

Sects and Cults

Recommended Readings

Our North American society is not only drifting to conservatism in search for answers, it is also returning to religion. Therefore, it is not surprising that conservative evangelical churches, known for their strict moral codes and their belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, are enjoying steady growth. But this renewed interest in religion has also led many to make a leap of faith into exploitative, strange and even bizarre cults and sects that are sometimes led by dubious and strong-willed prophets.

How seriously should we take the rapid growth of sects and cults? They are not harmless or just eccentric. Mind-control and manipulation have all too often become their trademark.

Biblical Christianity teaches that man is completely helpless in getting to know God, that he is incapable of arriving at truth on his own, that he is blinded by sin, but that God in his infinite goodness and mercy has revealed the truth, and that the only way to God is through the Lord Jesus Christ, who said: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Christianity is God reaching out to man. Sects and cults start with man, his needs, aches, pains, trials, troubles and longing for security and answers. They don't begin with God. Instant results and direct knowledge of God are offered a faith without the cross of Christ. Come to us! We will take care of your insecurity, problems and feelings of despair and loneliness! We provide the answers and show you the way! Sects and cults are tempting havens for troubled souls in our violent, inflationary and crime ridden age.

Sects and cults are a challenge to the church. This is not the time to retreat from their onslaught. We must be willing and able to give an account of "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). In many circles Christianity is considered a crutch for the weak, a community for those who claim that Christ is the answer. Christians are people who don't want to think through today's questions.

But faith and intellect are not in conflict with each other. Early Christians often outwitted the pagans: We must do the same. The Christian's duty is to work out the right answers in confrontation with sects and cults. We don't need to be afraid of beliefs that lead people to dead-end roads. We must show those lured into counterfeit Christianity or eastern mysticism that they are misled and wrong. And at the same time, we must proclaim the glorious facts and truths of scripture. We should be ready to defend our faith while we converse with non-Christian people at work or when they call us at home. The apostle Peter warned Christians facing persecution in Asia minor, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15).

We must defend the truth. We are fighting a spiritual battle. To be effective we must be able to handle our weapons well. But we must also know the strategy and motivations of the enemy. Besides the Bible, other types of material should be read to stimulate us in our ministry to the members of the sects and cults. Secular and Christian bookstores offer a vast variety of relevant titles, ranging from astrology and Christian Science to the Moonies and the Mormons. Many of the books available have been written to cash in on the current interest in the cults created by the Jim Jones's tragedy in Jonestown, Guyana. They are often poorly researched and pamper seekers for sensation. But there are some good ones.

The list of books I suggest here for your consideration is necessarily very selective. I have limited myself to some books I have found helpful in preparation for a course on sects and cults. They should be available through your local bookstore.

General Works

Know the Marks of Cults by Dave Breese; Victor Books

This paperback is not a history or survey of the cults, but an introduction to the errors that are most characteristic of the cults of our time. They are listed as follows: Extra-biblical revelation, a false basis of salvation, uncertain hope, presumptuous messianic leadership, doctrinal ambiguity, the claim of "special discoveries," defective Christology, segmented biblical attention, enslaving organizational structure, financial exploitation, denunciation of others and syncretism. A timely warning is sounded here. Don't be lured into the cults!

How should Christians combat the cults? The first responsibility of each Christian is not to be an expert in sects and cults but in the Word of God. Breese emphasizes the need for sound doctrine. He says that cultists have had a field day in exploiting experience-oriented saints who have no time for the study of Christian doctrine.

Scripture Twisting, 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible by James W. Sire; InterVarsity Press.

The Jehovah's Witnesses are known for refusing blood transfusions. They argue on the basis of scripture that the giving of blood transfusions is forbidden.

How do we interpret scripture? How do people in various cults and sects interpret the Bible? What can Christians learn from scripture abuse? As Christians we too are tempted to have the Bible say what we want it to say.

Scripture Twisting is an important contribution to the understanding of the sect and cult phenomenon. It helps us not only to defend our faith against the cultists, introducing them to Christ instead, but also to further our own understanding of the Word of God. The last chapter provides excellent guidelines for good scripture reading.

The Christian Warfare. An Exposition of Ephesians 6:10 to 13 by D.M. Lloyd-Jones; The Banner of Truth Trust / Lawson Falle.

Though this book does not analyze the sects and cults as such, it is still a pastoral and much needed biblical contribution to the study of the subject as it thoroughly examines the character and strategy of Satan. Dr. Lloyd-Jones rightly insists that the crisis in our modern world, the rise of counterfeit Christianity and the explosions of cults can only be understood in the light of the extraordinary activity of the devil.

