

III SOME PROMINENT SECTS AND CULTS

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

The Jehovah's Witnesses are a high profile group whose followers we meet at our door-offering literature and arguing about the end-times and the Trinity. *Watchtower* and *Awake* are two magazines peddled by them. They use Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 3:17, 7:27, 17:10, 11:14; and Acts 15:20, 29, to justify their prohibition of blood transfusions. They do not donate vital organs nor receive transplants. They celebrate neither birthdays nor Christmas. They don't recognize governments or sing the national anthem. The only true citizenship is membership in "Jehovah's New World Society." Governments and political parties are allies of Satan. They refuse military service. Every believer is a minister and spends an average of 15 hours a month proclaiming their message, attends four or five classes a week in the Kingdom Hall, and participates in Bible study groups. Children are also recruited for mission work. Even shut-ins are encouraged to write letters or have a telephone ministry. Surplus wealth is turned over to the sect. The membership is recruited from the lower ranks of society. Yet they regard themselves as "the elite of Jehovah."

In recent years, the sect has undergone some internal struggles as some members have questioned authorities and their failure to correctly predict the end-times. Some have been "fellowshipped" or excommunicated.

Founder

Charles Taze Russell (1852 to 1916) was the founder and first president of the Watchtower society. By 1872 he had come to believe that Christ would set up his millennial kingdom in 1914. When the Lord didn't return that year, he announced that what he thought to be a visible event was actually invisible. His major work was the six-volume *Studies in the Scriptures* (also called *The Divine Plan of the Ages*) written between the years 1886 and 1906.

Russell managed to erect a totalitarian form of organization, even though his teachings don't prescribe such a condition. His millennial, doomsday movement, was so busy predicting the endtimes that it had no social or cultural impact.

Name

For years the sect was known as the Russellites, the Millennial Dawnists, or the International Bible Students. In 1931, their leader, "Judge" Joseph-Franklin Rutherford (1869-1942) told his followers that they should now be called Jehovah's Witnesses. This name is based on Isaiah 43:10.

The Bible

The sect believes that the Bible is God's inspired and infallible Word. But they also have infallible interpreters. Russell stated, "Be it known that no other system of

theology even claims, or even has attempted, to harmonize in itself EVERY statement of the Bible; yet nothing short of this we claim for these views."

The Bible used by the Jehovah's Witnesses is their own *New World Translation* (NWT). It features numerous mistranslations. For example, John 1:1 reads in the NWT, "In (the) beginning the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god."

The Trinity

The Jehovah's Witnesses are unitarians. They claim that the doctrine of the Trinity originated with Satan.

Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ's deity is denied. "This One was no Jehovah God, but was existing in the form of God ... he was a spirit person ... he was a mighty one although not ... Almighty as Jehovah God is; . . . he was a god, but not the Almighty God, who is Jehovah." The bodily resurrection is also denied. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jehovah raised Christ as a spirit.

The Church

All churches are seen as organizations of Satan. Jehovah's Witnesses teach that according to Ephesians 5:32 the mystical body consists of Jesus as the head with the 144,000 of Revelation 7:4 as the body. The latter are "the anointed" or "the elite." Those who are now joining the Jehovah's Witnesses are the "Jonadabs" or "the great multitude of Revelation 7:9." The 144,000 will reign in heaven as spiritual beings. The Jonadabs will be raised with physical bodies. They will spend eternity on the new earth, ruled by the spiritual elite.

Salvation by Works

Christ's death "does not give or guarantee everlasting life or blessing to any man." The "anointed class" is selected on the basis of worthiness. The Jonadabs may be saved by being faithful members of the Watchtower Society, canvassing door-to-door, and distributing literature (Tangelder, 1983).

BAHAISM

Bahaim or Bahai ("the glory of God") is an outgrowth of a movement known as Babism. It was founded by Mirza Ali Muhammad (1819-50) of Shiraza, an important city in southern Iran. Today, its principal centre is located in Haifa, Israel, near the graves of Baha'u'llah and his predecessor, the Bab.

