

# SPIRITUAL STORIES AND THE GROWTH OF NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

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## **Abstract**

*In the following publication I examine the spiritual or religious stories narrated by certain new religious movements (NRM). It is long argued in scientific literature that telling a story is a more efficient form of proselytism than approaching people in a direct way. In this work I will attempt to find statistical evidence to prove this, based on the NRMs examined herein. I shall analyse the effects of such works and the content itself according to contemporary views of legal philosophy. The centerpiece of this analysis is the spiritual anime titled *Laws of Eternity*, although other religious narratives and teachings will also be examined with similar methods. The other two important examples which this work details are the *Order of the Solar Temple* and the *Missionary Church of Kopimism*. The reason for examining this phenomenon lies in the increasing importance of newer religions, as well as the desire to shed light to the modern methods of spreading religious ideas. This research follows a multidisciplinary approach which can be placed between sociology, law, philosophy, and the broader spectrum of social sciences. One part of the work provides a descriptive analysis of these stories, the others deal with finding statistical correlation between the stories and the change in the number of believers. The hypothesis that I am trying to prove in this work is that narrating and publicizing these stories is a way to achieve faster growth for these religious organizations. The final conclusion is that - although the current research is far from being representative - the given examples confirm that there is a correlation between growth and storytelling.*

**Keywords:** *sociology of religion, philosophy, media, new religious movements, statistics*

## **Introduction**

In ancient times, people were struggling in harsh environments, and needed clear guiding principles and morals to reach cooperation. Therefore religions were founded, which taught not only about afterlife, but how to behave in earthly life as well. It is long recognized that religion is a source of legitimation, and provides a way to build and maintain universes. (Berger-Luckmann, 1969.; Lewis, 2003.) Since the tenets of any religion are passed down in stories, storytelling and mythology constitutes a large part of religion. Some experts in the subject compare the effect of religious storytelling to certain aspects of marketing. When a story reaches enough people to make them believe it, it eventually leads to a growing number of followers. (Dev, 2016.) The new religious movements, which I have explained previously (cf. Ormandi, 2018.), are currently small in size, however they still have about 100 million followers together, which is around 1.8% of the world's population, and has to be reckoned with. (Smith, 2016.) There are several definitions for new religious movement (NRM), but what they have in common is that they are religions founded in the second half of the 20th century. (Dawson, 2006.) They may or may not be a continuation of an older religion (such as ISKCON, a branch of Hinduism), though some definitions exclude

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this type of religious movement. Basically the term means a smaller and/or less defined religious group than an established church, the same that was called „cult” or „sect” in earlier times. (Tomka, 1988.)

## Materials and methods

The main questions of the research are: Can we determine how NRMs grow by observing their storytelling functions? What can we learn about the NRM from the content of these stories themselves? From these questions we can „distill” a hypothesis: there is an observable correlation between the changes in an NRM’s stories and its growth. The methods used herein are: firstly, a descriptive analysis based on certain philosophical and sociological paradigms, secondly, attempting to find evidence of the correlation between these stories and the growth of certain NRMs with the use of simple statistical functions. There are several ways to define growth, and we could use a large number of indicators, such as: income, fame, area of activity etc., but in this paper I chose the number of followers as the indicator of growth, seeing that this defines the expansion of a religious movement in the most visible way. Owing to the small number of data available, it is hard to discern what factors cause growth or decline. We must also keep in mind that each case, each group is unique and it is not easy to generalize. Because of the rarity and inaccuracy of exact membership data, in some cases the missing data had to be estimated by interpolation, or extrapolation with the help of trend functions (only where it was necessary). While the data thus gained are not flawlessly accurate, they still provide the basis for a working model - which may be refined later - for the purposes of presentation and trend prediction.

## Results and discussion

### Heoretic background

In order to better understand these phenomena, we need to have some information about the theories behind mythology and narratives. A myth is often described as a sacred story, but there are more defining features to it. In the words of religious sociologists Diana Tumminia and R. George Kirkpatrick, myths „...present sacred narratives that usually includes venerated characters, whose actions lead to the present state of spiritual affairs, that must be addressed through the group’s action.” (Tumminia-Kirkpatrick, 2004.) They often define the moral and ethical concepts followed by the group, as well as the behavior that needs to be „copied” by the believers through the actions of the positive characters.

