

# Relationship of the 'other' in new religious identities



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The origin of the “ other” and how it relates to oneself comes from Tzvetan Todorov and is defined as a social construct in which a majority group identifies a minority group. This identification is due to how the different groups are represented within a society. The religions we studied throughout the semester incorporate differences in the formation new religious identities. These differences are significant in the sense that the idea of “ otherness” explains how outsiders viewed these religions. The Lakota religion, Christianity, the Latter-Day Saints, the Kingdom of Matthias and the Nation of Islam are all viewed or view the “ other” as violent, controversial or primitive.

Something all of these religions have in common is their relationship with the “ other”. Each relationship depends on how they interact with one another and their understanding of each other. For example, Columbus saw how the natives were different and even took advantage of them, stating “ All that they have they give for any trifle we offer them, so that they take in exchange pieces of crockery and fragments of glass goblets” (Todorov 38). Columbus did not take the time to consider that things he and his culture find valuable may not be the same for the natives, and it shows that Columbus has that superior mindset evenly trade with the natives. This explains why outsiders view the “ other” (new religions) the way they do; they do not completely understand each other and that makes it easy to judge each other.

The Lakota religion is a Native American religion that included visions and spiritual dances. The Latter-day Saints was created by Joseph Smith with the idea of gathering all the followers of the church in one region. On the other

hand, the Kingdom of Matthias was created by Robert Matthews, who declared himself Matthias the Prophet of the God of the Jews, with the idea of preparing the church for the second coming of Christ. Even though the religions were created for many different reasons, the new religious identities that separated Latter-day Saints, the Kingdom of Matthias, the Nation of Islam and the Lakota religion from the major religion, Christianity, include the reorganization of religious, marital and political roles.

In the book *Black Elk Speaks* by John G. Neihardt, people of the Lakota religion saw white settlers (“Wasichus”) who “were coming to take our country and rub us all out” (6). When the Lakota people encountered the white settlers, their biggest concern was to survive being that the settlers were invading their land and “they all have to die fighting” (Neihardt 6). Not only were their lives in danger but also their religion as they saw that the “yellow metal made the white men go crazy” (Neihardt 6). Because the Lakota people did not have the same want or knowledge of material wealth as the settlers did the Lakota people viewed the settlers and their invasion as violent.

On the other hand, the colonizers also had their own views of the Native Americans; they were viewed as uncivilized and without religion. With the new-found knowledge of the Native Americans, Columbus and his men decided to show off teepees and other artifacts to show how they helped the Native Americans to become more civilized. According to Todorov’s “The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other”, Columbus’s first-hand encounter with the Native Americans helped to understand how Christians of that time identified and treated those who were not like them. Columbus

witnessed how the natives went about their day, talked, interacted with each other and some of their culture. The white settlers viewed the Native Americans as being unhuman and living without a religion because Columbus and his men saw the natives “ go naked, men and women, as the day they were born” (Todorov, 35). Todorov also states that on Columbus’s passage Columbus referred to himself as “ chosen, charged with a divine mission, and who sees divine intervention everywhere” (10) which shows how Christians of that time wanted to convert the Native Americans whom they thought did not have a religion.

However, even though it did not follow the Christian norms, the Native Indians did have a religion. In Black Elk’s story, it is revealed that the Earth and how it signifies the self has a great amount of value within the Lakota tribe. Black Elk, who is a holy Man of the Oglala Lakota tribe, had a vision which showed the “ Powers of the World” (Neihardt 16) that included the North, West, East, South, Earth and Sky. With this different view of the world and the Native Americans not believing in violence there was a large contrast between the Natives and the settlers. Black Elk states that “ the soldiers surrounded us with their guns, but Red Cloud, who was living there, stood right in the middle without a weapon...he told the Wasichus it was foolish for men to want to shoot grown people” (Neihardt 39). Because of this different understanding the settlers saw the Native Americans as not being human, but at the same time the Native Americans saw the settlers as unfriendly and violent which ultimately led to the removal and deaths of many Native Americans.

Other than how Christians viewed Native Americans, they also had their views on The Latter-Day Saints. The Latter-Day Saints did not give the same reaction as the Native Americans, however, they used their controversy as a form of advertisement and to show that they were different from the average religion. Laurence Moore stated that they wanted “ to attack, to persuade, to mystify,” (27) meaning they wanted to make it known that their religion would be nothing like Christianity. However, Mormonism was simply “ a dull affair” in its beginnings (Moore 30) even with the big controversy.

During the beginning of the Mormon religion, there were many similar attitudes shared with “ middle-class Victorian American” (Moore 29). The church valued the aspect of being different even though there were disputes on aspects of the faith “ including Joseph Smith’s claims about his discovery of the golden tablets, the importance assigned to the Book of Mormon and Smith’s other revelations at the expense of traditional Christian scripture, the theocratic government established by Mormon leaders...” (Moore 29).

