Prophets and Protons represents the first book-length treatment of how science and religion are negotiated by new religious movements (NRMs). Benjamin E. Zeller focuses his book on three specific NRMs – the Unification Church, the Hare Krishna Movement and Heaven’s Gate – which flourished primarily, but not exclusively, in the 1960s and 1970s, a period when America’s counterculture also thrived. Zeller’s main concern is to argue that the responses of American NRMs to science during the second half of the twentieth-century are largely predictable based on their influences and theology. His end result is to “offer the basis of a typology of how other new religions–and possibly older religions–might also respond to science” (164). The primary modes he sees exemplified in these movements are to guide, replace or absorb science, and his argument is often persuasive.

The Unification Church presents an interesting case because it sees science and religion as separate domains, yet it thinks religion should be patterned after and guide science. To explain this contradiction, Zeller points to the group’s millennialism to explain how they see science and religion as currently distinct, yet achieving a future unity. The Hare Krishnas take a different approach, seeing western culture as a whole, and science specifically, as bankrupt because of its excessive materialism. Instead, they envision themselves as offering an alternative science that embraces the spiritual, and is rooted in a richer, eastern culture. Finally, Heaven’s Gate draws on both Western science and pseudoscience (i.e. ufology) to present a materialistic religion that readily incorporates science into itself.

All three groups see themselves as being scientific, which speaks to the diversity of how the term science is understood by these NRMs. Zeller grapples with this in his definition of science as “both an epistemology and a worldview dependent on that epistemology,” (5) while also being an institution within American power structures that has “the potential…to improve as well as destroy life” (6). As both a symbol of colonial authority abroad, and of untrustworthy political oversight at home, “big science” (5) was criticized not only in the colonized world, but
also within American counterculture, with this criticism being reflected in how these NRMs viewed science. Each group had to grapple with science as a tool of social legitimation on the one hand, and “a symbol of the modern West,” (166) on the other.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Zeller’s argument is that NRMs are unencumbered by “institutional and theological constraints,” (164) meaning that they should have a greater freedom in how they position themselves relative to science. While looking at their theologies for clues, he sees these movements as ultimately confined by a situation that forces them not only to engage science, but to engage it in specific ways. This suggests that a long history does not fundamentally change a religion’s capacity to respond to science, making traditions more peripheral to the science-religion dialogue than has been suggested.

Zeller uses colonialism and mind-body dualism as predictive variables for how movements will respond to science. The latter is a convenient way of gauging how (dis)connected with the material world the founders of these movements felt, and so while it is not clear that dualism will always be an accurate or useable criteria, Zeller nonetheless identifies a central feature influencing interactions with science. That said, his criteria seem unlikely to correlate strongly with how groups make use of the technology produced by big science, which are often pragmatically helpful. His criteria are further problematized by his own research, which suggests that even within smaller NRMs, a uniform response to science may be unachievable, due to the varied histories of those involved. Even the two founders of Heaven’s Gate had disagreements on science, in part because one had a background in Theosophy, while the other eschewed the spiritual entirely.

While many of Zeller’s ideas are not radically new, he breaks new ground in extending the field of science and religion to encompass NRMs, which are often marginalized and ignored in relation to science. Zeller offers a picture of science and religion extending beyond these three traditions, serving as an accessible introduction to the field while avoiding the pitfall of suggesting that one issue or tradition defines discussions of science and religion.