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What's New with Cults and Sects in America? - Part 4

By Tal Davis

In this four part series we have tried to bring our readers up-to-date on some of the largest cult and sect movements in America. The first installment updated information on two groups: Armstrongism (the legacy of Herbert W. Armstrong's bizarre interpretations of the Bible) and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

In the second part we looked at the Jehovah's Witnesses. We discussed the recent revision of their Bible version and changes in their authority structure. We also updated Oneness Pentecostalism and Unitarian Universalism. In Part 3 we focused on Christian Science, the Unity School of Christianity, and the Way International. In this Part 4, we will examine some recent happenings with the Church of Scientology, review the current status of the Nation of Islam, and see how (if at all) the Unification Church has changed since the death of Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

Church of Scientology

Leah Rimini (b. 1970) was raised in Scientology from the time she was nine years old when her mother started "Dianetics auditing." Scientology is the strange mind cult founded in the early 1950s by Science Fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard (1911-1986). Later, as a teenager in California, Rimini began a successful TV acting career (*The King of Queens*; *The Talk*) and remained active in Scientology's Celebrity Centre in Hollywood. In 2013 she became disillusioned by the movement's abusive treatment of its staff and the authoritarian leadership of its current president David Miscavige (b. 1960). As a result, she was asked to testify in several law suits brought by former staff mem-

bers against Miscavige and Scientology. In 2015 she published her memoir called *Troublemaker: Surviving Hollywood and Scientology*. The next year she began producing a TV series on A&E channel called *Leah Rimini: Scientology and the Aftermath*. It features a number of ex-Scientologists who related their bad experiences in the movement. She has become public enemy number one for Scientology!

Among those defecting were several of the highest ranking officials in the church. One of them was Marty Rathbone (b. 1957). He had held the position of Inspector General of the Religious Technology Center (RTC) – the organization that is responsible for the protection and enforcement of all Dianetics and Scientology copyrights and trademarks. He was also the primary spokesperson for the church. In 2004 Rathbone left the organization over disagreements with Miscavige, but maintained his continued faith in L. Ron Hubbard and Scientology principles. Later he disavowed any personal religious beliefs.

In 2018 Scientology launched its own satellite TV network featuring round the clock programming promoting Scientology practices. It is available on only a few satellite or cable outlets.

In 2019, a former Scientologist, known only as "Jane Doe," filed a suit against the church. According to NBC news (June 19, 2019):

"The suit, filed Tuesday in Los Angeles County Superior Court, seeks unspecified general, special and compensatory damages, as well as unpaid wages, from the church, its Religious Technology Center and its 'ecclesiastical leader,' David Miscavige, and 25

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unnamed co-respondents at a jury trial. Allegations in the lawsuit include libel, slander, invasion of privacy, and intentional infliction of emotional distress, and seek double or triple damages on claims the plaintiffs violated California labor and human trafficking laws."

Another rather ironic news item about Scientology appeared in May, 2019. Its prized Sea Org (Sea Organization - its management team - organized somewhat like a navy) cruise ship, the Freewinds, was quarantined in St. Lucia because of an on-board measles outbreak. Scientology has a history of discouraging people from getting vaccinated against some illnesses. It is highly suspicious of traditional medicine, and especially hates psychiatry.

For decades Scientology has been among the most controversial and dangerous movements in the world. It is even banned in some countries as threats to their national security. The recent defections by former followers and other bad publicity has shined a needed light in the darkness of that cult's organization and methods. For more information on the bizarre beliefs and practices of the Church of Scientology visit these links.

- The Gospel According to Tom Cruise: Scientology
<http://www.marketfaith.org/non-christian-worldviews/the-gospel-according-to-tom-cruise-scientology>
- What Do You Know About Scientology?
<http://www.marketfaith.org/2014/01/what-do-you-know-about-scientology>
- A Closer Look at Scientology – The Celebrity Cult
<http://www.marketfaith.org/2015/09/a-closer-look-at-scientology-the-celebrity-cult>

- The Last Days of Scientology?
<http://www.marketfaith.org/2012/07/the-last-days-of-scientology>
- More Trouble for Scientology
<http://www.marketfaith.org/2012/10/more-trouble-for-scientology>

Nation of Islam

The existence of doctrinaire racism and anti-Semitism in America today is difficult to surmise. Most people think we have moved past those old prejudices and just want all Americans to enjoy the freedom of living in this country. Not so, however. Racism (hatred of and/or discrimination against people of a different race or ethnicity than one's own) and anti-Semitism (hatred of and/or discrimination against Jewish people) are still present among some extreme religious groups. One of the most notorious in both regards is the Nation of Islam (NOI), a radical black pseudo-Muslim movement founded by Wallace D. Fard in Detroit in the early 1930s. In 1934 Fard inexplicably disappeared and was soon replaced as leader by Elijah Muhammad (1898-1975).

