

Sects and Cults

an Introduction

EDITOR'S NOTE.

In extensive research for this study which will deal in depth with sects and cults, the first few articles will deal with background material on why the sects are so popular today. Then will begin a critically accurate analysis of various sects and cults around the world.

On the eve of his world-stirring installation, Pope John Paul II told the world media of the beginning of a great spiritual revival. "You can be encouraged at the new importance that people are giving the Church and spiritual matters all over the world," he disclosed in an informal talk. And he added: "This is God's moment."

Religious belief is returning. Only a decade ago, theologians asked: "Is God dead?" And for many the answer was obvious. Churches were losing members. Secularism, humanism, and atheism killed off the religious spirit.

Today, religious faith is rejuvenated. "There is no doubt," says Emmett Carter, Roman Catholic archbishop of Toronto, "the swing is definitely toward religion. But it is more profound than just church attendance. What we are seeing is the swing away from the cult of affluence and materialism. All have a yearning for something above the bread and circus of the Roman empire." The conservative, evangelical and fundamentalist churches are growing. Answers, stability and continuity are wanted in an age of doubt, anxiety and rapid change.

The current wave of religiosity has not only led to new life and growth in the conservative churches and Charismatic catholic movement, but also spawned exploitative, strange and bizarre cults and sects, sometimes led by dubious and strong-willed prophets.

In France, among the 20 odd religious sects and cults studied by historical magazines are such way-out groups like the "Worshippers of Serpents" and "The Worshippers of the Onion." The religious magazine *Priere* (prayer), after carrying out a national survey on prayer, found out that one French person in two now prays regularly. The study revealed that when the French pray, 43 percent of their prayers was for the healing grace of The Higher Power.

North America's religious revival is also in full bloom. Religious books, recordings and trinkets are best-sellers. Racketeers have discovered that there is big money in religious and cult movements. "To rob in God's name is the lowest crime possible," explains an American minister, "but how can we rid ourselves of these vultures without injuring the cause of religion itself?" The cause of Biblical Christianity is hurting through the tenacity, hard-sell and high-pressure tactics of the cults.

The Ontario government commissioned a study of cults and mind development groups. A report was the result, recommending no new legislation against cults or new religions.

There has been at least one attempt by a Liberal MPP to have an anti-cult bill passed by the Ontario parliament. The proposed legislation was rejected after a debate in which both Conservatives and New Democrats put forward spirited civil libertarian arguments.

Through propaganda and aggressive proselytizing the sect and cult members have received world-wide attention. Their often bizarre and baffling behaviour makes one wonder about their appeal to youth. And why are so many people so gullible in our "sophisticated" scientific age?

FOLLOWINGS

In 1975, a distinguished-looking couple held a series of meetings in California to announce that a spaceship would soon arrive to swoop up properly trained apostles into the "next level" of existence. The pair called themselves only "Bo and Peep" or "The Two" - because of their claim to be the "two witnesses" of the End Times in Revelation. As many as 200 people said farewell to their jobs and even their families, and suddenly followed "the Two" into the wilderness.

Rev. Estelle Lehman of the Foundation Faith of God has done more than 600 angel listenings for a range of people from convicts in prison to politicians. She teaches that you can also contact your angel yourself by simply saying his or her name in prayer and asking for guidance and light. If you have had an angel listening and want to ask specific questions of your guardian angel, you can do so by mail. Cost? A special form suggests a \$10.00. donation for three questions, a \$15.00 donation for five questions, and \$30.00 for ten. Lehman's "church" has a strong emphasis on spiritual healing. It is an offshoot from Toronto's Church of the Process which taught that Satan had to be loved since Christ said: "Love your enemies." Its theology, according to Tom Harpur, *Toronto Star's* religion editor, has now "a fairly orthodox, Christian theology."

It is ironic that the present century, which has witnessed such a rise and advance in ecumenism and search for the reunion of divided Christian churches, has also seen the rapid spread of sects, cults, the renewal of heresy, sectarianism and schism. Spiritual confusion abounds.