Founders

In 1844 Mirza, who claimed to be a direct descendent of the prophet Muhammad, claimed himself to be the "gate" or "door." He taught that God would soon "make manifest" a world teacher to unite men, women, and nations in an age of peace. Among Bab's followers was Mirza Husayn Ali (1817-92), who in 1863 claimed to be Bab's prophesied great prophet. He adopted the name Baha'u'llah. His followers often called him "The Blessed Perfection." Baha'u'llah was no longer satisfied with attempting to reform Islam from within. He taught that through him Islam was overcome and proclaimed a new world religion and the brotherhood of all mankind. From the outset, Iran's strict Shi'ite Muslims considered Bahai's teaching heretical.

Baha'u'llah was a prolific author. He wrote *The Hidden Words*, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, *The Book of Certitude*, *The Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, and *Prayers and Meditations*. A selection of his writings is in the anthology entitled *Bahai World Faith*. Baha'u'llah was succeeded by his son Abdul-Baha (1844-1921). At Baha'u'llah's death, the Bahai faith had spread as far as India, Burma, and Chinese Turkestan. It was first brought to North America through the World Parliament of Religions in 1893. Abdul-Baha visited the US in 1908 and again in 1912, when he broke ground in suburban Wilmette (near Chicago, IL) for a temple, which was completed in 1953.

Bahai is a fast growing religion. Today there are more than 6,000 local groups in more than 140 countries with a few million followers. On every continent there is an impressive temple.

Doctrine

One world-one religion

Bahai is a syncretistic movement which asserts the essential unity of all religions and all humankind. "The earth is one country and all mankind its citizens." Under Bahai's leadership all previous forms of religions should merge as "rivers merge in the ocean."

Baha'u'llah

Bahai is pantheistic. God and world form an absolute unity. God lives in the world and has manifested himself through Abraham, and all the way through Bab and Baha'u'llah.

A Bahai believes in Christ, Muhammad, Krishna, Buddha, Moses, Zoroaster—all are messengers from one God ... God is not in competition with Himself His revelation is orderly and progressive, and He sends His messengers whenever mankind is in need of a fresh outpouring of His Word. Thus Moses may be likened to the seed; Christ to the tree; and Baha'u'llah to the fruit.

Bahai also claims that when Jesus told his disciples "to watch and pray" for the coming of the Lord, he meant "receive Baha'u'llah." They say, "Baha'u'llah is the 10th Avatar of Krishna of the Hindus, the Messiah of the Jews ... the return of Christ, the Son who would come in the glory of the Father, of the Christians."

The Resurrection

The bodily resurrection is denied.

The Reality of Christ, which signifies His teachers, His bounties, His perfections and His spiritual power, was hidden and concealed for 2 or 3 days after His martyrdom The cause of Christ was like a lifeless body, and, when after 3 days the disciples became assured, and began to serve the Cause of Christ, and resolved to spread the divine teachings, the Reality of Christ became resplendent, His religion found life.

Sin

Evil is the absence of the divine qualities.

The only difference between members of the human family is that of degree. Some are like children who are ignorant and must be educated until they arrive at maturity. Some are like the sick and must be treated with tenderness and care. None are bad or evil. We must not feel repelled by these poor children. We must treat them with great kindness, teaching the ignorant and tenderly nursing the sick.

Salvation

Humans do not need salvation; they need enlightenment. Salvation comes through Baha'u'llah. The revelation of Jesus was for His own dispensation-that of the Son. Now it is no longer the point of guidance to the world. We are in total darkness if we are refusing the revelation of the present things both good and bad:-everything. Now all is changed. All the teachings of the past are past. Abu'l-Baha is now supplying all the world.

Bahatism is not as tolerant as it claims. Converts must renounce their former church or organization before joining.

For a Bahai to belong to an organization ... membership of which implies holding beliefs or approving aims out of harmony with the teachings of Baha'u'llah, would amount to a denial of faith in those teachings. Anyone applying for membership of the Bahai's Community who is unwilling to relinquish membership in such an organization proves ... that he has not fully understood the Bahai's teachings, and consequently he is unacceptable There are very few organizations whose beliefs and aims are wholly consistent with the Bahai teachings. Virtually all religious organizations ... require some sort of belief to which a Bahai cannot subscribe.

