
The Cults: An Update

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It was in November 1978 in Jonestown, Guyana, when over 900 people obeyed the order of their white leader, the Rev Jim Jones, to drink a mixture of cyanide and Flavoraid. As many as 913 of Jones' followers queued to drink the lethal mixture, 'men and women, old and young, black and white — parents who poisoned their own children — silently, willingly, sipped the poisonous mixture as Jim Jones had told them to while he preached about dying with dignity'.¹ Many of these people believed they had found the 'truth' through Jones and had been born again through his ministry. Some even claimed that their leader was divine. However, the real Jim Jones was a rather unpleasant and cruel human person. Those who succeeded in escaping from his commune described Jones as a 'cruel tyrant who disciplined his flock with terror, armed guards, electric shock treatment, child beating and mock trials'.²

This sad incident reminds us again that some cults are potentially dangerous and destructive. The Jonestown tragedy also illustrates one of the distinctive features of the cults, namely, the belief that 'truth' is found exclusively in a leader professing to have special understanding and authority from God. But Jonestown also underlines the pastoral challenge which the world of the cults presents to the Christian Church today. For example, researchers have established that as many as 80% of those involved in the Jonestown incident came from 'Christian' backgrounds, whether Christian homes, churches or schools and this large percentage is also true in relation to a significant number of other cults.

Quite literally, the cult problem is on our doorstep today. Many cult representatives visit our homes or approach us in city shopping precincts and there is evidence that Moonies are now infiltrating evangelical churches in order to gain converts. Some of our church people are vulnerable while others do not know how to respond or how to help these cult members. Sadly, pastors and church officers are all too often badly informed and thus fail to warn and teach their people in this important area.

The purpose of this brief article is to update readers with regard to developments in some of the cults and to indicate some of the theological questions arising from these developments.

Definition

By now the term 'cult' has virtually displaced that of 'sect' previously used to describe groups like Jehovah's Witnesses, Moonies, Mormons etc. The term 'sect' is regarded as being too restrictive and too closely linked with Christianity. Sociologically, it is important to note that the terms 'sect' and

now 'cult' are used to describe groups or movements of religious protest against organised religion, secular government as well as the dominant culture. For the modern media, the word 'cult' is often a convenient way of referring to the more bizarre groups such as Moonies and Scientologists. The **Shorter Oxford Dictionary** defines the word as 'devotion to a particular person or thing as paid by a body of professed adherents'. Such devotees are usually sincere, zealous and convinced that they have found the 'truth'. The term 'cult' has also been more widely used to include self-improvement groups such as Exegesis and Est but this wide application of the term is confusing. At present, terms like 'movement', 'new religious movements' and 'new religions' are being used increasingly to replace that of 'cult'.³

Appeal

Ronald Enroth, Professor of Sociology at Westmont College, California, suggests several reasons for the phenomenal growth of cults in the United States during the past three decades.⁴ He observes that the cults developed during times of significant change and cultural upheaval. They also prosper when there is no single, national issue such as war or important civil-rights problem to capture the imagination and loyalty of people. In an absorbing interdisciplinary study, Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe also draw attention to these social aspects of 'cult explosion'.⁵ Professor Enroth underlines, too, some psychological factors such as security and a strong dependency feeling which the cults exploit in meeting basic human needs.

You will be wrong if you assume that young people are the only ones to be attracted to the cults. Already in Britain many middle-aged and older people have joined cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Scientology, etc. In America, for example, the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University has provided conclusive evidence that the cults are successfully recruiting between the ages of fifty and seventy-plus.⁶ Some cults in the United States have 20% of their members over the age of sixty while, in areas like Miami, nearly half the number of cult members are over the age of fifty.

There are reasons, of course, why the cults are focussing attention on older people. Some hand over their large incomes to the group while those with fewer resources surrender social security and pension payments. Sometimes their discontent, loneliness and fears are exploited by cult activists who offer 'instant' answers to personal problems and provide an initial sense of caring for those who feel neglected.

Classification

The cults are classified in a number of different ways. Professor Bryan Wilson has distinguished them as world-denying (e.g. Children of God, Hare Krishna), world-indifferent (e.g. The Way International) or world-enhancing (e.g. Est, Exegesis, Transcendental Meditation, Scientology etc).⁷ A different and more satisfying classification is given by Professor Ronald Enroth.⁸ He classifies them as a) Eastern mystical, b) aberrational Christian, c) self-improvement, d) eclectic-syncretistic, e) psychic-occult-astral and f) established groups including Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian

Science, etc. These 'established' cults are in contrast to newer cults like the Family of Love, Scientology, etc. Some prefer to describe Scientology, Hare Krishna, the Unification Church (Moonies) and the Divine Light Mission as 'destructive', rather than new, cults.