Strange Gods. Contemporary Religious Cults in America by William J. Whalen; Our Sunday Visitor/G.R. Welch; pb.

No single book can catalogue the multitudes of sects and cults that have sprung up since the 1960s. Whalen, a Roman Catholic author of numerous books and articles on comparative religions, focuses on a few contemporary sects and cults, which have been founded, or which have experienced their fastest growth, during the second half of this century. He explores such cults as the Moonies, Scientology, Edgar Cayce and the A.R.E.

Whalen's presentations are fairly objective. The style is lucid. This well researched book lacks a biblical evaluation. It is informative for anyone wishing a quick overview of the beliefs, developments and motivations of today's sects and cults that have drawn the attention of the media.

The Lure of the Cults by the evangelical sociologist Ronald Enroth; Christian Herald Books/G.R. Welch.

Enroth details the approaches the cults use to attract followers. He discusses the role of fear and intimidation, and the personalities of cult leaders. Why do youngsters join the cults? What should parents and church leaders do to fend off the appeal of the cults? What must parents do when one of their children has joined a cult? This probing analysis of today's luring world of cults is an excellent source book for anyone who wishes some basic information to help victims of cults.

All God's Children. The Cult Experience-Salvation or Slavery? by journalists Carroll Stoner and Jo Anne Parke; Penquin Books.

Should sons and daughters be rescued and deprogrammed from the clutches of the cults? Are cult leaders usurping the talents and productivity of youth for their own destructive end? The authors believe that the real issue of the cults lies not in their theologies, but in their practices. They describe in detail the faith and practices of various cults such as Guru Maharaj Ji's Divine Light Mission, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and the Church of Armageddon. They provide a wealth of information and suggestions for parents who wish to dissuade their children from cult involvement.

Older Works

The Chaos of Cults. A Study In Present-Day Isms by J.K. Van Baalen; Wm. B. Eerdmans/Oxford University', Press.

The Chaos of Cults is still a standard work in its field. Its relevancy for today lies in its thorough treatment from Reformed perspective of some of the major sects and cults. But since it is dated, it has no information on the recent developments within the; Jehovah's Witnesses or Seventh-Day Adventism. A common complaint about the book is that the reader has to wade: through so much material to find some, pertinent information.

Christian Deviations: The Challenge of the Sects by Horton Davies; SCM Press/Trinity Press.

This paperback was first published in 1954 and has gone through subsequent reprints. The author discusses ten diverse movements, including Spiritism, Christian Science and British Israel, in easily understood terms and style.

These Also Believe. A Study of Modern American Cults & Minority Religious Movements by Charles Samuel Braden; The MacMillan Company/Collier MacMillan.

First published in 1949, Braden's book continues to be regarded as a leading text on the North American cults and sects. Thirteen groups are studied, including Father Divine's Peace Mission, New Thought, and Mormonism. Some of the groups are no longer of interest to the students of the current religious scene. Psychiana's influence has waned, for example, but the book is still recommended reading because of Braden's popular writing style, combined with ample evidence of thorough research.

The Theology of the Major Sects by John H. Gerstner; Baker Book House/G.R. Welch.

This handy reference book outlines the erroneous doctrines of the following sects: Seventh-day Adventism, the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, New Thought, Christian Science, Spiritualism, and Theosophy. Two chapters are also devoted to Liberalism and Faith Healing. The value of the book lies in its unique presentation of information: tables showing doctrines sect-wise and sects doctrine-wise, a chart of doctrines of sects, and a glossary of some terms used by the major sects.

Readers who want to have only a brief overview of various movements, their history and teachings, may find useful

What's Wrong with Seventh-Day Adventism? What's Wrong with Christian Science? and so forth. Series by Louis T. Talbot, published by Dunham Publishing Co., Findlay, OH.

The Modern Library Booklet Series has condensed booklets available on the Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Science by Dr. Walter R. Martin, published by Zondervan/G.R. Welch.

New Religious Movements

Those Curious New Cults by William J. Petersen; Keats Publishing/G.R. Welch.

What do you know about I Ching, the Children of God, Zen Buddhism and Baba-lovers? Is the dawning of the "Age of Aquarius" a sign of decay of modern civilization? According to Petersen, the new cults mark the disillusionment of millions with the secular spirit of the age and traditional churches without a firm commitment to the gospel. With clear, penetrating and lively style, he examines from his evangelical faith perspective the sublime and the ridiculous in North America's new religious movements. Highly recommended!

Cults and New Faiths by John Butterworth; Paideia.

