

## Sects and Cults

### Insecurity

Many young people feel insecure. The suicide rate for young people between the ages of 15 and 24 is at an all-time high in Canada and the U.S. Parents are more mobile than ever before. Some are frequently transferred by their employers. This practice leads to the breakdown of family unity. Children don't know their grandparents, aunts and uncles, the extended family. Young people feel uprooted. They don't experience any meaningful ties with a family or community. TV has contributed to the lack of communication within the home.

There is no longer a real sense of belonging. In this void, cults and sects look attractive to young people with a lost identity. A cult community provides a tight fellowship. Its members are "brethren", and sharers of an inner and unseen truth.

The Spiritual Counterfeits Project, a group of young Christians based in Berkley, California, describes potential cult followers as: "Idealists and intellectuals who find the cult doctrines appealing as a philosophical superstructure complete with absolutes on the meaning of life and incentives for changing the world; those who have recently accepted Christ but have no biblical back ground; the lonely and the alienated; those with a simple hunger of intimacy."

Jobs have become scarce. Traditional values are questioned. Many modern young people have no clear-cut basis for right or wrong, Father Andrew Greeley, Roman Catholic priest and social critic, remarked:

"They grew up thinking they were going to remake the world ... now they find it hard to get jobs, are cut off from their predecessors and successors in age groups, afraid of marriage and parenthood, uncommitted politically and religiously, filled with self-pity and turning more and more to lives of hedonistic withdrawal from the complexities of life."

Cults and sects prey on the vulnerability of the disillusioned and troubled. They offer quick solutions to complex problems. These movements are glib. They give the impression that they have arrived. They have got it. There is nothing of the spirit of Philippians 2 where Paul admonishes to "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling."

Cults and sects take advantage of the deep crisis with which our society is afflicted. They don't hesitate to fill the vacuum. Timidity is unknown to them. Hurdles and hurts of living are only a challenge. They will be overcome.

The church faces momentous challenges from within and without. The growth of the sects and cults should stir her into action. Not the spirit of fear and defeat, but the Spirit of the Lord should control her. Christ asked "When the son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8) Our Lord's question plainly indicates that the Christian faith

is not destined to survive without a struggle. The Church needs to draw upon her spiritual resources, pray and work for reformation and revival, and develop strategies for growth.

How do sects and Cults bring in their destructive heresies? They depend on a novel and twisted interpretation of Scripture. The Bible is appropriated for their own use. "Other gospels" are taught as they depart from the apostolic doctrine. A text is wanted that confirms a leader's or guru's peculiar teachings. Heretics claim that they have an "inside track". They alone have the truth and nothing but the truth.

North Americans have travelled as far as India to learn of special discoveries and "deep insights" into the meaning of life of some guru. The pagan cult Scientology claims to have "discovered" that man has occupied a number of different bodies during his many incarnations in the world. All that is needed to prove this, is to take an individual along a "time track" to his earlier lifetime to seek the reasons for his present difficulties.

One of the typical characteristics of a sect and cult is the claim to extra revelation apart from the Bible. Sects and cults are not satisfied with sola scriptura. They must have more than Scripture offers. The Jehovah's Witnesses say that they take the Bible seriously. But they take Scripture out of context and glue texts together to make up their own prophetic views.

The Mormons have their Book of Mormon, The Christian Scientists their *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* by Mary Baker Eddy. And there are many other religious groups which have their particular brand of books to shed extra light on the Bible. These works are without exception the basis of cult and sect theology. They are not innocent additions, they overshadow and even lord over the Bible. God can no longer speak on His own. He has to speak according to the directions of the sect An excellent book on the abuse of the Bible is *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible* by James W. Sire. He catalogues 20 kinds of mistakes made by these groups "from simple misquotation of Scripture to complex, deliberate re-translation of the text to fit a preconceived idea; from ignoring the immediate context of a passage of Scripture to mistaking a literal reference for a figurative one or vice versa."

The Unification Church, a modern cult founded by Sun Myung Moon, teaches that the Bible is not complete nor fully accurate. A new truth is needed that "can elucidate the fundamental contents of the Bible so clearly that everyone can recognize and agree with it." Moon quotes Jesus' words "Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about the Father" (John 16:25 N.I.V.) as proof for the need of a new revelation. Moon says that his Divine Principle breaks the code and tells us what Jesus meant. For the Moonies the Divine Principle is - "the present truth supercedes Christian theology."

Swami Satchitananda, head of the Integral Yoga Institute, interprets Jesus' beatitude "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matth. 5:8) as: "Blessed are those who purify their consciousness, for they shall see themselves as God." The Swami

makes no distinction between God and people. Each person is essentially divine. Each of us is God. The God of Satchitananda is not the Jehovah of Scripture who is known through Christ, but the impersonal deity of the East. The Swami is a pantheist - God is everything and in everything.

Erich Von Daniken has led many astray with his weird interpretations of Scripture as recorded in his *Chariot of the Gods*. He has tried to make his pseudo-space-science-fantasies fit the Bible. The ark of the covenant is said to have been an electrically charged radio transmitter, referring to Ex. 15:10, 25:40, 2 Sam. 6:2. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by astronauts. In the nuclear explosion (cf. Gen. 19:1-28) and Ezekiel is supposed to have seen a spacecraft (cf. Ez. 1:1, 28).

How can the Church meet the challenge of misinterpretation and twisting of Scripture? First, she must oppose private interpretation. The apostle Peter says that the people of God - communally - are called to interpret the Word of God. "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Pet. 1:20, 21).