Muhammad declared that Fard was God and was still alive on a space ship above the earth. He then declared that he was God's new spokesman prophet. His message was (and remains that of the NOI) basically that black people are the true people of God, and that white people are devils created thousands of years ago by an evil scientist.

In the late 70s, after Elijah Muhammad's death, his son, Warith Deen Mohammad (1933-2008), took over. He quickly retracted his father's strange racist teachings, turned the movement into an orthodox Sunni Muslim group, and changed its name. Those reforms led some of Elijah Muhammad's former followers to turn to Louis Farrakhan (b. 1933), who continued to adhere to the bizarre teachings of Elijah Muhammad. He retained the

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Nation of Islam moniker and soon gained national recognition.

In 1995, Farrakhan hosted the Washington DC Million Man March. Thousands of African-American men gathered on the Washington Mall to hear various speakers, with Farrakhan giving the main speech. In the more than two decades since the nationally televised march, Farrakhan's public profile has decreased. Many mainline African-American leaders, and even former President Barack Obama, distanced themselves from him and his extremist ideology.

In August 2017, the then 84-year-old Farrakhan made this startling statement:

"I thank God for guiding me for 40 years absent my teacher (i.e.: Elijah Muhammad). So my next journey will have to answer the question. I'm gonna say, I know that my redeemer liveth. I know, I'm not guessing, that my Jesus is alive. I know that my redeemer liveth, and because he lives I know that I, too, will pass through the portal of death yet death will not afflict me.

"So I say to the devil, I know I gotta pay a price for what I've been teaching all these years. You can have the money, you can have the clothes, you can have the suit, you can have the house but, me, you can't have."

Some Christians thought that maybe Farrakhan had repented, changed his theology, and perhaps had become a Christian. If, however, we understand the beliefs of Farrakhan and the NOI, we know that he did not really alter his theology at all. He just disguised it in terms familiar to Christians to sound more acceptable (as cults often do). Here is our interpretation, reading between the lines so to speak.

"I thank God (Wallace D. Fard) for guiding me (a modern inspired prophet) for 40 years absent my

teacher (Elijah Muhammad). So my next journey will have to answer the question. I'm gonna say, I know that my redeemer (Fard) liveth. I know, I'm not guessing, that my Jesus (Elijah Muhammad) is alive. I know that my redeemer (Fard) liveth, and because he lives I know that I, too, will pass through the portal of death yet death will not afflict me (I will go to the "Mother Plane" spaceship in the sky orbiting the Earth where Fard and Muhammad now reside).

"So I say to the devil (all white and Jewish people), I know I gotta pay a price (strong opposition to his racist ideology) for what I've been teaching all these years. You can have the money, you can have the clothes, you can have the suit, you can have the house but, me, you can't have (I'm not changing anything)."

The NOI and Louis Farrakhan are still as racist and virulently anti-Semitic as ever. In a 2014 speech, Farrakhan stated, "the satanic Jews that control everything, and mostly everybody, if they are your enemy, you must, must be somebody." In an October 2018 speech and tweet, Farrakhan compared Jews to termites: "So when they talk about Farrakhan, call me a hater, you know what they do, call me an anti-Semite. Stop it, I'm anti-Termite."

As we observed, Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam are not as visible as they once were. Farrakhan is getting quite old (86) and has had serious health issues. Nevertheless, as many as 50,000 African American followers still adhere to his racist and anti-Semitic doctrines.

In one strange development in the mid-2000s, Louis Farrakhan began to use some of the terminology of Scientology in his speeches. Why he did so is not known.

In any case, what the future of the NOI will be without Farrakhan is yet

to be seen. We do not know if he has designated a successor. Some have suggested it may be Ishmael Muhammad (b. 1964), a popular younger son of Elijah Muhammad and Farrakhan's right hand man. Another candidate is Abdul Hafeez Muhammad (age unknown), a leader of the NOI's student work. Additionally, there is Mustapha Farrakhan (age unknown), one of Louis' sons and a former police officer who holds the title as the NOI's "Supreme Commander." Farrakhan's oldest son, Louis Farrakhan Jr., died in June 2018.

