Encyclopedia of New Religions

New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities

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Below: Brides holding pictures of their betrothed at a mass wedding of the Unification Church.
GLOBAL NETWORK OF DIVERGENT MARIAN DEVOTION

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From its earliest days, the Roman Catholic Church has given an important place to the veneration of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Marian devotion has become the most significant 'cult of saints' in the church. At certain times, Mary reveals herself to various Catholic Christians through visions and messages. In the early Middle Ages, a phenomenological tradition of apparitions began. Before the 1920s almost all the places where this occurred developed into shrines that have been acknowledged by the church. Sometimes these shrines became of international importance, such as Guadeloupe in Mexico, Lourdes in France, Knock in Ireland and Fatima in Portugal. The activity of this devotional circuit focuses on devotions and sites of approved apparitions, which take part in the mainstream Marian veneration of the Roman Catholic Church. Since the 1940s there has been an exponential increase in the number of new apparitions of and messages from Mary, and also of other saints and of Christ, although they are less frequent. Sometimes it is claimed that statues and pictures weep, bleed or move. Most of the groups and shrines connected with these recent apparitions and private revelations are not acknowledged by the church and form a divergent or alternative devotional circuit. The Catholic Church has become increasingly wary of the boom in such private devotional activities, groups and organizations, especially because the number of people who can be reached by them is much greater than it would have been in the past. As such, it affects the position of the Catholic Church, its doctrines and religious practices.

Network structure

These alternative devotions are not shaped or governed by official ecclesiastical structures. Rather, they are grass-roots movements, the rituals and devotions of which are shaped informally by individual visionaries, particular religious leaders associated with the group and the ideas and practices of related groups of devotees. Although each of the apparitional groups are independent, they can be considered collectively in that they attract very similar types of visitors, who, generally speaking, can be understood as devotees and believers with conservative, traditionalist and even fundamentalist views. Collectively, the individual shrines form a globally oriented network which, to a large extent, is 'controlled' by the devotees and their prayer groups. This network has absolutely no formal status or structure and no headquarters. In many ways, it functions in a similar way to the World Wide Web, in that literally millions of devotees are connected with one another in an open manner. They locate and communicate with each other in eclectic ways at constantly changing sacred sites. In this way they participate in the devotional life of each place, and at the same time create their own specific religious system with its own concentrated spirituality and rituality. In their own local settings they practise their religion, evangelize by distributing prints, folders of information and images, share ideas by word of mouth and actively participate in prayer groups.

Not only has there been an increase in the number of apparitions taking place, but there has also been a change in the type of people receiving the visions. Instead of young people receiving visions, revelations are increasingly reported by adults. Moreover, the nervousness of the church about such revelations, groups and movements stems from the fact that the recipients of visions and revelations not only spread messages related to their 'own' apparitions, but also interpret them in relation to their personal views about the church and the world, some of which conflict with formal church teaching. Indeed, the efforts of the church to control these individuals and groups has proved ineffective because the messages and interpretations can be quickly and widely distributed by adult visionaries, and also because, with or without the support of the media, adult visionaries have shown themselves to be particularly effective in establishing movements, prayer groups and organizations that publish and disseminate their messages.

In their local communities, large proportions of the individual devotees will belong to one or more prayer groups. Some of these groups are linked to a person (often the visionary) or a shrine; others are 'free' prayer groups. The thousands of prayer groups in Europe and northern America form the basic structure of the devotion network. They often play an important role in missionary 'world actions'. For example, prayer groups based in Amsterdam sent newly made copies of the Rosa Mystica statue are sanctified at the Marian shrine of Montichiari, Italy.
Although they have commercial motives, there are also strong apologetic forces at work. For example, the editors prepare their own commentaries with well-substantiated, polemic support for revelations criticized by the church. The devotional network is, to a large extent, independent of mainstream Roman Catholic Marian devotion. Having said that, there is a continual interaction with the institutional church. On the one hand, the Catholic Church ignores, discourages or impedes these devotions because of the perceived possible negative consequences for Roman Catholicism. On the other hand, there are also conservative forces within the church that wish to give elements of this ‘authentic’ voice of the people (as the voice of God) a stronger role, because of the indirect benefits for the threatened modern church. For example, the Medjugorje movement (beginning in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1981) is said to have produced many vocations for the priesthood. Such encouragement has, during the pontificate of John Paul II, led to the positive toleration of, or at least a level of acknowledgment of, some ‘banned’ sites of apparitions (such as the Lady of All Nations in Amsterdam and the Queen of Love at Schlo).

**Spiritual sources**

The apparitions and messages received at Fatima in 1917 (and before that, the Rue du Bac visions in Paris in 1830 and those of La Salette in 1846) are still one of the most important sources of inspiration in the network’s spirituality. Although Fatima was recognized by the church in 1930 as a place of pilgrimage and ‘mainstream’ Marian devotion, it still has a particular function as a standard-bearer for conservative and fundamentalist Marian movements, comprised of a number of Catholic groups and institutions that take their inspiration from the messages. The Fatima messages frequently reappear, either in their original form or interpreted, in the messages announced by contemporary visionaries. The importance of Fatima can also be seen in several conservative groups with large numbers of adherents, such as the Marian Movement of Priests, with about 100,000 members, the Legion of Mary, with 3 million members, and the Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima, which claims to have about 10 million adherents worldwide. According to the organizations and devotees involved, the messages of Fatima should form the basis for a worldwide re-evangelization and missionary programme to save the ‘degenerate’ world and church from the ever-present Satan. Among the typical and central themes in the messages are penitence, prayer (particularly the rosary), conversion of all sinners, war, anti-Communism and anti-atheism. The constant activity of the Devil further points to the approaching, apocalyptic end-time and an ultimate separation of good and evil individuals, the saved and the unsaved.

