

I CULTS

Definition Of The Term Cult

What is the difference between a sect and a cult? How do we define the two? The terms sect and cult are applied quite indiscriminately. Some call the Jehovah's Witnesses a sect and others call it a cult. The late Dr. Walter Martin, founder and director of the Christian Research Institute in California, suggests that liberal Christians, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses can be called cultists because they deny the divinity of Jesus Christ, his virgin birth, and his physical, bodily resurrection (Clay, 1984, p. 3). The term cult is not only hard to define, but it is also difficult to avoid the pejorative connotation now associated with it. It is most often used by members of one branch of the Christian faith to describe a heretical or competing denomination or religion of which they disapprove.

It seems that one's view of Christianity has an influence on how one classifies cults. Rev. Colin Peter Clay, chaplain at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, sponsored by the Anglican, United, and Presbyterian Churches in Canada, considers the Jews for Jesus movement extremist and cultic. He opines that they hinder dialogue between Jews and Christians. He says that the presence of Jews for Jesus missionaries in our larger Canadian cities should be a matter of concern to all who cherish religious freedom and that Canadian Jewish families should be warned. Clay also wonders if Christian schools are not cultic. He states, "The danger may be that these schools will provoke a new level of religious and social intolerance, as well as providing an education which is not applicable to the kind of society in which we are expected to function today" (Clay, 1984, p. 65). He even devotes one chapter to the Christian school movement, singling out Accelerated Christian Education Inc. (ACE) as an example. Clay claims he does not suggest the ACE school program is some form of religious cult, but charges that its rapid growth in the United States and Canada should be viewed with some concern and apprehension. "Like the cult groups," says Clay, "ACE schools deliberately create a gulf between themselves and the outside world—a world where Satan has control" (Clay, 1984, p. 67). He believes that the ACE program may endanger human freedom and that the opportunity to use our own God-given common sense may be in jeopardy (Clay, 1984, p. 70).

American-based Fundamentalists Anonymous, is an organization founded by Richard Yao, an ethnic Chinese lawyer, who attended a Baptist elementary and high school in the Philippines. When he attended Yale, he realized that "the black and white mind-set doesn't have to be linked up to Christianity." He now belongs to a mainline church. Yao considers fundamentalism cultic. He focuses on behaviour, not theology. Through a cable television show, about 300 hotlines around the USA, and support groups, Yao and his movement "alert people to the dangers of fundamentalism." One member of Fundamentalists Anonymous was a former Calvinist "of the Dutch Reformed Church." She testified, "It is a demanding religion. On Sunday, church members aren't permitted to work. Those who watch television turn to programs like 'The Wonderful World of Disney.' Families go to church every Wednesday night and twice on Sunday" (Cowan, 1987).

In view of how vastly different and loosely the term cult is used, one must be careful in defining it. Social activist Margaret Thaler Singer observed that the term "cult" is always one of individual judgment (January, 1979, p. 72).

James and Marcy Rudin view cults as deviant groups which exist in a state of tension with society. Such groups do not evolve or break away from other religions, as do religious sects, but, rather, offer something that is new and different (Clay, 1984, p. 1). Their definition is more to the point than author Bob Larson's popular description. He understands the term cult as a "negative connotation which indicates morally reprehensible practices of beliefs which significantly depart from historic Christianity" (Larson, 1982, p. 29). However, as I have shown, this view can include any departure from what is perceived to be one's correct concept of the Christian faith. Ian Howarth of COMA gives this working definition, making a clear and proper distinction between cult and sect:

[a cult] uses mind control or brain washing techniques for the recruitment and indoctrination of members. Its social organization is elitist and totalitarian, its leader is self-appointed, usually living a dogmatic and charismatic messiah figure who offers some kind of vision of what is ultimately true. It believes that the end justifies the means, that it is ethically acceptable to lie, cheat, or steal to achieve the cult's cause, despite claims to the contrary, it performs no real service to society. It is a self-centered and self-contained social unit, functioning outside the institutions and customs of society at large. (Howarth, March, 1985, p. 14)

Generally, cults have their roots in Eastern religions rather than in Christianity.

