CHAPTER 7

"Guru Pedophiles", Neo-Polygamists, and Predatory Prophets: Exploring the Sex Scandals and Abuse Allegations Concerning "Cults"/NRMs, 1993–2017

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Introduction

This chapter explores the recent proliferation of media reports and criminal trials focusing on the alleged sexual abuse of women, men, and minors by patriarchal spiritual leaders of small, unconventional new religious movements (NRMs), known to the public via the media as "cults" (Palmer and Hardman, 1999; Beckford, 2004; Richardson, 2007). The pedophilia scandal in the Catholic Church has been documented and widely discussed (Jenkins, 1996; Boston Globe, 2002), but a comprehensive survey and discussion of the sex scandals involving charismatic prophets of NRMs has yet to be accomplished. There has been a noticeable increase over the last 30 years of news reports and court records concerning charismatic prophets ("cult leaders") of new religions who have been accused of sexual misdemeanors or crimes (Hatch, 2016). But aside from one scholarly study of "clergy malfeasance" in new religions by sociologist Anson Shupe (1998) and several studies of specific notorious "cult leaders", all that is available on this topic are personal memoires and the value-laden diatribes on sexual predators in anticult literature (Malcairne and Burchard, 1992; Singer and Lalich, 1995).

This study seeks to provide an overview of this enigmatic phenomenon by compiling a list of cases, distinguishing between various forms of alleged abuse, and crafting a typology of sexual predator prophets in NRMs. Next, it examines the sources of conflict and the social context of these controversies. Finally, it addresses the issue of justice and weighs two conflicting imperatives:

(1) The imperative to control and punish "clergy malfeasance" (Shupe, 1998) to protect children and vulnerable disciples;
(2) The imperative to respect the right for the presumption of innocence—even if the accused is a despised, heterodox "cult leader".

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The Nature of the Complaints and Problems of Evidence

New Religious Movements (NRMs) have a longstanding history of conflict with society. Dubbed as "cults" in the media, they tend to be viewed with suspicion by secular authorities and leaders of mainstream religions. The characteristic features of NRMs—their strange practices, heretical beliefs, unconventional economic patterns and the extravagant charismatic claims of their founder-prophets—have contributed to their controversial status (Beckford, 1984). When complaints are made about "cults", however, they are usually by family members, for the social organization of many NRMs provide a new model of family life, if a fictive one. Male and female disciples become "brothers" and "sisters", and when their intense devotion to their fictive "father" or "mother", the spiritual master or mistress, interferes with biological family ties, formal complaints, lawsuits, custody battles and negative media reports will result. The fierce rivalry between the bereft parents and the charismatic gurus over their adult children's affections, new radical lifestyle, and future prospects is reflected in the stereotypical portraits of "cult leaders" as ruthless con artists, as schizophrenic megalomaniacs, or as exploitative psychopaths abound in the media and in anticult literature.

The allegations, rumours, and formal charges against these holy men range from the sexual exploitation of female disciples, to child molestation, to arranging forced underage polygamous marriages (Derocher, 2008). More recently, there have been complaints against homosexual spiritual masters who have forced young "straight" male disciples into homoerotic relationships. *Holy Hell,* a 2016 documentary by Will Allen describes his seductive gay guru, "Michel" of the Buddhafield; also, the 2017 scandal surrounding 91-year-old Dennis Lingwood, founder of Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, whose former disciples complained he had created an esoteric spiritual path that required heterosexual "deconditioning" by one's roshi (Doward, 2017).

Many venerable swamis, roshis, or gurus, now in their eighties and nineties, have recently found themselves confronted by alleged victims from their past. Even deceased holy men are targets of posthumous allegations of sexual misconduct, as for example Hindu spiritual masters Muktananda, Sri Sathya Sai Baba, and Krishnamurti (Balfour-Clarke, 1977). Most of the victims tend to voice their complaints years after the abuse, which raises problems of credibility and evidence.

The progress of these allegations moves from rumours, to scandals in the media, to police reports, to civil or criminal lawsuits, to convictions or dismissals. Some NRM leaders, branded as child abusers in the mass media and