

II SECTS

DEFINITION OF SECTS

Dr. Michael D. Langone, director of Research for the American Family Foundation, broadly defines sects as "religious groups whose adherents strongly emphasize special teachings or practices that fall within the normative bounds of the major world religions" (1982, p. 1). Starting with Langone's interpretation, we can state that most sects in Western society have their roots in

Christianity. We must also understand that we can only interpret the term sect from our own understanding of church and gospel. For example, Roman Catholic writers have often used the term 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 Church. Those from the Evangelical or Reformed traditions reserve the term sect for Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and the like.

In his book *Sociological Interpretation of Religion*, British scholar Roland Robertson says that a sect espouses a religious message which is out of line with the dominant religious and secular culture, but which is also regarded as an acceptable or perhaps necessary part of the religious scene. With this description Robertson lumps together the Salvation Army and the Plymouth Brethren in Britain and the Mormons and Christian Scientists in America (Robertson, 1970, pp. 126f).

In Canada, the sociological approach has been popular with numerous scholars. S. D. Clark's *Church and Sect in Canada* seems to have been a basic source for many writers on sects and cults. Clark believes the difference between church and sect arises out of the conflict between 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 exclusivity of religious organization; the worldly society is something evil of no concern to the spiritually-minded" (Clark, 1948, p. x11). Clark claims that support for religious sects comes from an unsettled sector of society which has lost its sense of belonging. Clark's view is based on Ernst Troeltsch's (1865-1923) famous work *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. Troeltsch denied the uniqueness of Christianity. He claimed 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 social ideas that 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 act of the "religious sociological basic scheme of Christianity" (Tangelder, September 11, 1981).

What constitutes a sect? The term sect is derived from *sequi* (Latin: to follow), not from *secare* (Latin: to cut). The emphasis falls on a religious group's response to the leader or founder and not on the group's existence as such.

A sect usually looks upon the mainline church as apostate, beyond hope or redemption. It regards itself as the sole "true" church, and the only 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 to a God-ordained command.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SECTS

Sect membership is generally drawn from those in society who perceive themselves as being marginal, "out of the mainstream." Through sect membership they get a sense of belonging and importance. The sect is their dominant social priority in life. The very notion of being separated from the evil world gives a high degree of discipline, structure, and commitment. Roland Robertson claims that religious sects give their members a self-conception of eliteness and personal perfection is the expected standard of aspiration, accompanied by the ideal of the priesthood of all believers (Robertson, 1970, p. 130). With the latter he means the active involvement of all members in the activities and life of their sect.

Writer and educator B. R. Wilson divides sects into seven categories. This sociological classification is helpful to deepen our understanding of the characteristics of sects. This classification is based on the sect's response to the world.

Conversionist Sect

Wilson puts evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity under the conversionist heading. This type shows no interest in social reform programs. The world can only be changed through converted individuals. Causal explanations which take into account the influence of the environment on behaviour are rejected. There is little emphasis on ritual. The dominant note in the sect's atmosphere is more emotional than doctrinal.

The Revolutionary Type

This type emphasizes eschatology (the doctrine of last things). Its attitude toward the world is to get rid of this social order when the time is ripe. Its members are awaiting a new world under God's sovereign rule. Members occupy themselves actively in prophetic exegesis, in comparison of prophecies and contemporary events. Wilson observes that the biblical texts used are directly eschatological or else obscure visions from prophetic books, which can be interpreted as relevant predictions for the present period. He also notes that one finds in these sects "little feeling for a relation with divinity." Jehovah's Witnesses are typical representatives of these ideas.

Introversionist Type

The response to the world is neither conversion of the world's population nor the expectation of the imminent end of the world. It is simply retiring from it to enjoy the security gained by personal holiness. There is no interest in social reform, individual conversion, or social revolutions. Members have a great disdain for those who are

"without holiness." They consider themselves as the "assemblies of the saved." They put great emphasis on the Holy Spirit. An example of this type is the "holiness movement."

Manipulationist Sects

They insist on a particular and distinctive knowledge or gnostic. They claim that through the use of the knowledge taught by their movement, wealth, happiness, and social prestige can be acquired. Wilson recognizes that these movements can also be classified as cults.

This type may use the Bible, but since Christians had much more to say than is recorded in the Gospels, their teachings have to be added as another source of truth. There is little interest in eschatology; the hereafter is simply an enhancement of present joys. A representative group is Christian Science.

