Ex-Member Accounts from New Religious Movements:  
A Compilation, 2000-Present

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**ABSTRACT**: The 21st century has seen an explosion of personal accounts of life in and exodus from a range of new religious movements (more than 200 book-length titles). Much of this literature is self-published, poorly publicized, and difficult to obtain. Though often ignored, this ex-member literature forms a valuable additional insight into new religious movements when used critically and integrated with the many other information sources available to researchers. Ex-member accounts have added promise as representatives of three longstanding genres—religious testimonies, apostate stories, and memoirs. The literature cited also indicates the expansion of interest within the cult awareness movement beyond the relatively small number of new religions that dominated controversy in the 1970s and 1980s to look at the Amish, Hassidic Jews, polygamy-practicing Mormons, and traditionalist Catholics.


**Introduction**

In recent centuries, especially as religious freedom has become a fact of life, accounts by individuals of their pilgrimage from the religious group in which they were raised or joined as a young adult, to either a secular life or membership in another religion, have appeared decade by decade. Since World War II, with the growing diversity in religions in the West, the number of such accounts have
risen dramatically. Of special interest have been the stories of “apostates,” those who have not only withdrawn from their former religion but subsequently turned on it with often harsh criticism.

Apostate literature has been a subject of controversy over the years. Through the 1960s and 1970s, with the proliferation of new religious movements (NRMs), researchers viewed much ex-member literature as little more than a segment of the literature expressive of the emerging anti-cult (or “cult awareness”) movement. Indeed, several ex-members went on to become deprogrammers, helped create the cult awareness movement, and became important leaders of it. Simultaneously, NRMs scholars also used former members (both those who authored articles and books and those who did not) as important sources of information. They tested the claims of former members about groups as they moved through the material published by groups and made their own observations of group activity.

There is also a body of scholarly literature critiquing apostate accounts and warning of the need to handle such accounts critically. A significant case highlighting the need to apply critical tools toward ex-member accounts was the book *Michelle Remembers* (1980), eventually uncovered as a hoax, but only after sparking the social panic over Satanism in the 1980s. While, the overwhelming amount of ex-member literature bears little resemblance to *Michelle Remembers*, the widespread acceptance of the book stands as a vivid reminder of the need to remain alert in approaching ex-member literature even as we keep all our research tools on the ready when visiting new religions.

Apostate accounts can be quite valuable in calling attention to problems within religious groups not readily available to even the most persistent scholars who may be blocked from certain aspects of any given group’s life while conducting research. Some groups announce up front their esoteric nature, and make no secret that certain aspects of their life are considered the sole property of accomplished members and should not be disclosed either to outsiders or the uninitiated. Almost all groups have matters that they wish to remain confidential, especially confidences shared with them by individuals in pastoral situations. The real problem often arises when groups attempt to withhold information on actions by leaders that might be considered illegal, immoral, or embarrassing. In this respect, ex-member literature provides new research agendas by calling attention to possible issues of interest that previous researchers had ignored.
While the accounts of former members of the many NRMs might be considered under the heading of apostate literature, such accounts also have an indistinct border with what might be considered testimonies of religious conversion, a large percentage of which includes the story of leaving one’s birth religion for a new faith or a life of unbelief. Christian literature has made space for testimony stories of conversion to Christianity from other faiths, and in recent decades, as the world’s religions have emerged in the West, they have begun to publish similar titles, and Atheist and Humanist literature has long valued accounts of people telling how they lost any faith in God and need for the community of the religious life.

These books also fit into another genre, that of memoirs. Memoirs have been valued for centuries for the personal point of view they promise on particular events the author has witnessed, and the unique illumination their insider status has given them. The memoir format suggests insights available only to someone who has lived through the events being described. As such they not only supply new data but offer some degree of emotional impact not found in, for example, third person accounts of life in a new religion. Memoirs can become an important platform for communicating intense feeling about a particular group.

Some ex-member accounts are also especially valuable in calling attention to groups from which little or no literature is available due to their separatist lifestyle, their lack of publications, and their refusal to cooperate with outsiders seeking to learn of them.

The discussion of the varied opinions on ex-member accounts over the last 60 years, however, goes far beyond the limited purposes of this paper, which are two. One is to re-affirm the continuing importance of ex-member NRM literature when used alongside of the spectrum of sources that one would want to consider in studying any given group. And, of course, it should be second nature to us, that like the literature generated by any group, ex-member literature from the same group is also to be used critically and not simply accepted at face value.

Second, this article is to call attention to the explosion of such literature in the new century. After an initial appearance of this literature relative to the more controversial NRMs in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a seeming drop off in the 1990s. However, since 2000, several hundred books by former members of different NRMs have appeared and over the past few years, the authors of this article have been compiling it for use in our work. Many of these books have been
difficult to locate as they were privately published and given little publicity, hence we offer a compilation of what we have found for any wider use that may flow from it. We also note that the number of groups called out as being “cults” or “cult-like” has expanded greatly. In recent years, hostile ex-member literature has targeted a whole new set of groups not included among the “cults” in the 1970s and 1980s, most notably the Amish, Hassidic Judaism, polygamist Mormons, and traditionalist Catholics. Several groups which were prominent in the earlier cult controversies have also continued to be targets of former members, most notably the Church of Scientology and the Unification Movement.

