justify their actions.

Future work on spiritual kinship issues might examine how various new religions use spiritual kinship claims to build new, fictive kinship relationships among members (Cartwright and Kent 1992). That is to say, religions provide family structures for many members, as people feel that they develop social relationships with leaders, other members, and sometimes with the gods themselves, that supplant any ties they may have felt for their birth families. Theologies about spiritual kinship lineages likely assist people in reconfiguring their beliefs and feelings about what their social kinship lineages are. God and community usually intermingle, and spiritual kinship lineage claims may be key to understanding how people develop deep attachments to persons whom they come to feel are their new, true relatives-in-the-faith.

Characterized by transnational migration, social mobility, consumerism, and varying degrees of secularization, the (post-)modern world uproots many people, physically and spiritually, in historically unprecedented ways. Increasing numbers of people, therefore, come to believe that the new social conditions of their lives both require and reflect religious realities that traditional faiths are unable or unwilling to address. Consequently, new religions allow some of these people to make sense out of their potentially anomic lives. In this process of meaning-creation, people and the new religions to which they may adhere will continue to identify or construct spiritual kinship claims. These claims sanctify their lives, create religiously legitimized fictive families, and (sometimes with dire consequences) diminish the value or worth of their opponents. While specific spiritual kinship legitimation strategies will vary, the general sociological process will continue as long as human society survives.

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