This is a reliable and highly illustrated introduction to nineteen of today's new faiths, their origins, their leaders and their impact. Butterworth's approach is fresh and appealing for today's visual media oriented readers. I commend Paideia Press for making this fine work available.

The Mindbenders. A Look at Current Cults by Jack Sparks, who holds a Ph.D. degree in behavioural science; Thomas Nelson/Lawson Falle.

This paperback offers vital information on - what the author believes to be - some of the most dangerous new cults of our day. They are Transcendental Meditation, Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna, The Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon, The Children of God, The Way (International), The Local Church of Witness Lee, The Peoples Temple Christian Church (Jim Jones). Sparks gives a profile of each movement, an outline of its beliefs, a discussion of its methods of operation and refutation. This is a powerful, well-organized, up to-date and handy reference work!

Rise of the Cults by Dr. Walter Martin, founder and director of the Christian Research Institute and evangelical authority on sects and cults; G.R. Welch.

Dr. Martin has written this comprehensive and easy guide with the general reader in mind. From the multitudes of sects he has selected the following seven for discussion: Jehovah's Witnesses, Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God, The Mormons, Christian Science, The Unity School of Christianity, Spiritism and Baha'i. The history of each movement is traced, its theology stated and a biblical refutation given.

Cults, World Religions, and You by Kenneth Boa; Victor Books.

Boa's book is a comprehensive reference work which explains how the old and new religious movements and major religions got started, what they believe together with a biblical evaluation of each. Boa directs himself primarily to Christians, particularly those who find themselves uninformed and bewildered by the great variety of religious movements they see flourishing in North America, and, perhaps even in their own neighbourhood. This book is basically designed for personal use to illuminate strange concepts that were known only to a few in the Western world. It can also be profitable for group study since a leader's guide is available.

Reasons 1. Sects and Cults with Non-Christian Roots and Reasons II. Sects and Cults with Christian Roots by Bill Evenhouse; Board of Publication of the Christian Reformed Church; Grand Rapids, MI

Reasons I and II are accompanied by a teacher's manual. They are part of the Bible Way curriculum for young adults, but they are also useful for groups - ranging from high school seniors to adults. The title, Reasons, is derived from 1 Peter 3:15. The study guides are attractive, but a teacher needs to do extensive research to find the necessary information for the course. The manual provides only scanty study material. Two insignificant groups, the snake-handlers and the Native American Church are included.

What do you say to a Moonie? by Chris Elkins; Tyndale House/G.R. Welch. Elkins, a former Moonie and author of *Heavenly Deception*, is now consultant with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Heavenly Deception is the story of Elkins' conversion from the grip of Rev. Sun Myung Moon to the freedom of Christ.

How do you respond to a Moonie who accosts you at the airport or at Eaton's Centre in Toronto? This sensitive little book contains helpful hints, and sound principles that aid the reader in his approach to the Unification Church but also to the cults in general.

The Mystical Maze by Pat Means, Campus Crusade for Christ International. How do we communicate the gospel to those entangled in Eastern Mysticism? Why today's anti-intellectualism, the readiness to submit to the authority of a guru, the Westerners' attraction to reincarnation, an ancient Hindu doctrine? What is the difference between a Christian form of meditation and yoga? Pat Means' book is an effective tool for equipping Christians in their outreach into the eastern mystical subculture. The reference section includes a good glossary of difficult eastern mystical terms, a list of who's who of gurus and other mystics, a compendium of eastern cults, and a summary of key issues and pertinent scripture.

I recommend this resource book, but I find the strong emphasis on the four spiritual laws as an evangelistic tool frustrating. There is more than one way to introduce someone to Christ.

Readers who plan to do some indepth study should write to: Spiritual Counterfeits Project, P.O. Box 2418, Berkeley, California 94702; or to: Council On Mind Abuse (COMA), Box 575, Station "Z", Toronto, Ontario, M5N 2Z6.

In studying and perusing a wide range of literature on sects and cults, I noticed that few contemporary writers seem to make a distinction between the two. The terms sect and cult are applied quite indiscriminately. Some call the Jehovah's Witnesses a sect and others brand it as a cult. So we must define sect and cult as we are using the terms, and from our particular perspective. Definitions are important. Many modern cults have no relationship whatsoever with the Christian faith. The cults oriented to Hinduism or Buddhism area case in point.

Sects and cults are protest movements. They accuse the church of her shortcomings and failures. May God's people take them seriously and through a prayerful, dedicated, compassionate and informed evangelistic outreach be instrumental in leading many of their members to Christ.

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