

THE DANGER OF SECTS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract:

This article deals with the introduction of the issue of the sects from the perspective of the Christian religion, the definition and the basic characteristics of the sects. In the contribution, we also mention the basic division of the sects. The aim of this contribution is to highlight the dangers of the sites in contemporary society, to present some of the practices used by the cults today, and thus to raise awareness of the dangers of these groups. We also want to appeal for caution in seeking information from the spiritual sphere and feeding the 'spiritual hunger' that people are suffering today.

Keywords: Cult. Christianity. Religion. Sect.

Introduction

A Christian lives and shares their faith in an environment they should understand well. Some people believe that the attitudes of those we approach with our Christian faith are predominantly atheistic. However, atheism is no longer as militant as it was a few decades ago. Often, it hides behind indifference. Even the old familiar conflict between the atheism of science and faith is no longer as evident. Many mathematicians, physicists, astronomers, biologists, as well as psychologists, historians, economists, and political scientists are believers. Therefore, engaging in science does not necessarily mean losing faith in God [6].

People today are spiritually hungry. Western society has now become almost entirely secularized – its institutions offer minimal satisfaction for spiritual hunger. Even the Christian Church, in many cases, has lost sight of the nourishment and drink of God's word. As a result, many who are "hungry and thirsty for righteousness" remain unsatisfied. They long for nourishment but do not know where to find it. This is where sects and new religions emerge! Groups that have split from orthodox religions—Christianity, Islam, Eastern religions—and traditional psychology often offer a sense of meaning, hope, and spiritual fulfillment. Many young people eagerly seek to satisfy their needs within these new religious groups. Some might argue that it is good when people return to spiritual life and religion. However, it is not that simple. From a Christian perspective, new religious movements are not necessarily positive. It is true that people are once again searching for God, but the question is to what extent they truly find Him. There is often a risk that they replace Him with something from this world and thus worship creation instead of the Creator. New religiosity can even be more dangerous than atheism or religious indifference. Atheism forced dissatisfied souls to continue searching. Some new religions or religious groups and sects give people the illusion that they have definitively found what they were looking for and no longer need to search.

With a new wave of interest in religions and spiritual life comes a certain trend that should be noticed. Above all, we must highlight fundamentalism. Building the structure of one's life on a foundation would, in itself, be good. However, practical fundamentalism means uncritical adherence to one's beliefs and intolerance toward others. Fundamentalists insist on fulfilling the letter of the law, whether it be the Bible, the Vedas, the Quran, or other religious scriptures. Fanaticism underestimates or even despises people of different faiths. Modern religiosity places great emphasis on emotions. Experience and personal feelings are often emphasized; people do not hesitate to express joy or other emotions [6].

Some Christians perceive sects as indistinguishable from other denominations

and religions. They tend to label everyone as a sectarian. At other times, however, in an ecumenical sense, they forget that some sects are truly dangerous and lose their caution and discernment.

The Second Vatican Council provides valuable insights regarding relationships with other Christians. In its documents (*Lumen gentium* and *Unitatis redintegratio*), it states that there are significant differences between us and other Christians that hinder full unity, but despite this, they are our brothers in Christ, and even separated churches can be used by the Holy Spirit as a means of salvation. Therefore, it is necessary to gratefully acknowledge and appreciate unity where it has existed from the beginning or has been achieved, to respect each other where diversity does not hinder unity, and to strive for reconciliation where undesirable differences exist. Regarding non-Christian religions, as the council states, people seek answers to fundamental questions about the meaning and purpose of our lives, how to attain true happiness, and the ultimate mystery that shrouds our existence—where we come from and where we are headed.

Thus, alongside the revival of Christian faith, the new wave of religiosity brings the spread of sects into our postmodern culture. If we want to understand what a sect is, how sects differ, and what they have in common, we must first define the term itself.

What is a Sect?

The definition naturally varies depending on the beliefs and values of the person defining it. For a Roman Catholic in the sixteenth century, Lutheranism was considered a sect. For a Jew in the first century, the Christian Church was a sect because it deviated from prevailing orthodoxy. Academics and other recognized observers of cults disagree on the usage and meaning of terms such as *sect* and *cult*. The academic use of these terms is more precise and technical than their use in everyday speech, but this does not mean that a clear definition has been universally established [2].

Sociologist Thomas Robbins noted in one of his articles that the term *sect* is increasingly used to describe a diverse range of groups and movements, making it unsuitable as a precise legal or social category. As a result, a sect is essentially any group that someone chooses to label as such [9].

In addition to the terms *cult* and *sect*, many scholars and university-educated commentators on this issue use terms such as *unconventional religion*, *emerging religion*, *non-normative religion*, *marginal religious movement*, and most commonly, *new religion* [2].

