Heaven in Transition

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Ackerman, Susan Ellen, 1949-
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This study is a result of serendipity. Originally, we intended to research trance and spirit possession, only to discover that some of our informants did not draw a sharp distinction between our definition of trance and their involvement in various religious movements. Our initial conception of trance as a privately experienced altered state of consciousness took on a different perspective when some informants introduced us to their religious movements. Having heard that we were interested in trance—which they took to mean events related to the occult—they eagerly invited us to their meetings and to listen to their experiences. Our association with these religious seekers opened up a whole new vista of thinking about trance and possession behavior. Trance did not only function as a source of power for healing, but also as a means of identity expression. Our experiences led us to explore other new religious groups that did not necessarily focus on trance as a central activity, but emphasized the inculcation of syncretic ideologies as alternative vehicles of ethnic identity. This exploration led to six years of research with three religious movements, each representing an innovative aspect of an established religious tradition in Malaysia. Our contacts with these movements heightened our awareness of other groups and organizations that comprise the Malaysian religious mosaic. Some of these groups were short-lived while others had been around a long time. But they shared with the three movements a quest for spiritual renewal, the expression of which was irrevocably determined by events in the larger sociopolitical environment.
The non-Muslim seeker in Malaysia today can choose from a wide range of religious and quasireligious alternatives, each with its own variable set of ideologies, so that the heaven that the faithful seek is never permanent but always in transition.

During our sojourn in the Malaysian religious arena, we received guidance and hospitality from many colleagues, friends, and other individuals. We would like to acknowledge our gratitude to them: Father Paul Tan and Brother Damien Oliver of the Catholic Research Center, Kuala Lumpur; Rev. Dennis Dutton, Mr. C. R. Daniel, and Ms. Janet Lee of the Methodist Church of Malaysia; Bishop Tan Sri J. G. Savarimuthu of the Anglican Church of Malaysia; the late Father P. DeCroocq of Jesus Caritas Church, Kuala Lumpur; Rev. Johnny Yeoh of the Bible Institute of Malaysia; Dr. S. M. Ponniah and Mr. S. Vythalingam of the Malaysian Hindu Sangam; Mr. T. C. Teh of the Buddhist Missionary Society, Kuala Lumpur; Encik Tahir of the Pusat Penyelidikan Islam, Kuala Lumpur; A. M. M. Mackeen, Stephen Leong, Amarjit Kaur, R. Rajoo, and R. Dorall of the University of Malaya; and Paul Markandan, Albert Alvisse, J. Hariram, P. P. Narayanan, Joy Seevaratnam, C. M. Chew, M. Sathiavany, Pat Cox, Soanne Ong, and M. H. Loke. We are also grateful to the University of Malaya, which provided a small grant for our survey. Last, but not least, we owe a great debt of gratitude to Damaris Kirchhofer of the University of Hawaii Press for her advice and guidance.

Some of the material in chapters 3, 4, and 5 appeared earlier in a different form in the following journals: Sociological Review (1980), Journal of Anthropological Research (1981), Contributions to Indian Sociology (1982), NUMEN (1982), Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography (1983), and Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science (1984). We would like to thank the editors for their permission to let us reuse the published data. This book is the product of a joint effort: the order of authorship was determined at random and does not suggest differences in contributions.
Introduction

The current increase in the number of new religions in the West and in other parts of the world has raised many questions concerning the role of religion in contemporary society. For many social scientists studying new religious movements, this phenomenon is now expressed as a problem related to the secularization process. Broadly speaking, this process entails the diminishing influence of religious institutions and symbols on various aspects of social life. It also implies the replacement of religious motivations by increasingly rational worldviews dominated by bureaucratic and technological considerations. Yet how can the decline of traditional religions account meaningfully for the rise of new religious forms? According to the secularization thesis, the loosening of religious controls tends to free individuals from ascriptive religious commitments and at the same time relegate religion to a sphere of private choice (Berger 1969:133). Traditional religious institutions no longer have a monopoly over the sacralization of personal identities. Without traditional constraints, religious institutions are compelled to compete with each other to ensure the continuation of their respective beliefs and practices. The burgeoning of new religious cults and movements, especially in the West, reflects an expanding religious market in alternatives catering to uncoerced clienteles that is concomitant with the secularization process.

The new religions in the West have been described somewhat facetiously by Bryan Wilson (1976:96) as the “religions of your choice,” where the religion bears no serious consequences for other social insti-
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tutions and power structures. Instead, these new religions promote an individualistic mysticism that contributes to the integration of personal identities in a society characterized by highly impersonal patterns of interaction. On the other hand, Wilson (1976:97) argues that new religious movements in developing nations offer more than personal salvation, because they organize "men into stable communities and elicit from them high levels of personal commitment." The impact of these movements on the rest of society is more significant than that of the new cults in the West. This difference can be attributed to the less advanced stages of secularization in developing nations where the sense of community and personal involvement are still strong. These movements not only bring together diverse individuals who share certain motivations, but also provide a medium from which new definitions of self and society are forged and activated. Unlike the individualistically oriented cults in the West, the new identities promoted by religious movements in developing nations transcend the individual to effect the total transformation of a community.

Wilson's broad distinction between the new religious movements in the West and those in the Third World contains an evolutionary assumption that glosses over the complexity of the secularization process in many developing nations. First, secularization is not a uniform process in many developing societies. Some segments of a developing society may be more urbanized, and therefore more secularized, than other segments. Religious movements in the more urbanized segments may resemble to some extent those in the West. Other movements may be more group-oriented in purpose. These differences suggest that secularization does not necessarily progress in a unilinear fashion. Rather, uneven secularization has important consequences for organizational differences in religious movements, as we will attempt to illustrate in chapters 2 and 6.

Second, the secularization thesis implies a paradox: on one hand, individuals are able to exercise greater choice in religious preferences without having to submit to an ecclesiastical authority; on the other hand, individual liberty is circumscribed by the increased authority of the secular state. The state may impose its will, explicitly or implicitly, on the direction of religious developments. In other words, individual choice in religious matters may be an illusion. In some developing nations, the government may define the limits of religious pursuits so that the individualistic appeal of some movements is confined to a par-
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