The story of Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council, illustrates this important point. The apostles and the elders debated the issue of salvation by keeping the law of Moses or through the grace of Jesus Christ. The gathering came to a unanimous decision. Communally they determined what was pure doctrine. And we read in Acts 15:22 "Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men"; verse 28 says "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us".

Second, God's people need to pay attention to all of Scripture. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." (2 Tim. 3:16) Revelation is progressive! God moves from the simple revelation about Himself in the Old Testament to the glorious and final revelation in His Son Jesus Christ. (2 Tim. 1:10)

The golden thread of the covenant is woven throughout God's Word. Scripture cannot be broken. A major deficiency of the cults and sects is their neglect to base their faith on the Bible as a whole.

Third, Christians must return to the study of Scripture. In our experience oriented times doctrine has been played down. If Christians believe the Bible to be the final and only verbal revelation of God, inerrant and authoritative for faith and practice, they must give themselves to its persistent study with a high degree of intensity.

Cults and sects have a field day with experience-oriented Christians who spend little time or effort on the study of sound Biblical teachings. The best weapon against the wiles of the devil is the Word of God! It is still the "sword of the Spirit" (Eph. 6:17).

Swamiyae saranam Ayyappa" (Lord Ayyappa is my refuge) chant Devotees in praise of the explosively popular Hindu god Ayyappa during the pilgrimage season in Kerala, India's first democratically elected communist state. Once little more than a local deity, the Ayyappa cult is now even drawing followers from the West. In 1970 fewer than two million worshippers visited the god's remote shrine in Kerala's Cardamon Hills. In 1980, at the close of the season, more than 8 million had paid homage, including 1000 foreigners from the U.S., Belgium, Australia and Israel. Correspondent Radhakrishna Rao reported to *Asiaweek* that the Ayyappa cult may be poised to take its place alongside Sufism and the Hare Krishna movement as the West's latest mystical fad.

"In this country they have Father's Day and Mother's Day, and they might as well have a Guru's Day", said guru Muktananda Paramahansa to his more than 2000 followers during a secluded retreat in upstate New York. Muktananda is known to his devotees as Baba (father). He has been visited by such celebrities as California Governor Jerry Brown, Singers James Taylor and Carly Simon, Anthropologist Carlos Castaneda and Astronaut Edgar Mitchell. In what is called an "intensive" Muktananda transmits shaktienergy or elemental force in one two day ritual of teaching and meditation. One of his American disciples testified of him: "He is the perfect guru for the West. We expect when we put something in to get something out - like Instant coffee - and from Baba you get instant experience."

Indian guru Rajneesh opposes established religion - and Christianity in particular - with vengeance. At his ashram (commune) in Pune, near Bombay, he teaches his disciples the worship of self-gratification. His stand on sex is: "If you use sex for fun, it is virtue; if you use it for reproduction, it is sin." A few of Rajneesh's critics accused him of blending California style group grope sexual therapies with Indian mysticism for a cosmic flavour. Many of Rajneesh's followers tend to be young Europeans or Americans who drift to India in search for spiritual direction. In Pune, a reporter comments, they find surrogate parental approval for letting go.

Youth are attracted to Eastern mysticism. It is estimated that by now several million Europeans and North Americans have been touched by the mushrooming eastern cults and their practices. In some cities in the Western world oriental movements crowd out the Christian churches. With little debate or critical thought, young people are seeking philosophical or religious answers. And they turn to the East in their disillusionment. Some young people have moved to India or Nepal to sit at the feet of a guru in some cave or to join an ashram. But most who have been drawn into eastern mysticism have stayed in their own country.

Eastern mysticism is discovered at the time when Christianity in the West appears weak in spirit. The East is still the East, but the West is no longer the West. While in Asia youths are rejecting their religious heritage, and sometimes finding their way into Christianity, in the West many young people believe that their culture can no longer provide answers for their questions. They tend to be skeptical about the values they have inherited and are open to any and all experiences. The East is looking toward the West for their sciences and technology, while in the West many question their benefits.

Hinduism and Islam are struggling with the strong inroads of secularism, while youth from the secular West turn to the East for spiritual guidance. Asia, to which many sect devotees are looking with hope, is rapidly disappearing. A short visit to the large and bustling cities such as Bangkok and Tokyo will be a spiritual shock for them.

When did Eastern cults start to make their inroads in the West? Some trace the origin of the new religious revolution to Timothy Leary's founding of the League for Spiritual Discovery in Millbrook, New York, in the late 1960's. This new youth counter culture, rejecting "packaged and promoted" American way of life, often rejected their Judeo-Christian heritage. Many became enchanted with mysticism, magic and the miraculous. Theirs is an anti-intellectual and even anti-ideological world. In this setting Asian spirituality made a deep impact. Youth yearned to get to know someone or something like God through a direct experience.

Are Westerners able to become "true" devotees of Eastern cults? I believe that the eastern mystical route is an extremely difficult one to follow for the Westerner. Westerners are different from Asians. The Easterners are more inward-directed. They are more intuitive rather than analytical in thought.

How do Easterners themselves view the rise of eastern cults in the West? The Third World theologian C.S. Song, formerly principal of the Tainan Theological College, Taiwan, is quite critical. He says that there has been too much romanticism on the part of Western seekers of the oriental meaning of life and also on the part of its Asian advocates. He charges that "the oriental sects that thrive on the consumerism of western society are sad caricatures of their distant spiritual ancestors."

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