TYPES OF CULTS

To simplify identification of cults and their activities we may fit them into four categories:

Religious Cults

They are best known. They preach one God or gods, and support a leader who claims to have the sole insight into truth or has received a special revelation.

Therapy Cults

They follow or worship a leader, not because of his or her relationship to God or gods, but because the leader helps them to reach some ill-defined point of psychological perfection. Their goal is not salvation from sin, but to be cured from their individual stresses or hang-ups.

Political Cults

The leader has a perfect political theory, or has discovered some great truth. Those who are enlightened will be in the vanguard of this political movement which will save the world. William Goldberg, a clinical social worker, notes that extremist groups and

domestic terrorist organizations have often been described as cult-like in their methods and in the effect they have on their members.

Economic Cults

The appeal of this type of cult is economic success. By abandoning one's past, cult members are promised a future fortune. As with the other categories, families, friends and society at large must be abandoned to achieve their goals. There is an immediate loss in the hope of great future financial success (Goldberg, 1986, pp. 13-16).

BENIGN VS. DESTRUCTIVE CULTS

As we are looking at various deviant cults we should ask whether or not benign cults exist since all of them manipulate their disciples and take from them the freedom of thought. In academic circles, the general consensus is that even a benign cult could become destructive if its leader chose to follow a violent path (Clay, 1984, p. 1). Destructive cultism has been labeled as a public health problem and a sociopathic illness (Clark, 1979, p. 280). Goldberg describes a destructive cult as a type of group that will advise their adherents to give up their egos, to surrender to the general sense of right and wrong, and to accept that which they would have rejected had they not been placed into a state of heightened suggestibility and narrowed consciousness (Goldberg, 1986, p. 14).

Dr. John Clark Jr., assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, makes this helpful distinction between destructive cults and "acceptable religious institutions":

It is not difficult to differentiate the dangerous cults from accepted religious orders which do not enslave members' minds by such sophisticated techniques or deliberately isolate and alienate subjects from family, law, country, or reality. Such tactics are direct assaults on sanity which can seriously restrict future personality development. Any organization using such methods can be considered destructive and should be carefully and responsibly viewed by psychiatrists and other medical personnel, but also by legal and social authorities. (Clay, 1984, p. 2)

CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTS

How can we know that someone belongs to a cult? Since a cult member has joined a group which uses psychologically coercive techniques for indoctrination, there is a loss of critical thought. Whatever is good for the cult is good for the member. The cult's goals must be met at all costs. The end justifies the means. There is a total dependency on the group. Relations with relatives and friends have been severed. The leader or guru has been self-appointed, is dogmatic, and dictatorial. No dissent is allowed. Total devotion is demanded. Funds obtained are for the enhancement of the leader's luxurious lifestyle. Leaders usually live in mansions while their followers are treated as slaves (Council of Mind Abuse [COMA], n.d.).

CULT LEADERSHIP

Charismatic, strong, persuasive, and messianic-type leaders have their appeal in every generation. History records many names of leaders who used manipulative techniques to obtain wealth and power. To gain an understanding of the coercive tactics of cult leaders, Clay's book quoting author Andrew Pavlos' analysis is helpful. Pavlos says that a cult leader "has the power to produce group-based behaviour in what is taken as the `desired direction.' Autocratic leadership requires that people follow the leader's suggestions or orders without question." He quotes two scholars who identified five sources of social power used by leaders to control their followers:

1. Reward power.
2. Coercive power (including punishment for deviations without losing a disciple's love).
3. Expert power-the leader has the answer to every problem.
4. Referent power-the disciple wants to identify with the leader.
5. Legitimate power-the leader has the right to expect their obedience and they comply (Clay, 1984, p. 6)

REASONS FOR CULTS

Why have sects and cults mushroomed in our secular, postmodern times? There are no simple answers. The causes are complex. I will discuss a few, which, in my estimation, have contributed to their growth. The roots are both historic and modern.