Thaumaturgical Sects

These sects insist that it possible for humans to experience the extraordinary effect of the supernatural in their lives. Wilson notes that within Christianity their principal representatives are spiritualist groups whose main activity is seeking personal messages from the spirits, obtaining cures, and performing miracles. "They resist acceptance of the physical process of aging and death and come together to affirm a special exception from everyday realities which assures each individual and their loved ones of perpetual well-being in the next world. For the present, they procure immediate advantages by accomplishing miracles" (Wilson, 1995, p. 13).

In Christian-based groups the Gospel of Mark has great appeal. This type assembles as an audience looking for a miraculous happening. I would classify Benny Hinn, a Canadian faith healer and religious TV star, in this category.

Reformist Sects

This type seeks to transform the world through humanitarian action. The history of the Quakers (Society of Friends) is an example of the type of sect which seeks to be apart from the world, yet wants to be in it.

The Utopian Sect

In reaction to the world, this sect withdraws from it while wishing to remake it. It does not only seek to establish communities, but also wants to construct the world on a communitarian basis. Their favourite Bible texts are those in Acts recounting the establishment of the first Christian community in Jerusalem. Wilson puts certain Mennonites into this category who practise communal living in response to particular circumstances, rather than as a part of their original vision. Their practice of communal living is a defence against the intrusion of the world, a protection of a way of life (Robertson, 1971, pp. 363-371).

SECT PRACTICES

Ideas have consequences. For example, adventist sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses believe in the apocalyptic downfall of the present evil order. This makes social action to reform the institutions of the world irrelevant.

Strong positive interactive ties are experienced within sect membership. There is a familial atmosphere. Members feel that the relationship with fellow sect members is more rewarding than with those in the world. To maintain discipline and to prevent deviant views from taking hold within their group, sects have various practices of "confession," "mutual criticism," or "catharsis sessions" (Thomas & Dick Anthony, 1981, p. 59).

Adventist sects seem to welcome persecution. They view the latter as a sign of the legitimacy of the group's chosen path of salvation.

Many cultists avoid educating their children outside their group. If they are sent to school, the children often do not participate in social activities or sports, befriend children outside the group, or complain. In her article "Hidden Terror: Child Abuse in 'Religious' Sects and Cults,"

Washington author Shirley Landa offers the following criteria which may assist in identifying cult control and/or possible child abuse:

If children attend school, do they socialize with other children? Do they participate in extracurricular activities? Will the group allow outsiders to talk to the children alone? Do children exhibit emotions characteristic of children their age? Do children associate with relatives outside the group? Do children allow outsiders to touch them? Do they answer freely and without reservations when asked about the sect? Can they carry on a conversation? Do they speak of their natural parents as their father and mother? Do they live alone with their natural parents? Are they allowed to play with neighbourhood children or children outside the group? Do they have their own toys? Will they speak about punishment and who sets the type and performs the punishment? Can these children make decisions of their own? Will they answer questions freely in front of their elders without looking to them for approval? Do they feel that illnesses should be medically treated? If the answer is "no" to most of these questions, investigation is warranted. (1985, p. 4)

HUMAN RIGHTS, SECTS, AND CULTS

After the apocalyptic event in Jonestown, Guyana, which resulted in the death of 900 people through murder and suicide, the American publisher William Randolph Hearst and law professor Richard Delgado argued that totalitarianism in the name of religion should not qualify for constitutional protection (Thomas & Dick Anthony, 1981, p. 59).

In Canada there is an adverse feeling toward sects and cults. With the strong emotional response many Canadians have toward them, they must be careful not to get involved in a witchhunt. Many have advocated legal restrictions, or even outright prohibition of their activities.

But prohibition is not the answer. The very definition of what constitutes a sect and cult depends on one's worldview and theology. All kinds of minority beliefs which

differ from the majority of the population, and such institutions as Christian schools, which are seen as a threat to democracy by some prominent opponents, may be defined as cultic. Professor Ian Hunter tells the story how in the late 1890s the city of London, ON, became so fearful of a new religious cult which had settled within its municipal boundaries that it passed a bylaw prohibiting the cult from witnessing within those boundaries. Aldermen and controllers who supported the bylaw denounced this particular cult as "fanatics, a travesty of true religion and traveling tinkers." The cult was the Salvation Army (Swope, October, 1983, p. 18).