The common traits identified in NRM mythology are the respect of modern technology, and the ability to communicate their main tenets in cross-cultural terms. (Hexham-Poewe, 1986.) The stories may be original, or just a mix of well-known and reused elements from other religions or cultures. The famous myth researcher Joseph Campbell believed that all myths are descended from one „monomyth”. This theory was frequently criticized, because myths generally lose their meaning when taken out of the cultural context. (Campbell, 1968.)

Most mythic-religious stories also refer to the afterlife. According to Max Weber there are four different basic beliefs of the afterlife and its relationship with this world:

- *„A) part-to-whole: this life is a mere speck of dust in a cosmos which may be conceived of as more or less shapeless, timeless, directionless*
- *B) reflectional: this life is a counterpart of an otherworldly existence, as in those primitive heavens where life is the same as on earth, only ‘spiritualized’*
- *C) emanational: this life is a dependant variable of the Idea, as in Hegel*

- *D) contingent: this life is a necessary forerunner of another „higher” existence, a (...) passage through the 'vale of tears', during which the soul undergoes tests of moral-spiritual virtue (...) becoming absorbed into timeless eternity” (cites Worsley, 1968.)*

## Happy Science and the Laws of Eternity

Happy Science, also known as Kofuku-no-Kagaku (hereinafter: HS) is a prominent example of the Japanese new religions, called shinshukyo, which is one of the fastest growing movements and also popular abroad. Its beliefs are a mix of Buddhism and some esoteric (such as Gnostic and New Age) ideas. The founder, Okawa Ryuho, was an ordinary Japanese man who claimed to have received visions from spiritual masters in 1985. He founded Happy Science in 1986. His teachings are written in his trilogy of books, *Laws of the Sun*, *Golden Laws*, and *Laws of Eternity*.

### Descriptive analysis of the main example

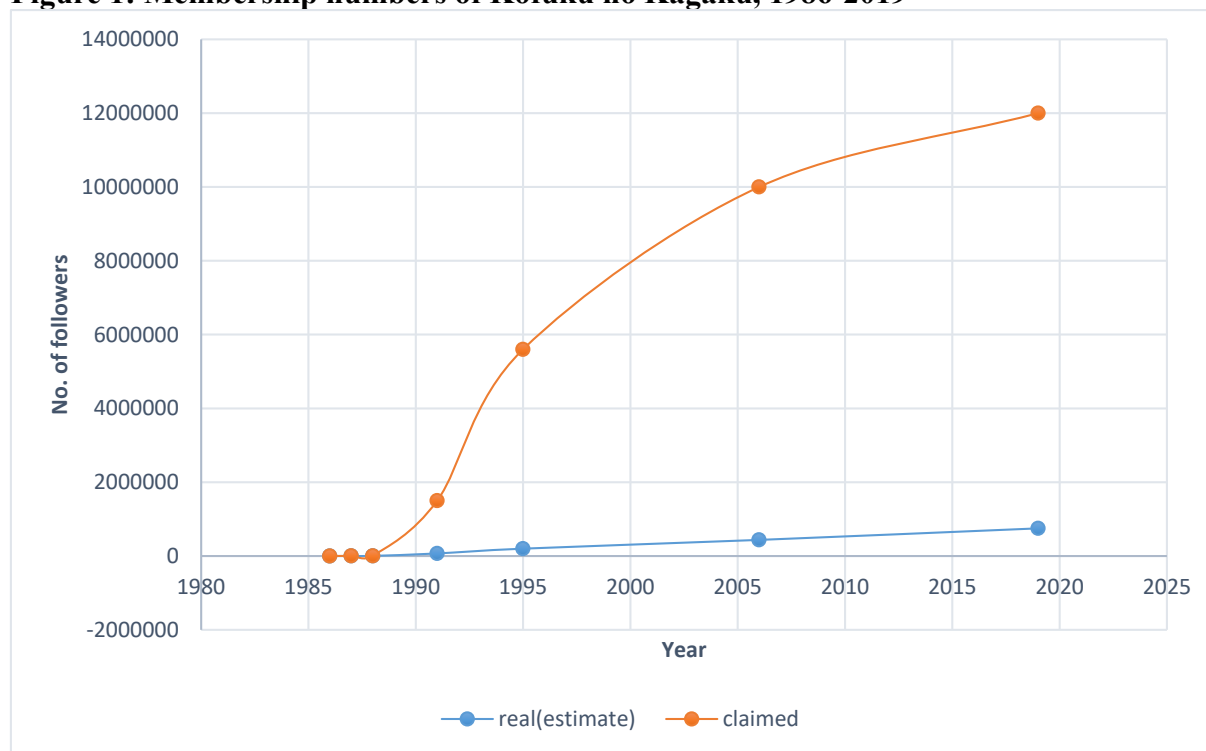
I have chosen the *Laws of Eternity* anime as the main example of this study because it characterizes the new religious trend of mixing older elements into one new, coherent world view, and also because it is well-known and widely available on online platforms. The story is based upon the classical theme of heroes' journey in the afterlife, such as seen in the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, or in the myths collected by Campbell. The main character, Ryuichi and his friends travel through the afterlife to solve a major crisis that affects the fate of the universe. They explore Heaven and Hell, as imagined by HS, which consist of multiple levels. The first three planes of existence are the three dimensions in Earth. The fourth is Hell, where the negative souls go to be cleansed of their sins. From the fifth to the ninth planes are the different levels of a heaven-like afterlife, each of which can be unlocked by attaining a special "enlightenment", such as being an expert in some topic, or being extremely helpful to people.