Other Bahai beliefs include immortality, though they pay little attention to the details of the hereafter and consider heaven and hell to be only symbols of man's progress or lack of progress in the spiritual realm (Crim, 1981, pp. 87ff.).

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE

Christian Science is known for its reading rooms, its world-wide radio broadcasts, and its daily paper, the *Christian Science Monitor*. By means of their learning facilities and publicity, Christian Science does not seek converts since the important thing is for the sect to acquire spiritual attitudes rather than to offer specific activities or relationships. Semi-intellectuals, who have some knowledge of scientific or philosophical reasoning, are attracted to it. Robertson observes that the positive image of science had a widespread impact in middleclass and lower middleclass circles, leading to the development of various parareligious and New Thought movements in Protestant societies, notable in the US. Christian Science is the best known of these (Robertson, 1970, pp. 211). The group life of this movement is at a minimum. Membership is conservative.

At the core of Christian Science teaching is the doctrine of health. Its view of healing is derived from the Hindu concept of an evil, illusory, material world. Sickness is an illusion. Healing comes through putting mind over matter.

When you have conquered a diseased condition of the body through Mind, that condition never recurs, and you have a point in Science.

Mind over the body or any illusion of physical weariness, and so destroy this illusion, for matter cannot be weary and heavy laden. (Baker Eddy, 1917, p. 217)

Founder

Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) was born as Mary Ann Morse Baker. Her major work was *Science and Health with Key to the Scripture*, first published in 1875. This work is filled with plagiarism from various sources. Mark Twain claimed that her followers saw in her the fulfilment of Revelation 12:1.

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven—a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.

That is our Head, our Chief, our Discoverer of Christian Science—nothing can be plainer, nothing surer. (Twain, 1907, p. 23)

Doctrine *The Bible* The Bible has secondary place in Christian Science teachings. The key to the understanding of Scripture is Mary Baker Eddy's book. The Bible is not trustworthy. For example, referring to Genesis 2:7, she says, "Matter is not the reflection of Spirit yet God is reflected in creation. Is this addition to His creation real or unreal? Is it the truth, or is it a lie concerning man and God?" (Baker Eddy, 1875, p. 524).

The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Deity of Christ

God is divine mind. The doctrine of the Trinity is rejected. "The theory of three persons in one God (that is personal Trinity or Tri-unity) suggests heathen gods, rather than the one ever-present I Am."

Jesus was not the Christ. "The spiritual Christ was infallible: Jesus, as material manhood was not Christ."

The virgin birth was a spiritual idea. "Jesus, the Galilean prophet, was born of the virgin Mary's spiritual thoughts of life and its manifestation."

Sickness is not real. "The sick are not healed merely by declaring there is no sickness, but by knowing there is none."

Jesus' ministry was to reveal to people their illusion of illness and thus cure them.

Christ did not die; His resurrection was spiritual and not physical.

Christian Science has nothing in common with the historic Christian faith. It is a mixture of Hinduism and Hegelianism. In recent history, membership has dropped sharply (Martin, 1957).

WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD (WCG)

The founder, Herbert W. Armstrong (1892-1986), became known through his television and radio program *World Tomorrow*, and full-page ads in *Reader's Digest* and *TV Guide*, inviting readers to request a free subscription to *Plain Truth*.

Armstrong's religious empire has branch headquarters in Canada, South Africa, Australia, the Philippines, Germany, Switzerland, England, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Holland. Its centre is the beautiful Ambassador College campus in Pasadena, CA.

Armstrong attacked Christians for observing "pagan" feasts such as Christmas. He loved the company of powerful world figures. He enjoyed lavish spending and the "good" things of this world.

He loves fine things, fine expensive paintings, fine cars, fine homes, fine airplanes, fine expensive clothes. The G-11 is the ultimate in corporate jets Millions of dollars have no meaning to him. Nor does he seem to care how these millions come. He *must have* what money buys. (Clay, 1984, p. 62)

In 1978, there was a well-published rift between Armstrong and his son Garner Ted. Garner was expelled from the WCG and went to Tyler, TX, where he founded his own Church of God, International.