Developments

Before I turn to some theological questions raised by two groups, I want to update readers concerning developments in four cults which are particularly active and influential in our contemporary situation.

During the last seven years, there have been leadership problems within the **Jehovah's Witness** movement. Several top leaders at their Bethel headquarters have been disfellowshipped during the past seven years over major doctrinal differences with official Watchtower teachings, including Franz's nephew, Raymond Franz. In a helpful, revealing book, Raymond Franz has written of his work within the Governing Body of the Watchtower and of the powerful, sometimes dramatic, impact of their decisions on people's lives which led to his own personal crisis of conscience.⁹

At present, there are approximately five million Witnesses worldwide. The Watchtower year books reveal, however, that there are twice as many baptisms as there are active Witnesses which means a high drop-out rate and by today there is a much higher number of ex-JW's than active ones! To meet this situation, there now exists in America an annual National Convention of Ex-Jehovah's Witnesses which provides members with encouragement and support. Some of these become disillusioned while others are converted to Christ and join Bible-teaching churches.¹⁰ On the other hand, some have gone into Judaism, or cults like the Mormons, the Worldwide Church of God or one of the JW breakaway groups like the Dawn Bible Students.

As a result of the **Unification Church** (Moonies) losing the longest and most expensive libel case in British legal history in 1981 against the *Daily Mail*, the cult has kept a low profile in Britain. However, there are indications that Moonies are eager to improve their public image and some cult members are joining local churches and working inside them.¹¹

Two influential cult leaders died recently. The founder of the **Worldwide Church of God**, Herbert W Armstrong, died at the age of 93 on 16 January 1986. Armstrong was officially described as 'the apostle and pastor general' of the WCG and 'it was under his leadership', they claim, 'that a new era of the Church of God was begun. The church was revitalised and injected with new life and vigour ...' The claim is absurd, of course, but his heretical views, mostly obtained from his first wife, are given considerable publicity. One WCG programme alone, *The World Tomorrow*, is transmitted daily in the United States through over a hundred radio stations and 144 TV stations and transmitted world-wide by a total of 168 radio and 192 TV stations. Via Radio Luxembourg the programme is beamed to Britain and the WCG claims that the programme relayed worldwide has at least one hundred million listeners daily. Many of their free booklets are available in supermarkets throughout

Britain and newspaper shops display them, too, in many city centres. The WCG is now a cult to be reckoned with in our situation.

The founder of **Scientology**, Ron L Hubbard, also died in the same month as Armstrong but nine days later. In the obituary notice, *The Times* concluded: 'Hubbard was the Henry Ford of occultism. He was not, by any standards, a nice man, but was a highly influential figure among the myriad inventors of magical and religious systems who have appeared in modern times.'¹² Scientology is one of the most vicious and dangerous of the cults operating today.¹³

Theological Questions

I want to turn in more detail to consider some theological questions raised by two other groups.

Amongst some Charismatics and house-church leaders, both in America and Europe, the '**Jesus-only**' teaching has gained in popularity since the sixties. For example, in the late sixties in England the South Chard leader of the House Church movement argued that those baptised in the name of the Holy Trinity were not properly baptised. This erroneous teaching gave rise to some ill-feeling amongst the believers as well as division. But the 'Jesus-only' teaching is beginning to trouble members in some of our churches. Before looking at the theology behind this teaching, it will be helpful to outline the historical context in which the teaching emerged.

It began in 1913 at a worldwide Pentecostal meeting in Los Angeles when R E McAlister preached from Acts 2:38 on 'baptism in Jesus' name' in which he claimed that all baptised believers in the apostolic age were baptised in the name of Jesus Christ alone rather than in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There was opposition to McAlister's message but men like Frank Ewart and John Scheppe were won over to his side. Verses like Matthew 17:8, John 10:30, 14:13, Philippians 2:9-11 and Colossians 3:17 were wrongly interpreted by Scheppe and others to support a 'modalist' theory of the Trinity. In contrast, however, to the much earlier heresy of Sabellius, the 'Pentecostal' leaders regarded Jesus, not the Father (as Sabellius had done), as the only one God. For them, Jesus manifested himself in the 'form' or 'office' of Father, Son and Holy Spirit at different times.