The higher levels are essentially transpersonal, where only very special individuals or divine persons can reach. (Imakake, 2006.) In Weber's terms this view of the afterlife can be characterized as a mix of the reflectional/contingent paradigms, seeing that the strata of Heaven reach from the most mundane to the most obscure, divine level. (Worsley, 1968.; Weber, 1946.) Another major feature of the story is the use of spiritual devices, such as the „spirit telephone” invented by Edison in the movie, which led the protagonists to communicate with the afterlife, thus beginning their quest. This is interesting because a religion can be characterized by its attitude to modern technology. From this instance we can observe HS is affirmative of development, as are most NRMs. (Herzfeld 2017; Lewis, 2004.) Concerning moral truths and the problem of good and evil: the anime works with simplified morals. Its goal is to teach some basic moral truths to children and younger people, who are the main audience.

Generally, scientists, artists, and selfless people such as *Edison*, *Einstein* and *Florence Nightingale* are represented as living in heaven. There are only two named denizens of Hell, namely Niches, a parody of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose teachings represent egoism and atheism, and Hisler (Hitler), who rules over a part of hell through brute force. (Imakake op. cit.) Although many viewers commented that the film misrepresents the philosophy of Nietzsche, one can argue that this is a children's movie and thus for didactic purposes they had to find a person who the story can deprecate for their atheist and anti-religious point of view. All in all, although the story is not extremely novel, it was well received by the audience and it is also a good example of how the beliefs of an NRM, when popularized in a media format, can shape the beliefs of larger groups of people.

## The growth statistics of Happy Science

**Figure 1: Membership numbers of Kofuku no Kagaku, 1986-2019**



Source: author (based on literature: Astley, 1995. ; various sources)

As it can be seen on the graph above, HS gathered most of its members before the Laws of Eternity was cast into film (2006). The movement seems to grow further, but its growth was only slightly affected by the broadcasting of this new form of material. Although the data about actual membership status is by large unknown, as of today Okawa claims to have more than 11 million followers around the world. (Pineda, 2017.) An article written by Trevor Astley focuses on his movement, and contains explanations on why and how his organization attracts new followers. According to the data collected by Astley, when HS started out in 1986, it had about 100 initial members. This later grew to 1700 and then 4000 in the subsequent years. After this there was a controversy in their numbers, as the founder claimed to have reached 1.500.000 followers by 1991, and 5.600.000 by 1995, though a more precise estimate by a Japanese expert was around 300.000 members. (Astley, 1995.) Even though Okawa's information may not be fully correct (he counted even mailing list subscribers and donators as „members”), the movement still had and continues to have an impressive amount of followers. This goes to show that the exchange of cultural and religious ideas, narratives between different countries is a working phenomenon.