In a 1955 unanimous Supreme Court decision that resulted from an action taken by the Quebec Provincial Police against two Jehovah's Witnesses, this important declaration was made:

In our country there is no state religion. All religions are on an equal footing, and Catholics as well as Protestants, Jews, and other adherents to various religious denominations, enjoy the most complete liberty of thought. The conscience of each is a personal matter and the concern of nobody else. It would be distressing to think that a majority might impose its religious views upon a minority, and it would also be a shocking error to believe that one serves his country or his religion by denying in one Province, to a minority, the same rights which one rightly claims for one self in another Province (Swope, October, 1983, p. 18).

Hunter notes that the Supreme Court's decision not only refers to religious liberty, but also to liberty of thought. He also points out that several fundamental principles about religious liberty were established. The first was that freedom of religion is a matter beyond provincial jurisdiction, and therefore, it is a matter beyond municipal jurisdiction. No province may within its boundaries diminish or impair religious freedom by legislation. Secondly, the ability of the federal government (or any level of government) to impair any of the fundamental religious freedoms is limited by the common Bill of Rights. Furthermore, the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that everyone, whether Canadian citizen or not, has the right to freedom of conscience and religion. Section 2A of that Charter states: "Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms, and the first stated freedom is the freedom of conscience and religion."

Cults and sects, therefore, should enjoy the full protection of their rights to practise and propagate their beliefs. Hunter concludes that religious liberty means that as long as a religious sect or cult is not committing illegal acts, it has a guaranteed right to spread its teachings and to seek converts (Swope, October, 1983, p. 18).

We treasure freedom of worship. We must affirm the right of Canadian citizens to worship according to their individual beliefs. Freedom of worship must have the full protection of the law. The question is: how do we uphold the freedom of worship while simultaneously opposing sects and cults?

Do Christian schools have the right to refuse enrolment of children whose parents belong to a sect or cult? The answer is "yes." Each religion has the right to draw its own parameters. The religious beliefs of the school cannot be infringed upon. But this calls for a carefully worded statement of faith. For example, Article 11 of the

"Constitution and Bylaws of the London Parental School Society" states: "The society is based on the Holy Scriptures, which are the infallible Word of God, as interpreted in the Reformed creedal standards such as the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, and the Westminster Confession."

This statement is an adequate safeguard in case a sect or cult member wants to become a member of the school society or wants to enrol a child. No sect or cult member can, in all good conscience, subscribe to Article II since it clearly articulates the school society's position on the historic trinitarian Christian faith. The constitution of the London District Christian Secondary School Society gives the same protection. However, I would suggest that this school delete from its Admission Policy Article 2.3: "No child shall be denied enrolment on the grounds of ethnicity, sex, race, colour, or national origin." The beliefs of some sects and cults are based on either race or ethnicity. This is especially the case in sects and cults which originated in either Hinduism or Islam.

SECTARIANISM

Belonging to a sect or cult is not the same as being sectarian. Sectarianism connotes an excessively zealous and doctrinaire narrow-mindedness that would quickly judge and condemn those who disagree. The sectarian view of the church leaves little room for cooperation or fellowship with other Christians. Sectarian Christians believe that they have a special corner on the truth.

Sectarianism has spawned many separate movements and denominations. Roland Robertson remarked:

Sectarianism is a relative matter. What from the standpoint of, say, the Anglican Church in the seventeenth century constituted sectarianism was from the point of view of the newly emerging religious movements of Congregationalism or Baptists the correct and true Christian perspective. (Robertson, 1970, p. 78)

North America's Christianity has sectarianism as its main feature. No other religion has become so fractured. One recent sectarian movement, which has made an impact also upon Reformed Christians, is the mega or superchurch. Many of them are not affiliated with a denomination. Their pastors are visionary lone rangers who specialize in "marketing" the gospel. These churches are long in attractive programs, and usually short on doctrine. The worship services are television-oriented. They are entertaining like TV shows.

"It is not surprising," says Tony Campolo, a Christian American activist, "that many of them have actually *become* television shows" (1991, p. 121). Campolo claims that the biblical prophets would be hard on the superchurches:

They would claim that such churches only help people to become better adjusted to our consumer-oriented society instead of calling them to reject it. They would argue that these churches are part of the problem because they strive to make people comfortable in a society that has gone mad. (1991, p. 115)