Regardless of who Farrakhan chooses, chances are, when he dies, the movement will again splinter with various factions following different leaders claiming to be the rightful new leader.

To review the full history and beliefs of the Nation of Islam visit these links.

- Louis Farrakhan and The Nation of Islam – Part 1
<http://www.marketfaith.org/2018/01/louis-farrakhan-and-the-nation-of-islam-part-1>
- Louis Farrakhan and The Nation of Islam – Part 2
<http://www.marketfaith.org/2018/01/louis-farrakhan-and-the-nation-of-islam-part-2>

Unification Church

The founder of the Unification Church (UC) was Sun Myung Moon (1920-2012). Moon's audacious claim was that, when he was a young man, Jesus himself called him to complete the work he had failed to finish and bring about peace in the world. For 70 years Moon's church preached a cryptic message that he was the "Lord of the Second Advent" – a 20th century messiah.

Moon died on September 3, 2012, in Gapyeong-gun, South Korea, at the age of 92, from complications of pneumonia. Since his death we do not hear much about him or his church. The truth is, the Unification Church is still in existence, it just lacks the public notoriety it once garnered in Moon's day by its aggressive fund raising tactics and mass weddings. It's official name used to be The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity. In 1994 it was changed to the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Moon went public with his claims of Messiahship. On March 23, 2004 Moon and his wife were crowned by the UC as the world's "Savior, Messiah, Returning Lord and True Parents." This title was bestowed on them at the "Ambassadors Peace Awards" banquet held in the Dirksen Senate Office Building in Washington, DC. About that same time, Moon declared the world is now in the "Completed Testament" age of history. Thanks to him and his church, good (democracy) is now finally triumphing over evil (communism).

Moon had prepared for his demise by choosing his youngest son, Hyung Jin Moon (b. 1979), to take over leadership of the UC. That being said, Moon's widow, Hak Ja Han Moon, continues as the spiritual leader of the movement and exerts a great deal of influence. At this point, any changes in UC theology is not known, mainly because Mrs. Moon continues to cling to her husband's messianic mythology. It is likely that when she dies, her son and others may revise much of UC doctrine in light of Moon's failure to bring about world peace and a perfect race of humanity.

The UC claims approximately three million members, mostly in South Korea. Though not big numerically, the church has controlling interest in a wide ranging number of business ventures worldwide. In the United States, where it may only have as many as 5,000 members, the church still owns *The Washington Times* newspaper. It also owns the United Press International wire service, and publishes *Insight Online* internet magazine.

In the education field, the UC appoints a majority of the board of trustees of the University of Bridgeport (Connecticut). The UC took over the financially strapped school in 1991 when it was facing imminent bankruptcy and closure. Its first president hired after the takeover was Richard L. Rubenstein (b. 1924), a former professor of Religion at Florida State University. Rubenstein is a Jewish Holocaust scholar and was once an atheist (some sources say he has modified his beliefs in light of studying Kabbalah). Nonetheless, he had publically defended Moon and his church in the 1980s. He served from 1995-1999.

Rubenstein was succeeded by Neil Salonen (b. 1946), a long time follower of Moon and former President of the UC branch in America. The current President, as of 2018, is Laura Skandera Trombley (b. 1961?/

religious affiliation unknown). She is a graduate of Pepperdine University, an English professor, a Ph.D. holder from the University of Southern California, and an expert on the writings of Mark Twain. In 2015 she resigned as president of Pitzer College after a no confidence vote of the faculty.

To read the history and beliefs of the Unification Church visit these links:

- The Unification Church/Moonies
<http://www.marketfaith.org/2014/11/the-unification-churchmoonies>
- Whatever Happened to Rev. Moon?
<http://www.marketfaith.org/whatever-happened-to-rev-moon>

This concludes our four part update on modern American cults and sects. As we have seen, most of these groups are in a constant state of flux regarding leadership and beliefs. As we indicated, often when the original leader ("apostle", "prophet", "teacher", "messiah", or whatever) dies there is almost always a split in the ranks. Factions usually divide over who will be the next leader and which is the "true" church or movement to continue the originators teaching.

For more information on all the groups we have analyzed (see introduction above) and other religious movements, go to the MarketFaith website at www.marketfaith.org and click on "Worldview Resources." You may also want to sign up for the weekly online newsletter on the home page.

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