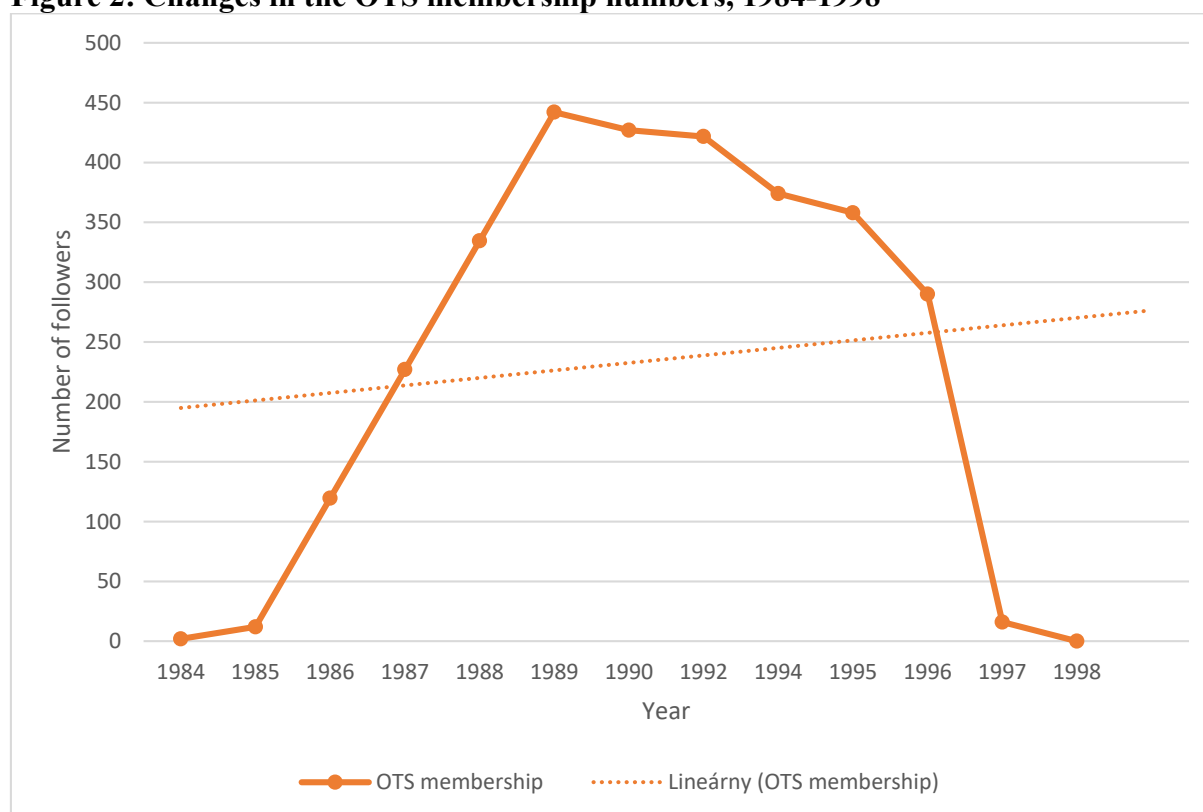
## Order of the Solar Temple

The Order of the Solar Temple (OTS) was founded by Luc Jouret and Jo di Mambro in 1984. This organization was an offshoot of Rosicrucianism, believed to be the „reincarnation” of the Knights Templar. The Order first carried out philosophical activities under the *Amanta* and *Achedia* clubs which they founded, where they acquired devotees. (Info-Cult, 2006.; Mayer, 1996.) They used verbal teachings, pamphlets and certain audiovisual techniques to promote their teaching. After 1990 the Order started to falter because of the lavish lifestyles the leaders had lead. In 1993 the leadership decided that „Waco beat us to the punch” (referring to the tragedy of the *Branch Davidians* in Waco, Texas). They changed the tone of their teachings to warn that the end of the world is coming. In their later pamphlets and tapes they declared that „our terrestrial journey is

coming to an end”, and that the true believers would survive as beings of light in the afterlife. This unfortunately caused many devotees to end their lives. (Lewis, 2004; Mayer, 1997.)

In the following graph I have represented the growth and decline of this organization. In 1989 the group reached its largest size, 442 members. The next year they suffered a large loss in followers, then soon they introduced their new narrative, which eventually led to the extinction of their cult. In the years following Waco, and the announcement of the end of their earthly mission, there was a steep decline, as seen in the graph. The movement was believed to be largely extinct by 1998. (Mayer op. cit.) This example shows that decline can also be (intentionally) achieved this way, if it fits the goals of an NRM.

**Figure 2: Changes in the OTS membership numbers, 1984-1998**



Source: author (based on literature: Mayer, 1997.; Hall, 1997.; Lewis, 2004.)