In the US, where most sects and cults find their origin, Christianity developed as a voluntary movement, rather than as a compulsory faith. American Christianity has been marked by evangelical fervour; a tendency to downgrade clergy: anti-intellectualism, little patience with a theology of the cross and suffering, little stress on doctrine, and a strong emphasis on individual experience.

American public schools taught a civic religion rather than nondenominational Christianity. It seemed that one was all right as long as one believed in something. President Dwight D. Eisenhower's statement to the American nation summed it up: "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply-felt religious faith-and I don't care what it is" (Johnson, 1985, p. 3). A frontier mentality and a strong sense of independence were instrumental in spawning a multitude of groups led by a strong leader.

In recent history, the adoption of psychological concepts by Christians to induce tranquility and a sense of well-being introduced readers to Norman Vincent Peale's *Guide to Confident Living* (1948) and *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and Billy Graham's *Peace with God* (1953). The focus is more on problems in one's personal life rather than on a holy and transcendent God. Many interpret their source of distress in psychological terms. Self-help books on personal development and a consumer's spiritual smorgasbord mentality have led many to a subjective journey into the soul.

Before the turn of the 20th century, liberalism reared its head. Mainline denominations were weak and indecisive in their response. They became more enthusiastic about saving the world from the ills of this life than about the spiritual needs of their flocks.

They didn't find a balance between the now and the not yet. The Kingdom of God was to come through social and political activity. Salvation became dependent on one's political activism on behalf of left wing causes. While individual believers thirsted for the water of life, liberal church leaders poisoned the wells. Mainline churches began to experience a rapid loss of membership. Benton Johnson, the chair of the sociology department at the University of Oregon and president for the Scientific Study of Religion, wrote an essay entitled "A Sociological Perspective on the New Religions" in which he points out that "social Christianity was never genuinely popular among the laity. It was, and is, the project of a small but influential group of metropolitan leaders. Their proposals to make Christian practice virtually synonymous with liberal politics was [sic] not well received by the laity" (Thomas & Dick Anthony, 1981, p. 59).

The support systems in schools, churches, and families have gradually eroded since the 1950s. Everything is in flux. The old certainties are rapidly disappearing. The eminent British author and historian Paul Johnson points to some notable surrenders of historic Christian principles in mainline churches. Though he wrote about the American scene, his remarks also apply to the Canadian situation. He speaks of the church's accommodation to the spirit of this age on issues such as the ordination of women, artificial contraception, abortion, the remarriage of divorced persons, homosexuality, revision of the liturgy to permit new worship practices, and music (Johnson, 1995, p. 42). In this spiritual and moral vacuum cults and sects have supplied for millions the motivational resources for living which are no longer given by mainline churches.

CULTS AND SECTS MASQUERADING AS CHRISTIAN

Many cult leaders, gurus, and sects appropriate the language of scripture for their own use. They quote the Bible and profess devout reverence for Christ. Most sects even use evangelical cliches to get across their message. What we must understand is that cults and sects redefine biblical terminology to suit their own belief system. For example, Swami Satchinananada, head of the Integral Yoga Institute, in an address at the Masonic Auditorium in San Francisco, CA, told the crowd, " `Blessed are the pure in heart,' Jesus said, `for they shall see God.' And moments later, he explained these words something like this: `Yes, blessed are those who purify their consciousness, for they shall see themselves as God' " (Sire, 1980, p. 7).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and the Jehovah's Witnesses claim the Bible as their sole authority. They speak of Jesus Christ, the way of salvation and so on. Yet, their views devalue Christ and the scriptures. In our approach to sects and cults we need to be clear about scripture and Christian doctrine. In our framework of reference Articles 3 to 7 of the Belgic Confession are pertinent. They reaffirm the divine origin of scripture; its nature and authority. Since sects and cults also differ with historic Christianity in their view of the attributes of God, the person of Christ, the nature of man, and the doctrine of atonement, the Reformed confessions provide a sound standard by which to evaluate what are true and false teachings in these crucial areas.