Along with evangelist Glenn A Cook, Ewart led this new movement assisted by some prominent leaders of the Assemblies of God like G T Haywood, E N Bell and H A Goss who each played a key role in propagating the new teaching. The General Council of the Assemblies of God strengthened its trinitarian position in 1916 and expelled many of its assemblies and as many as 146 ministers. Those expelled gradually organised themselves into 'oneness' churches of various shades but they held in common certain distinctives such as a 'modal' Trinity, the insistence that baptism by immersion was essential to salvation and that such baptisms should be carried out only in the name of Jesus. They also retained a Pentecostal position concerning the 'gifts' and Spirit-baptism.

Altogether there are over seventeen ‘oneness’ denominations active today but the largest and most zealous of them in Britain at present is the United Pentecostal Church.¹⁴

One thing is clear. The ‘Jesus-only’ teaching — even in relation to baptism — is an expression of non-trinitarian theology. They use texts like Acts 2:38, 8:16, 10:48 and 19:5. Furthermore, they argue that ‘the name’ of Matthew 28:19 is the same as ‘the name of Jesus Christ’ in Acts 2:38; their conclusion is that Jesus is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!

By way of reply, I confine myself to three observations.

First of all, the phrase ‘in the name of Jesus Christ’ has a primary meaning of baptisms being carried out under the authority and command of Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church. Secondly, the phrase in relation to baptism is used only sparingly in the Acts and then only at strategic moments to mark the extension of the Church amongst the Jews (2:38), the Samaritans (8:16) and the Gentiles (10:48). Thirdly, Calvin rightly insists that the same phrase in Acts 2:38 is not a formula to be used in baptism but rather a declaration that all the efficacy of baptism is found in Christ alone. ‘Christ is the work and end whereunto baptism directs us’, stresses Calvin, ‘wherefore, everyone profits in baptism as he learns to look to Christ ...’¹⁵

The use of the phrase and other New Testament passages by ‘oneness Pentecostals’ is then both unbiblical and irresponsible.

Finally, I want to comment on the **Seventh-Day Adventists**.

Some evangelicals will criticise me for regarding them as a cult rather than a Christian Church. I am familiar with the arguments but the history of Adventism and the theological controversies which plagued and still affect the movement warrant us, I believe, in calling it a cult.

At the age of 17, Ellen White claimed to have had a vision on the morning after the date set (22 October 1844) by William Miller for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the vision she saw the heavenly sanctuary in need of cleansing and Christ standing there so she interpreted this as a revelation explaining the true significance of Miller’s prophecy. Christ had come in 1844 but he came to his heavenly, not earthly sanctuary.

A distinction was later made between receiving forgiveness here and the ultimate, final blotting out of sins from our records in heaven. The claim is that in 1844 the Lord entered the inner sanctuary of heaven to finish his work of atonement for sin. This is called his ‘investigative judgement’, that is, his examining and revealing the life-records of people to the Father and blotting out the sins that are still supposed to be against believers in heaven.

This ‘sanctuary’ teaching clearly contradicts the Scripture and detracts from the sufficiency and finality of the Saviour’s sacrifice. There are serious implications, too, for the doctrine of justification by faith as we shall see.

Seventh-Day Adventism has had a chequered history. The early years, 1844—1888, were difficult years characterised by a failure to appreciate and

accept justification by faith. 'The almost universal position in this period was', according to Australian researcher G J Paxton, 'that acceptable righteousness before God is found through obeying the law with the aid of the Spirit of God.'¹⁶

1888 was a watershed in their history. Talks given by E J Waggoner and Mrs White at the General Conference Session of 1888 in Minneapolis helped to re-establish the doctrine of justification by faith to a position of prominence in the movement. They stressed the impossibility of human obedience satisfying the law of God and also undermined the necessity of a mediator who was both God and man to satisfy the law on behalf of sinners. Only through faith, they added, could this righteousness be received.

There was opposition to this new emphasis in the Conference and subsequently some leaders were strongly criticised by Mrs White for their antagonism to the doctrine of justification by faith. The years 1901—1920 witnessed expansion and consolidation of the movement despite a crisis over the teaching and influence of pantheism.

In subsequent years the controversy over the meaning and importance of justification and its relation to sanctification deepened and the decade of the 'seventies was a period of profound crisis with differing emphases and interpretations.

