

# In Memoriam

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**Thomas Robbins** (13 October 1943–31 August, 2015) was already a famous scholar when I met him in 1987. I was a young Ph.D. student infatuated with the “cult phenomenon,” attending my first Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR) meeting. I had attended his session the evening before, and spotted him the next morning at breakfast in the hotel. I found him quite informal, friendly and encouraging, and he questioned me about my research on the Rajneesh movement and on new religious movements’ responses to AIDS. Later I submitted my paper to the journal, *Sociological Analysis*, and he turned out to be one of the “anonymous” reviewers. I received his handwritten report on yellow lined paper in the mail (there was only snail mail then). He deemed it a “shoddy piece of work” and it was rejected. But to my surprise, he then invited me to present my (revised and much improved) paper on “AIDS and the Apocalyptic Vision” in a session at the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR), and it was published in *Society Magazine* and later in the revised second edition of Tom’s book, co-edited with Dick Anthony, *In Gods We Trust: New Patterns of Religious Pluralism in America* (1990).

Tom Robbins earned his undergraduate Bachelors degree in government from Harvard University in 1965, and his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of North Carolina in 1973. His scholarship helped shape the study of the sociology of new religious movements, and the subfield of new religious movement studies more broadly. He authored *Cults, Converts, and Charisma: the Sociology of New Religious Movements* (Sage, 1988). Tom edited or co-edited six anthologies on new religious movements that considered topics including conversion, brainwashing, deprogramming, legal and political issues, and millennialism. He also authored and co-authored several dozen articles and book chapters. Some of his more impactful essays he wrote with friend and colleague Dick Anthony, including writings on youth culture, deprogramming, and changes within new religions. Their works on the Meher Baba movement was pioneering, including one of the first publications in a major sociology journal on new religious movements: Robbins and Anthony, “Getting Straight with Meher Baba: A Study of Mysticism, Drug Rehabilitation and Postadolescent Role-Conflict,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 11 (June 1972). He also collaborated with David Bromley, Phillip Lucas, Ben Zablocki, Roland Robertson, and myself, among others.

After our first meeting at ASR and SSSR, Tom became my pal, one of the fun people to hang out with at conferences. When I arrived, after

checking in, I would look around the hotel bar and restaurant to find Tom holding court surrounded by the female Ph.D. students whom he informally mentored. This was a time when women were still struggling to find a place in the academy. Tom related well to women, and he was close to his sister who worked for the Clinton administration.

Tom and I would skip out of boring sessions and go swimming in the hotel pools (doctor's orders) and I would hold his cane and towel as he descended the ladder, and watch him swim off, looking rather Leviathan-like. As anyone who was friends with Tom knew, he fought a weight problem throughout his life, but his self-deprecating sense of humor often led him to poke fun at his own size. His doctor told him to eat fruit for dessert, so we would be careful to avoid cake and pie in his presence.

Tom was a natural comedian, who liked to collect weird stories and jokes. He wasn't afraid to be silly in public. When we organized a session on the Solar Temple, he wore a voluminous white T-shirt with "Temple of Doom" scrawled across it in red magic marker. When David Bromley organized a retrospective on Robbins's work I was asked to speak, and praised him for coming up with the brilliant Sino-Greco neologism, "philomandarin," to describe the phenomenon of new religious movement members such as Scientologists and Moonies who were over-eager to be studied by us NRM scholars. But then sociologist Roland Robertson butted in, insisting that it was he who had invented it, and they had a joking argument, accusing each other of plagiarism.

Tom was a direct and honest man. He was a private self-financed scholar. When I asked him why he didn't teach, he replied cryptically, "I tried it once – the students hated me." When I asked him why he didn't type or (later on) "do email," he replied, "my fingers are too fat." Then he hired a private secretary to handle his correspondence.

He lived in a high-rise apartment in Rochester, Minnesota, with his two exotic cats (NRM scholars are still debating the exact breed) who would yowl mysteriously in the background when we were talking on the phone, trying to organize the *Millennium, Messiahs and Mayhem* volume that we co-edited (Routledge, 1997). Then he would cut the conversation short because the staff would be waiting for him at the restaurant downstairs where he ate supper regularly.

Tom used to tell me stories about his youth when he went horseback riding and was a devotee of Meher Baba. He was a gentle, peace-loving soul. He had a horror of guns and of "hard" deprogramming. I will miss him.

Susan J. Palmer