The Latter-Day Saints wanted to separate themselves and the Christians of that time. They saw themselves as being different and wanted everyone else to see them as that way. Unfortunately, Americans grew a great dislike for the Latter-Day Saints and developed ways to put an end to the new religion. Much like how the Christians treated the Native Americans, they sought out violence to stop the Latter-Day Saints, however, this was unacceptable because of the era of “ religious inventiveness” (Moore 29). Even though forcing the Natives worked so well in the past this was not the case during the twentieth century, religious differences were respected more; thus, the Extermination order in Missouri put an end to the violence against the Latter-

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Day Saints (lecture). Moreover, the law was later seen as a “tragedy of so deep, and fearful, and absorbing interest, that the very life-blood of the heart is chilled at the simple contemplation” (Brooks v). This led to Christians having to take a more secretive approach to suppress the Latter-Day Saints.

Other than the desire to be different, The Latter-Day Saints had many other controversial aspects, one being marital roles. A not so common practice in the Latter-Day Saints religion was polygamy, even though it was not common within the religion, it was significant due to the fact that the Prophet, Smith and other men that held a higher position were allowed to do it. Moreover, a polygamous marriage changes the gender roles of society during this time; according to Gordon, critics of polygamy argued that the “Mormon question tied together questions of religion, law, and perceived sexual enslavement in a tantalizing mix” (14). However, early leaders in the church defended polygamy stating, “it could end prostitution, is practiced by many cultures around the world, and biblical patriarchs practiced it” (Gordon19). However, Christianity during this time thought polygamy was wrong and thought it was unlawful to be in a polygamous marriage.

Like the Latter-day Saints, the Kingdom of Matthias had a different outlook on who married who, yet, the views were less controversial than those used by Latter-day Saints. The Kingdom of Matthias believed that two people did not belong together just because they were in love, but because Matthias had the ability to match the two spirits of the two people. Even when marriages were already ensued the couple was broken apart and matched with someone else (lecture). Another seemingly controversial aspect was “the critical turning point in the Kingdom’s history-and in the scandal, that

followed-was the Ann Folger's seduction of Matthias." (Johnson and Wilentz 113) the relationship between Matthias and Ann Folger was controversial because they were both married to someone else during their relationship and polygamy was not practiced in the Kingdom. According to Matthias the two became match spirits, getting married under the Kingdom, and Ann holding the title of Mother of the Kingdom.

Even though the Kingdom of Matthias and Latter-day Saints had different views on marriage, they both were competing with the traditional sense of monogamy and gave more power to the male. On one hand, the women did not have the financial stability to have multiple husbands regardless if they were better off, nor did they find themselves in a situation where they were able to support themselves without a husband. While on the other hand, "the spirit of Truth, Matthias explained, was the spirit of male government. God wanted women to have none of it" (Johnson and Wilentz 95) meaning that women were not allowed to be taught anything but how to obey and respect their husbands.

It was not just the marital roles of these religions that the "other" had a problem with, there were other aspects that granted an uproar of blowback within the United States. For example, the Nation of Islam, commonly known as the Black Muslims, was founded by Elijah Muhammad who had the intention of making sure people of color received justice and equality: "for the man who is not white, Islam is the hope for justice and equality in the world" (Little 241). During the 1950s and 1960s the Nation of Islam became a large movement across the nation where it began to attract publicity and is portrayed as a hatred of whites and its leaders deemed "angry black men"

(Little 250). Because the Nation of Islam's outspokenness and preaching of black empowerment during the time of the Civil Rights Movement, along with a few confrontations with the police, they were deemed violent by the American public.

Not only were leaders deemed angry and violent, but Malcolm X (a prominent member of the Nation of Islam during this time) had become a symbol of hatred during the later years of his life. Malcolm X was against the integration movement and because of this he became hated and feared causing a greater negative outlook aimed towards the Nation of Islam. The blowback of Malcolm X's views created tension between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad leading to Malcolm X's suspension from the church. However, because Malcolm X was such a prominent leader in the movement it made it easy for him to take his beliefs with him and start a new political group named Muslim Mosque; the new group would focus less on the religious aspect and unite blacks no matter their religious beliefs in the fight against oppression (Lecture). The new organization planned to carry out the Nation of Islam's program of racial separation; even though the new organization was not a part of the Nation of Islam it was also viewed as violent by outsiders.

Using the idea of the "other", many of the newer religions were viewed as cults because of the religious differences described previously, along with each religion's relationship with the "other". The religions we studied throughout the semester incorporate differences in the formation of new religious identities. These differences are significant in the sense that the



idea of “ otherness” contribute to how others view different religious identities

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