How seriously should we take the rise of the sects and cults? They are no longer harmless and eccentric deviate behaviour patterns. "Sheep-stealing" from the Christian Church is their practice. Their greatest danger is in their claim that they and they alone have the truth and nothing but the truth. Mind-control and manipulation have all too often become the characteristics of the new pied-pipers. Parents have lost their children. Wives have left husbands and vice versa, to follow the call of a cult-leader. Young people have forsaken college and career opportunities. Many have broken ties with family and friends to join a cult commune. No parent should say: "This will never happen to my child." Recruits for the cults have come from solid as well as broken homes.

The rise of heresies, sects and cults is blamed on the Church. But it is a mistake to suppose that heresies and such like exist only by default in the Church's life. Heresies have always thrived. Everyone has a theology, but never is every theology Christian. Divisive elements were at work already in Bible times. Sects and cults are not a new 20th century phenomena!

The term heresy comes from the Greek "Hairesis," which means a philosophical school or teaching. Heretic is derived from hearitikos. This word describes someone who sets up his own beliefs in opposition to those of orthodox persuasion. A heretic, therefore, is someone who has deviated from the accepted norm of belief - from orthodox theology. In the New Testament, heresy is coloured by its use in Judaism, e.g. the "party" of the Pharisees and the Essenes. Heresy, as a movement over against orthodoxy, shows itself in 2 Peter 2:21, referring to false teachers who introduced destructive heresies in their denial of Christ. Since the second century "heresy" usually means doctrinal error, departure from the rule of faith. It is marked by individualism and subjectivism.

False doctrine has always plagued the Church, Paul warned: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." (Col. 2:8). He also told us that the Anti-christ will sit in the temple of God and that Satan will be transformed into an angel of light. And he said that evil men and imposters were "deceiving and being deceived." (2 Tim. 3:13).

Our Lord warned that in the end time false prophets and "false christs" would arise. His word regarding the last day has not lost its meaning. "For false christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect - if that were possible" (Matt. 24:24).

Every age has its prophets who, either secretly or openly, woo people away from Jesus Christ. Magic and witchcraft have remained a thorn in the flesh. Worship of the devil has been a constant thing, reaching back into pagan antiquity. Augustine met a strange and obscure sect called Abelonians around Hippo in Roman North Africa. This group became defunct in the early part of the fifth century through conversion of its last adherents to the Catholic Church. The sect worshipped Abel. In Jewish, Christian and Gnostic legends, Adam's son, Abel, died not only childless but also in pure chastity, though (in some versions) married. Each man lived with a woman in total sexual abstinence. Each couple were required to adopt a boy and a girl, which was not difficult to do in that century with its poor families. After the death of both adoptive parents, the boy and the girl formed a new pair and themselves adopted children.

In the 11th century there was a clash between the Church and the cult of Luciferians, who worshipped Evil. By the 14th century there was an all-out drive to destroy all cults in Christendom. It never fully accomplished its objectives. But man's desire to believe the strange and the bizarre remained undaunted.

The search for religious novelty has often led to the formation of new sects. Throughout the history of the Church there have been those who questioned the "faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). They drew up their own creeds and Interpretations. In 1683, Rev. Ponlfaan of Hattem, Holland, was disposed because of his heretical teaching. His doctrines leaned toward pantheism, a strong emphasis on the love of God with a denial of God's anger over sin. Sin was not guilt before the holy God, but a disease. Faith was a type of autosuggestion. After his deposition, Pontiaan gathered around himself, a following that soon received the name: "Hattemisten." After Pontiaan's death in 1706, Lady Dina (jonkvrouwe) became the leader of the sect. This lady received "revelations" and all the Hattemisten went, if at all possible, to Zierlkzee to listen to the revelations of this prophetess. I mention this small sect as it gives some insights into modern sects and cults. The "Hattemisten" illustrates the development of the pantheistic and mystical trends which are such prominent features of current sects and cults. As in many such movements, a woman leader plays an important role in some stage of the sect's history.

A spiritual vacuum, crisis times and confusion invite people to turn to many directions. Our age is no exception. But never have so many strange groups and prophets pushed their way into the limelight as in the 1970s and 80s.

What is the difference between a sect and a cult?

The terms sect and cult are applied quite indiscriminately. Some call the Jehovah's Witnesses a sect and others brand it as a cult. A sect is described differently by different people: So we must define "sect" as we are using the term, and from our particular perspective.