Adventist scholars like Desmond Ford, Geoffrey Paxton and Robert Brinsmead argued strongly for the Reformation principle of justification by faith alone; they insisted that sanctification is not the basis of salvation. Others, however, like Hans K La Rondelle, disagreed. As the debate continued in the late 1970s, an official committee was appointed to study the question. Sadly, this committee issued an ambiguous, compromising statement which did little to clarify the official Adventist position concerning the crucial doctrine of justification by faith. La Rondelle, for example, had rejected the Reformation gospel as the norm for the Adventists' understanding of the apostolic gospel while Fritz Guy affirmed:

'One of the most important elements in our Adventist heritage is the notion of 'present truth' — truth that has come newly alive and has become newly understood and significant because of a new experience, a present situation. What is important, then, theologically and experientially, is not whether our understanding is just like that of the Reformers; what is important is whether our beliefs are TRUE.'¹⁷

With the establishment of Adventist research centres in the 1960s and 1970s attention also focused on the nature and authority of Ellen White's writings. As a result of this historical research, three points were established. First of all, Ellen White borrowed a lot of her material from other sources; secondly, she was fallible and also conditioned by late nineteenth century American culture.

In September 1980 church leaders disciplined one of its leading theologians, Australian Desmond Ford, removing him from ministerial and teaching posts within the movement. Having gained his doctoral degree in New Testament studies in Manchester under Professor F F Bruce, Ford had been head of the

theology department of the Adventists' Avondale College in New South Wales, Australia, for sixteen years. Ford challenged some of the most cherished Adventist traditions, including the status of Mrs White's writings and the 'Investigative Judgement'. He claims, 'You can't find the investigative judgement in the Bible. You can get it out of Ellen White. The fact is, she got it out of Uriah Smith, an early Adventist writer'.

Prior to his dismissal, Desmond Ford was given a six month leave of absence in order to research the question of the 'sanctuary' doctrine and other related issues. Ford published the findings of his research in the summer of 1980 in a manuscript called **Daniel 8:14, the Day of Atonement and the Investigative Judgement**.¹⁸ In this lengthy document, Ford denied the traditional Adventist teaching that Christ entered the most Holy Place in 1844 to start upon his work of investigative judgement. Ford then underlined the biblical truth, namely, that Christ has been interceding for his people as High Priest since his ascension. What then, according to Ford, was the significance of 1844? It was the time, he declared, 'when God, in heaven and on earth, raised up a people to whom he entrusted his last, everlasting gospel of righteousness by faith in Christ, for the world.'¹⁹

The official Adventist response was disappointing. In numerous articles and editorials in the **Adventist Review** it was argued that the traditional sanctuary doctrine was an essential article of faith. Richard Leshner, for example, insisted:

'These landmark doctrines are to be received and held fast, not in formal fashion but in the light of divine guidance given at the beginning of the movement and made our own. Thus we become part and parcel with the movement, and the beliefs that made the original Seventh-Day Adventists make us Seventh-Day Adventists too.'²⁰

Ford's manuscript was then studied by the 'Sanctuary Review Committee' where the majority of members decided that the 'Adventist tradition was the norm for interpreting the Bible, rather than the Bible for tradition'.²¹ A few weeks later the General Conference recommended that Ford should be disciplined and the Australian Division took the appropriate steps. Almost immediately, however, a new magazine called **Evangelica** was launched to defend and propagate Ford's teaching. Ford's influence on Adventism both in America and Australia has been extensive. One Adventist reported that in the USA 'there is a vast youth movement in the church identifying with the evangelistic gospel (as a result of Ford). There's a renewed excitement about the cross.'²² Some, like John Toews the Californian pastor, have resigned their churches; Pastor Toews renamed his church the SOUTH BAY GOSPEL FELLOWSHIP. 'We feel', he explains, 'we want to move into the mainstream of Christianity now because we feel that Adventism is very definitely way off to the side.'²³ He predicted that many more pastors would resign.

The issues are important and clearly defined.²⁴ If Adventism wants to be accepted as a Christian Church rather than a cult, it must make its supreme appeal only to the Bible and embrace the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone which, as Calvin observed, is 'the hinge on which all true religion turns'.

Challenge

'The new religious movements represent, worldwide, a challenge to the mainline Christian denominations. They are growing apace. Currently, they comprise 2.2% of the world population, some 96 million. They presently outnumber Judaism and by the year 2000 AD will approximate to the numbers of Eastern Orthodoxy.'²⁵

We cannot afford to be complacent in our churches.

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