In organizing the many ex-member books, we have chosen to organize our list around the groups that have been left behind, and to organize those groups under the major religious traditions into which they fit. We start with the Asian religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism and Sant Mat—which are followed by Western Esotericism, Judaism, and Christianity. Finally, at the end are a set of books in which the “cult” being discussed is either unidentified or its placement in a major religious tradition difficult to discern. These are listed under “Additional Groups” (such as the Manson Family).

Finally, while the assembling of this list has occurred over several years during which time a diligent search for all of the literature (in the English language) was made, items have obviously been missed. The authors welcome information on additional items that should be listed below but have been missed. Please forward information on such Items to J. Gordon Melton (JGordon_Melton@baylor.edu) and/or W. Michael Ashcraft (washcraft@truman.edu).

Part I. Asian Religious Traditions

A. Buddhism


Re: Shambhala International.


Re: Sogyal Rinpoche.

**B. Hindu and Related South Asian Groups**

Cohen, Andrew (Evolutionary Enlightenment)

Andrew Cohen, a student of Hindu spiritual teacher H.W.L. Poonja (aka Poonjaji, 1910?–1997), emerged as a popular spiritual teacher whose students began to complain of changes in his teaching style and about demands he made upon students. In 2013 he took a sabbatical from teachings and in 2015 apologized to his students, ceased teaching, and disbanded his organization.


**International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)**

Angyal, Andrew T. *From Church to Ashram: Joining the Hare Krishnas and Coming Back Home to Catholicism*. N.p.: the Author, 2011.


**Rajneesh/Osho**


**Transcendental Meditation**


Bourque, Judith. *Robes of Silk Feet of Clay: The True Story of a Love Affair with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the TM Guru followed by the Beatles*, Deepak


C. Sikhism/Sant Mat

Sikh Dharma/3HO (Yogi Bhajan)


ECKANKAR


D. Various Hindu-Inspired groups


[Barbosa, raised in a traditional Jewish home, joined a Hindu group, and has more recently become a Messianic Jew (i.e., a Jew who believes Jesus, or Yahshua, is the Messiah). See also a review of the book by Gina Catena, *ICSA Today* 10/3(2019):22–3.]


Re: Guru Maharaj Ji.


Re: various gurus.


Re: Jagadguru Kripalu Parishat.


Re: Ananda Marga.


Re: Robert Martin Lloyd (aka Master David), Essence Church of the Fields. [Lloyd led a small short-lived group that dissolved after his conviction on charges of rape in 2000.]


Re: Sri Chinmoy.


Re: Amma “The Hugging Saint.”

**Part II. Western Esotericism**

*Christian Science*


*Satanism*

[Note: The memoirs of life in a Satanic cult exist as a special case in cult memoirs. While some relatively small Satanic churches exist, the controversy over the accounts of Satanic ritual abuse in the 1980s and 1990s called into question the existence of a national Satanic movement. There were over 12,000 accusations nationwide of widespread cultic sexual abuses involving Satanic ritual, but investigating police were not able to substantiate any allegations of organized cult abuse.]


The Trailer Park Angel. *This is a True Story*. N.p.: the Author, 2019.
Scientology, Church of


By a Scientologist. One of a series.


*Synanon*

[Little discussed today, Synanon began as a therapeutic group for drug addicts in 1958 and gradually mutated into a full-blown religion. Controversial in the best of time, it imploded in the late 1970s.]


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**Part III. Judaism**

Ultraorthodox/Hassidic Judaism


Re: Skverer Hassidism.


Re: Lubavitcher, Satmar.


Re: Hassidism.


**Black Judaism**


**Part IV: Christianity**

Amish

[Note: Unlike most other “ex” memoirs, when it comes to the Amish, the ex-
Ex-Member Accounts from New Religious Movements

Amish memoirs must compete with a large number of pro-Amish memoirs, in which the authors have largely intact, non-abusive childhoods. Because Amish life reminds many of Americana—the classic small town, church-centered life that many today look back to with nostalgia—ex-Amish memoirs have a special challenge that other categories of “ex” memoirs do not. For example, it is rare for someone who was in Scientology for a long time to write a memoir about how wonderful their life was in Scientology, and to get some sort of cultural affirmation of that story because it resembles something nostalgic in American cultural memory. It is also to be noted that there are a variety of distinct Amish groups.


[See also Voelz, Sabrina, “Writing Life, Writing Back, and Writing Through: Saloma Miller Furlong’s Why I Left the Amish: A Memoir and Bonnet Strings: An Amish Woman’s Ties to Two Worlds,” Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies 4,2 (2016): 201-19 (review article).]


[About Wil Hochstetler.]


Re: Amish people converting to Evangelical Christianity.