Roman Catholic writers have often used sect as equivalent to denomination, in distinction from the church. This is consistent with their emphasis on the true, visible, universal church, namely the Roman Catholic. Evangelicals reserve the description of sect for Jehovah's Witnesses and such like. The sociological approach has been popular with numerous Canadian scholars.

John S. Moir

Dr. Moir asserts that sects aim to restore the original purity of Christianity, ignoring the accumulation of tradition. In North America a sect is fundamentalistic, Bible-centred, strongly missionary minded, and it gives a large role to women in its independent, autonomous congregations.

William E. Mann

In his *Sect, Cult and Church in Alberta*, Mann makes a distinction between conservative movements dedicated to the restoration of New Testament Christianity, while suspicious of ritualism and organization, and the cults which feature only isolated bits of Christian teaching. As a result, Mann identifies fundamentalism with sectarianism. Fundamentalists are said to be exclusive and selective in membership as their emphasis is on an individualistic religious experience. The sects (fundamentalists)

assist in the adjustment of rural people to an urban environment. The fundamentalists give rural folk, who have moved to the city, a feeling of belonging and a sense of identity.

A cult is described as a religious group which looks for its basic authority outside the Christian tradition. With this interpretation, Christian Science, Mormonism, and such like, can be considered cults.

S.D. Clark

Clark's book *Church and Sect in Canada* seems to have been a basic source and an inspiration for many Canadian writers on church and sects. He believes that the difference between church and sect arises out of the conflict between the forces of order and separation. "The church seeks the accommodation of religious organization to the community; the welfare of society is something for which it feels responsible. The sect emphasizes the exclusiveness of religious organization; the worldly society is something evil of no concern to the spiritual minded." Clark claims that the support for the religious sect comes from an unsettled sector of society which has lost its sense of belonging.

Dr. Clark's view is based on Ernst Troeltsch's (1865-1923) famous work, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. Troeltsch attempted to discuss the relationship between church and sect from a perspective which was dogmatically unprejudiced. He denied the uniqueness of Christianity. All religions, including Christianity, are the outgrowth of religious feelings. Their distinctive forms are in part predetermined by their environment. Troeltsch paid close attention to the social ideas which influenced various forms of Christianity. He called church and sect two independent sociological types, implied in what he styled the "religious sociological basic scheme of Christianity," with its radical tension between individualism and universalism. A person becomes a member of the church community by birth. This is the universal aspect. The Roman Catholic Church is the best example. A sect is joined on a voluntary basis. This is the Individualistic faction of the "religious sociological basic scheme of Christianity,"

PROTEST

What constitutes a sect? The word sect is derived from sequi (to follow) not from secare (to cut). The emphasis falls on a religious group's response to the leader or founder and not on the group's existence as a tiny fraction or a section as a whole.

A sect is a protest against the developments in the church universal. Its members long for a new and fresh religious experience. They want to leap over the centuries of church tradition in an attempt to restore primitive Christianity. Nonconformity and world flight are some of the marks of the sects.

The sect usually looks upon the Church as apostate, beyond hope and redemption. It regards itself as the sole "true" church, and the door to salvation. The sect's standards of morality alone are the sanctified pattern for life. For example, the Jehovah's

Witnesses elevated their refusal to receive blood transfusion as a God-ordained command.

Sects did not arise out of a vacuum. They originated in false doctrines that had crept into the church. Fingers are pointed at the Church. Failures are listed. Time and time again the Church has walked upon dangerous paths. She has often opened her door to rationalism. The Word of God has many times been weighed and found wanting by her scholars. National causes were defended by the Church.

One of the serious mistakes of the Church was her gradual neglect of her social calling, the arts and the sciences. The world was left to the forces of evil. Sin became sins. A gospel without the cross has been proclaimed from many pulpits. The preaching of the Second Coming, the hope of the Church, has been neglected. The church no longer watched, worked and prayed for the glorious Second Coming of her Lord.

Church membership has been too soft and easy in the Western world. Congregational life failed to provide understanding and fellowship. The rise of the sects and cults must be understood from this background.

Johan D. Tangelder
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