Doctrine

There is only one true church. All others are satanic counterfeits. The true church has seven marks: 1. Observance of the Sabbath on Saturday instead of Sunday. 2. Observance of the Passover and other Jewish feasts. 3. Compliance with Old Testament dietary laws that forbid eating pork and other "unclean" foods. 4. Rejection of belief in the doctrine of the Trinity. 5. Adult baptism by immersion, valid only if administered by a "true minister of the true Church." 6. Noninvolvement in secular governments. 7. The use of the term "Church of God."

No new congregation can be formed unless a graduate from the Ambassador College can serve as minister. Church meetings are not open to the general public. To attend you must have a special invitation approved by the minister.

A frequent complaint about Armstrong was his dictatorial control over the church's faith and practice. Until 1974, divorced and remarried persons who joined the WCG had to break up their marriages. This changed when Armstrong married a church secretary, who was divorced and nearly half his age. His first wife died in 1967, a few months before their golden wedding anniversary.

Many members disputed Armstrong's view on the correct day to celebrate Pentecost and some other beliefs. Because of these complaints, new rules for the church were announced in 1976. Voting in elections is now allowed; and so are birthday celebrations and interracial marriages.

WCG is extremely legalistic in its insistence on the observance of the Jewish feast days, new moons, festivals, and sabbaths. Members are not only expected to contribute a tithe, but also a second 10 percent to finance church festivals. Every third year, an extra donation of 30 percent of their income is expected. WCG doctrine is a concoction of ideas borrowed from British-Israelism, Seventh Day Adventism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Mormons.

According to British-Israelism, the 10 lost tribes of Israel are the forerunners of the British and the Americans. England is the Israel of the Bible. Armstrong asserts prophecies were never given to, and did not pertain to ancient Israel. Most of them pertain *directly* to the United States and British nations.

Armstrong says that only Jesus, of all human beings, has so far been saved. By the resurrection power of God, he was the first human ever to be perfected. Armstrong does not believe Jesus Christ is God's son.

Armstrong teaches that the blood of Christ does not finally save any man. The death of Christ merely paid the penalty of sin in our stead and wipes the slate clean of past sins; it saves us merely from the death penalty and removes that which separated us from God and reconciles us to God. Salvation, then, is not through the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Christians are not saved as yet; they are in the process of being saved. When you are converted, you are merely beginning salvation. You are placed under the government of God. Only people who keep the Old Testament's laws all their life will be born again when Jesus returns to earth.

From Mormonism, Armstrong adopts the idea that God is a "family," including the Father, Jesus Christ, and the spiritual sons who will become divine. Men can become gods.

Do you really grasp it? The purpose of your being alive is that finally you be born into the Kingdom of God, when you will actually be God, even as Jesus was and is God, as His Father, as a different Person, also is God. You are setting out on a training to become creator-to become God.

(Tangelder, 1982)

Why did WCG attract so much attention and so many followers? They believe in the infallibility and authority of Scriptures. They debunk the theory of evolution, stress law and order, and a God-centred family life. Their promotional material is slick. Their message is attractive to many who are dissatisfied with what they regard as the loss of authority and erosion of belief in mainline churches.

MORMONISM

Many Christians seem to think that there is little difference between Mormonism and Christianity. They are impressed by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, the clear lifestyle of the Mormon faithful, their missionary zeal, and the radio and TV programs.

Worldwide membership has surpassed the nine million mark—a three-fold increase in 20 years. About 50,000 missionaries are scattered across more than 140 countries. Growth in Africa is rapid. Russia and Eastern Europe also provide fertile soil.

"In Red Square in Moscow, you'd see maybe 30 Mormons in a group approaching people, and they're very effective," recounts business lecturer Merle Amundsen, a non-Mormon from Idaho who recently spent two years in Russia. "And mostly they'd be talking about family, because families everywhere in Russia are disintegrating and there's a real vacuum."

At the end of 1993, there were an estimated 138,000 Mormons in Canada, with the largest group living in Alberta (Appleby, February 10, 1995).