Re: Amish family that converts to Evangelical Christianity.


Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints


Churches of Christ (Restoration Movement)


Branch Davidians

[A variety of memoirs have been written by surviving members of the Branch Davidians, an Adventist church that largely ceased to exist following the burning of Mt. Carmel, their single center, in rural McLennan County, Texas. The memoirs reflect a spectrum of opinion of life in the group.]


The Family/Children of God


**Jehovah’s Witnesses**


Murphy, Ron, and Mary Murphy. *Held Captive by Religious Belief: A Heart-Wrenching Account of Two Kids Forced to Grow Up as Jehovah’s Witnesses*. N.p.: the Authors, 2014.


[Note: a novel.]


[Note: “This is a fictional account based on real events...”]


Secondary


Re: the case of James Penton.


Note: a blank book.

**Plymouth Brethren**


Re: Taylor-Hale Brethren.


**Polygamy-Practicing (Mormon) Groups**

[While the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) is the best known of the several LDS polygamy-practicing groups, it is by no means the only one, and the current literature has been written by former members from different splinter groups.]


Re: Apostolic United Brethren (aka the Allred faction).
Re: FLDS.

Re: Blackmore clan in Canada.


[Not about leave taking.]

Bushman-Carlton, Marilyn, with Connie Saddler. *Worthy: A Young Woman from a Background of Poverty and Abuse Falls Prey to a Polygamous Cult*. N.p.: the Author, 2016.


Re: Apostolic United Brethren (aka Allred faction).

Re: True and Living Church of Jesus Christ of Saints of the Last Days.

Re: FLDS.

Re: FLDS.
Re: FLDS.

Re: FLDS.

Re: FLDS.

Re: FLDS.


Re: Zion Society.


Re: Church of the Lamb of God.


Re: Latter Day Church of Christ (aka the Kingston faction).


Re: Apostolic United Brethren (aka the Allred group).

Re: Church of the Lamb of God.


Re: Latter Day Church of Christ (aka the Kingston Faction).


RE: FLDS.


Re: The Church of the Lamb of God (aka the LeBaron faction).


[Includes stories from the FLDS, the Apostolic United Brethren, and the True and Living Church of Jesus Christ of Saints of the latter Days (Harmston).]


**Roman Catholic Church (related)**

Through the 19th and 20th century, at least until Vatican II, among the most popular segments of ex-member literature consisted of accounts by former priests, monks, and nuns who left their calling. This literature, which dropped in popularity after Vatican II, was often cited in the 1970s and 1980s to counter the impact of members leaving high demand groups that were organized similarly to Catholic orders. Simultaneously, accounts appeared of nuns who left the ordered life amid the feminist movement and the post-Vatican changes in church life.

In the 21st century, a new set of material was generated by several traditionalist Catholic groups that resisted the changes introduced by Vatican II, most notably the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, a fringe traditionalist group based in Boston, Massachusetts; and the Congregation of Mary Immaculate Queen, a
traditionallyist order based in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho; the Society of Saint Pius X, an international traditionalist group; and the Order of St. Charbel, an Australian order founded by William Kamm. All of the aforementioned groups are organizationally independent of the Roman Catholic Church. They stand in contrast to the Legion of Christ, a popular Latin American ordered community, founded in Mexico City in 1941. After disclosures of abuse within the Legion of Christ, its leader was removed, and the order underwent a renovation under papal scrutiny. In the new century, Paul Lennon, a former member of the Legion of Christ wrote and published a useful guide to the various Roman Catholic groups accused of cult-like tendencies: *Catholic Orders & Movements Accused of Being Cult-like: Intra-Ecclesial Sects?* (n.p.: the Author, 2020).

There is a large body of autobiographical Roman Catholic literature written by former priests, monks, and nuns who have left their vocation, some of whom also left church membership, and an even larger body of literature of or concerning lay members who have left. That literature has in turn generated a body of literature that attempts to analyze the many who have drifted away from faith, and the church has itself published books seeking to woo lapse members back into the church. This large body of material is far beyond the scope of this bibliography, which centers upon new religions and other groups popularly labeled as “cults.”


Re: Society of Saint Pius X/Order of St. Charbel.


Re: Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Fr. Leonard Feeney, 1897–1978).


Re: Legion of Christ.

Re: Legion of Christ.


Re: Congregation of Mary Immaculate Queen.

*The Way International*


*Various Christian Groups*


Re: International Churches of Christ.


Re: Two by Twos.


Re: Two by Twos.


Re: The Bible Speaks (aka Greater Grace World Outreach).


Re: Word of Faith Fellowship.


Re: Church of Bible Understanding.


Re: Westboro Baptist Church.
Re: William Branham Pentecostalism.


Re: Two by Twos.


Part V. Additional Groups

*Love Israel Family*

[See review in *Nova Religio* 23.2 (Nov. 2019): 137-8.]


Manson Family


Unification Movement (Sun Myung Moon)


Miscellaneous


Re: “The Druids.”


Re: Buddhafield.