

CULTS OVERVIEW

Cult, sect, religion, and "true faith" are difficult terms to define objectively to everyone's satisfaction. Some distinguish "true personal faith" from "religion." Such a distinction breaks down, however, when religion is discussed as the spiritual aspect of human life that includes faith in God.

A general use of the word "religion" refers to the major Eastern and Western religions. Smaller groups of religious believers who break off from a major religion are often referred to as sects. New and different expressions of religious life outside traditional patterns are called cults. But even these general designations do not include many uses of these terms.

In this discussion, the term "religious" is used to describe organized faith of a long historic standing and wide acceptance. The word "sects" describes groups who split from organized churches or religions (schismatics), and the word "cults" defines new expressions of religious belief and practice. Accordingly, Judaism was once a new cult and Christianity and Islam were considered Jewish sects. Obviously, what is now long established was once new and threatening; this is part of the challenge of criticizing modern cults and sects.

Historically, Christian sects have criticized established religion by an appeal to a clearer or more literal reading of Scripture or a return to primitive Christianity. Sects have also often flourished among the socially and economically disadvantaged. As their social and economic status improved and sectarian features were discarded, the sects found legitimacy in society (e.g., Adventists, holiness churches, pentecostal sects, and Russian sectarianism).

During the mid-1980s, the United States witnessed a decline in the cults that had flourished in the 1970s (e.g., Hare Krishna, Divine Light Mission, and Unification Church). At the same time, sects such as the Opus Dei in the Catholic Church, The Way, and sectarian Church of God and Church of Christ groups thrived.

Cults and sects incur justified public criticism when they

- * Use unethical means to entice recruits.
- * Manipulate members in a way that diminishes critical thinking.
- * Work against family unity.
- * Use the authority of a cult leader for destructive or illegal ends.

The prosletizing and evangelistic efforts of some religions, churches, and parachurch groups can resemble the unethical practices of destructive cults. In most cases, however, the criteria above will show that such instances reflect only the excesses of an isolated leader or situation. New religious movements need evaluation from psychological, social, legal, moral, and theological perspectives.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Parents need to ensure that faith, authority, values, and a sense of community are positive realities in their children's lives. A family that has a son or daughter in a cult or questionable sect should contact authorities in the field.

2. Teachers should include the study of destructive cults in the learning curriculum at the senior high school level. It is important that youth learn to distinguish religious faith from the brainwashing by cults. Also, the recognition of various forms of manipulation in commercials, political rhetoric, and cultic propaganda needs to be taught.

3. A zealous youth leader can develop an enthusiasm that leads to a cult of personality. Such a person should, with the help of others, evaluate any cultic tendencies in one's youth work, especially if it becomes very successful. Youth leaders should also analyze the nature of their group with the help of the young people who are in it and discuss how it differs from a destructive cult. Finally, youth leaders must be cognizant of why young people are attracted to cults—this can point them to fulfill unmet needs.

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