In our age of moral relativism, the notion of family values, sexual fidelity, and a standard of healthy living that prohibits alcohol, tobacco, and even hot drinks, are appealing.

Who are these Mormons? Why are they classified as a sect? And why can nice people still be so wrong? The fact is that a Mormon who claims to be a Christian denies the key doctrines of the Christian faith.

Founder

Joseph Smith (1805-1844) lived near Palmyra, New York, which had spawned many evangelical, utopian, and millenarian experiments in the 19th century. Smith claimed that in 1822 the angel Moroni told him where gold tablets, containing God's revelation, were buried. Smith published a translation of them, the *Book of Mormon*, in 1830, and that same year started the "Church of Jesus Christ." The name was later changed to the Church of Jesus Christ of the LatterDay Saints.

Doctrines

Mormon Scriptures

The *Bible*, the *Book of Mormon*, the *Doctrine and Covenant*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*, are works considered to be authoritative. Joseph Smith claimed that the *Book of Mormon* is also the word of God. It was the most correct of any book on earth, and

the key stone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.

It contains the strange story of a group of Jews led by Lehi who sailed to America around 600 BC, with, among others, his sons Nephi and Laman. The book records the wars and ultimate demise of their followers known as Nephites and Lamanites. It also includes the story of a group of people known as the Jardites whom God spared from having their language confused at the Tower of Babel. The dark-skinned Lamanites are supposed to be the ancestors of modern American Indians.

God

God has physical and material dimensions. He was once a mortal man who progressed to the level of God. "As man now is, God once was; as God now is, many may become." God is a procreating father with a divine mother-wife. God is therefore the literal father of Jesus Christ. "Elohim is literally the Father of the spirit of Jesus Christ and also of the body in which Jesus Christ performed His mission in the flesh" (McKeever, Johnson, 1994, p. 156).

Jesus Christ

Lucifer and Jesus Christ are *spirit brothers* as both are the premortal offspring of God the Father. Jesus Christ is believed to be the literal firstborn son of the heavenly father and heavenly mother who became God in the pre-existence without experiencing mortality. In his pre-existent state he was known as Jehovah.

Christ is the Firstborn. Obviously, he did not have this distinction as pertaining to his birth into mortality, for many millions preceded him in birth upon this earth. But it must not be forgotten, however little the doctrine is known and believed in the Christian world, that all men lived in premortal estate before they were born into this world; all were born in the premortal existence as the spirit children of the Father. Christ as the firstborn child; and from that day forward he has had pre-eminence in all things. (White, 1993, p. 208)

Salvation

The road to salvation is through belief that Joseph Smith was a true prophet sent by God. The right to godhead is not through grace and faith in Jesus Christ, but by living a life of good works. Keeping the law is essential. "Those who gain exaltation in the celestial kingdom are those who are members of the Church of the Firstborn; in other words, those who keep ALL the commandments of the Lord" (McKeever, Johnson, 1994, p. 176).

Baptism for the Dead

A peculiar teaching for which Mormonism has become known is baptism by proxy, performed in a Mormon temple. Mormons believe that the deceased for whom the

ritual is performed will have an opportunity to receive the Mormon gospel in the spiritual world.

Practices

The temple in Salt Lake City, UT, is Mormonism's spiritual and ritual centre, along with a second temple in Washington, DC, built in the early 1970s. Only members in good standing may enter sacred places within the temple. In Salt Lake City are housed the genealogical records of the sect, which has become the world's premier genealogical archive. The Mormons also have a relief program for national and international emergencies. Local congregations hold Sunday morning religious instruction and Sunday evening services with communion and lay preaching. Larson includes in his list of unique Mormon practices the following: de-emphasis of Easter and the Cross, speaking in tongues and spiritual healing, the ability of individuals to receive private revelation from God, emphasis on Monday as family night, storing of food supplies for times of famine, insistence that the US Constitution is divinely inspired, belief that the state of women is inferior to that of men, opposition to the use of birth control, and opposition to interracial marriages (Larson, 1982, p. 156).