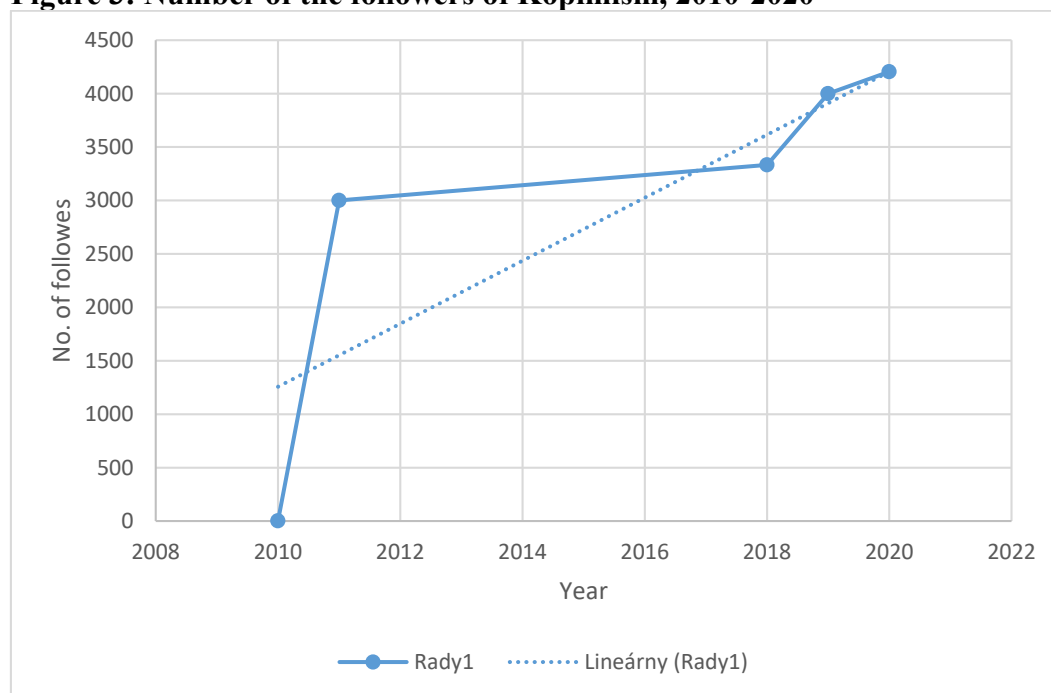
### The „newest religion” - Kopimism

The Missionary Church of Kopimism (in Swedish Missionerande Kopimistsamfundet), is a congregation of file sharers who believe that copying information is a sacred virtue and was founded by Isak Gerson, a philosophy student and Gustav Nipe in Uppsala, Sweden in the autumn of 2010. The Church, based in Sweden, has been officially recognized in January 2012. (BBC News, 2012.) Kopimism has also since taken root in multiple nations, including: Canada, Japan, Israel, and the United States of America. The name Kopimism derives from the words copy and me which are the fundamental roots of the Church's beliefs and are an invitation to copy information. According to the Kopimist constitution: „Copying of information is ethically right; Dissemination of information is ethically right; (...)The Internet is holy; Code is law.” (First Church of Kopimism US, 2012.)

Their mythology is noteworthy because it is entirely new and based on modern technology, as well as the entire narrative of the church being a media-hack (given the controversy between copyright laws and the file-sharing community). There was a huge backlash against the movement in the media, as they labeled Kopimism as "a PR stunt" and "a devaluation of religion" (George,

2012.) Despite this, it was acknowledged as a valid religion, and its believers are rightfully (k)optimistic about its worldwide recognition. On the graph below, I labeled them as „followers of Kopimism”, as there are several Kopimist congregations worldwide. We can generally see a rapid growth in the numbers of believers. In the first few years the Kopimist movement had as many as 3000 followers, who up to now grew in numbers to around 4000. The predicted growth for next year (2020) is not huge, but the fact that they acquired so many followers in the span of 10 years is remarkable and shows the potential for growth hidden inside NRMs.

**Figure 3: Number of the followers of Kopimism, 2010-2020**



Source: author (based on various online sources)

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## Conclusion

In this study I have examined the properties of certain NRMs, and their opportunities for expansion. I also attempted to draw a correlation between their new or emerging stories and myths and how they expanded in numbers. Although this research is in the test phase, and no ex cathedra statements can be made yet, it is possible to observe a correlation between the changes in a movement's mythology or central narratives, and their changes in numbers of followers. The effects of mostly unpredictable variables (modern technology, online exchange of information etc.) mean it is uncertain how exactly a group will behave and how it might grow or shrink in the future. However, in each of these cases, the storytelling used by the religious group and its leadership was in correlation with their positive, or negative growth. Thus the examples which I have provided seem to agree with the hypothesis.



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