The renewal within the Roman Catholic Church launched by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) was an extra stimulus for the rise of unorthodox views within Marian messages. Since the Second Vatican Council, the interpretation of the Fatima messages has begun to take on a life of its own, and has increasingly begun to function as the model for new Marian apparitional groups and movements of alternative devotion. After the fall of Communism, this emerging network of groups and movements found new enemies, including apostasy, social degeneracy, abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia and the corruption of the church and its priests. This forms the ‘classic’ representation of the church-related range of thought and belief of the conservative devotees. Major unacknowledged and private shrines (e.g. Medjugorje, Amsterdam and Montichiari) generate their own particular spiritualities, which then influence other sites.

Another important issue in many recent apparitions is the question of the recognition of ‘the fifth dogma’. Various visionaries claiming Marian apparitions promote the desirability of recognizing the position of Mary as co-redempress (a saviour along with Christ). This dogma, which was particularly propagated in the Amsterdam apparitions (1943–59), is heavily contested both inside and outside the church. Mary revealed herself in Amsterdam as ‘The Lady of All Nations’, and introduced a prayer that, together with the desired spread of the rosary, was to realize the swift promulgation of a new, fifth dogma of Mary as ‘Coredemptrix, Mediatrix, Advocate’. This view has now won worldwide support from Marian devotees who want to give Mary a place of her own in God’s acts of salvation, something Fatima would also have supported. In the 1990s, the ‘Third Secret’ of Fatima, which the visionary Lucia shared only with the pope, continued to be the inspiration for end-time prophecies and speculations of an apocalyptic nature about the further course of the world and the concrete beginning of the end-times. The fall of the Communist regimes, growing interest in the end of the world caused by the approach of the year 2000, and his own personal devotion to Fatima led Pope John Paul II to reveal the Third Secret in 2000. The content appeared less dramatic and apocalyptic than many had thought. The year 2000 having quietly passed, fundamentalist circles suggested that the message has not yet been fully revealed, and that the end of time will begin some years later. In this way, too, Fatima continues to be an important source of nourishment for groups within the network.

**Medjugorje**

Medjugorje is probably the most famous and most frequently visited shrine within the network. The authenticity of the apparitions that have taken place there since 1981 is one of the most contentious topics within modern Roman Catholicism. Since that year, six children have been receiving daily messages from Mary, who appears as the ‘Queen of Peace’. From the beginning, the bishop of Mostar-Duvno had doubts about the authenticity of the apparitions and suspicions of manipulation by the Franciscans arose. Over the years, many influential persons in the Catholic Church, up to and including Pope John Paul II, have either spoken out about the movement or expressly refused to take a position on it. The whole subject is too politically problematic for many priests, others who suggest plausibility deception on the part of the visionaries and their advisors, and still others who assume a conspiracy involving the Franciscans and their conflicts with the local bishop. Whatever the case, three diocesan investigative committees have declared the apparitions and messages non-authentic, and in 1998 the Vatican itself also accepted that standpoint. However, over against the negative position of the church hierarchy stands a massive following of believers who find considerable strength in the shrine and the series of messages associated with it. Since 1981, more than 35 million pilgrims, devotees and believers, including thousands of regular priests and hundreds of bishops, have visited the shrine. The majority were theologically conservative Catholics. However, because
of the opposition of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the movement exists in a problematic spiritual vacuum, and links have arisen with other unacknowledged apparitions and devotions around the world, such as the group of devotees associated with the Lady of All Nations in Amsterdam.

The spiritual and theological autonomy of unorthodox Marian devotion is further stimulated by a powerful relationship between the movement and Catholic charismatic renewal, another movement that can tend to disassociate itself from institutional ecclesiastical structures. For example, Catholic charismatic prayer groups associated with Medjugorje have been established and now function as models for similar groups elsewhere in the world. The intensive mission activities of the movements are supported by the world tours of visionaries or shrine guardians claim to receive the only correct or true apparitions or messages. A list of the principal devotional sites and shrines in the network should include Heede, Germany (established 1937), Kérizinen, France (1938), Amsterdam, the Netherlands (1945), Montichiari, Italy (1946), Marienfried, Germany (1946), Heroldsbach, Germany (1949), Necedah, Wisconsin, United States (1949), Eisenberg, Austria (1955), Garabandal, Spain (1961), San Damiano, Italy (1961), Wollongong, Australia (1968), Akita, Japan (1969), Bayside, New York, United States (1970), Tampa, Florida, United States (1973), Dorrego, Argentina (1975), Olawa, Poland (1981), Kibeho, Rwanda (1981), Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina (1981), Soufanieh, Syria (1982), Maasmechelen, Belgium (1982), Melleray, Ireland (1985), Schio, Italy (1985), Naju, South Korea (1986), Cuenca, Ecuador (1988), Conyers, Georgia, United States (1988), Manduria, Italy (1992), Paratico, Italy (1994), Valkenswaard, the Netherlands (1998), Marpingen, Germany (1999) and Seuca, Romania (2000).