Even though the word *sect* has become a somewhat vague label, it will undoubtedly continue to be frequently used, along with its negative connotations. This negative meaning cannot be easily concealed, especially after the events of Jonestown. Even today, no one wants to be labeled as a sect member. Keeping these facts in mind, we can delve deeper into the concept of sects.

First, it is essential to acknowledge that the original use of this word comes from the Latin word *cultus*, meaning *worship*. In this sense, a cultic act is an act of worship, which includes both internal rituals and external expressions of reverence and homage. A well-known and popularized version of this understanding of cults is personality cults—for example, the cult of Elvis Presley or Hitler's cult, which involved a particular form of devotion or dedication to a specific individual [2].

Approaches to Defining a Sect

The definition of *sect* can be approached from three perspectives: popular, sociological, and theological.

- The **popular perspective** is based on journalistic articles in the media, which often focus on the dramatic and sometimes bizarre aspects of sectarian behavior.
- The **sociological definition** includes authoritative, manipulative, totalitarian, and sometimes communal aspects of sects.
- The **theological definition** is based on a specific standard of orthodox doctrine.

Before offering any answer to the question of what a sect is, it is necessary to consider all three perspectives to see and understand the diversity of existing viewpoints.

Most people form their idea of what sects are and how they operate from the media. Journalists are often expected to prioritize sensational stories that sell well over in-depth research and careful analysis. Sects frequently provide the media with exotic material. Stories of unusual behavior, including mysterious practices, sexual promiscuity, and occult rituals, attract public interest.

As a result, the public often associates the term *sect* with groups such as Hare Krishna members handing out flowers in public, absent-minded followers of a Korean evangelist who claims to have spoken spiritually with Jesus and Buddha, or disciples of Guru Rajneesh dressed in orange robes, dancing in cosmic gatherings [2].

On the other hand, many sects remain unknown to the public because they are not very conspicuous and have little media value, despite having far more members than more well-known groups.

Sociologists define sectarian religion to understand its place within the broader social context. From a sociological perspective, there are important differences between a church and a sect or cult. Churches are religious organizations that integrate into the culture in which they exist, meaning they adapt to varying degrees to prevailing cultural and social realities. In contrast, sects reject the surrounding culture. According to sociologist John Lofland, sects are small groups that separate themselves from society's accepted conventions and adopt a completely different understanding of what is real, possible, and moral [4].

For Christians, the most important aspect of defining sects is the theological perspective. This is because it involves a fundamental doctrinal question: what is truth, and what is falsehood? Unlike secular sociologists, who are not concerned with the truthfulness of a particular belief, Christians must be able to distinguish truth from lies. A theological definition of sects must be based on Christian doctrine. Thus, a sect can be defined as any religious movement that is organizationally distinct and has teachings or practices that contradict the doctrines and practices revealed in Scripture, as interpreted by traditional Christianity, represented by Catholicism and the main Protestant denominations, and as expressed in the Apostles' Creed [5].

A significant danger for people today is the presence of false biblical Christianity within various "religions," cleverly disguised. Members of "heterodox religious groups" often use the same terminology as Christians, reinterpret biblical texts or official doctrinal statements, and attempt to impress others with false discipleship. Sometimes, they even deliberately deceive and conceal their full theology [1].

For example, members of the Unification Church of Moon believe—though they are not always willing to admit it publicly—that Moon is the Messiah, the Lord of the Second Coming. He and his wife are known in the movement as the "True Parents." In a highly sacred ritual led by Moon, members are told that they are being transformed into the image of the True Parents. When they partake of the cup of holy wine, Moon proclaims to them: *"You will be transformed into members of the heavenly family and will belong directly to the True Parents, and through them, directly to God... By accepting this holy wine, you will immediately be transformed into God's offspring."*

Recruitment tactics, sect activities, and their political and economic operations also deserve attention. However, the key issue and central concern for Christians

must be the group's theology. Of all approaches to defining sects, secular analysts are the least concerned with theological or doctrinal aspects. From a Christian perspective, however, the categories of truth and falsehood are not indicative of a narrow fundamentalist mindset but are crucial in determining orthodoxy. We must affirm the fact that God revealed Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, and that His word—the Bible—serves as the sole standard for discerning whether something is truth or falsehood. Ultimately, what truly matters is not the labels of “conventional” or “unconventional” religion but rather the objective truth of God [2].

Characteristics of Sects

All sects exhibit some of these traits, but not all sects possess every one of them.

1. **Authoritarianism** – The defining feature of all sectarian organizations is authoritarian leadership. In every such organization, the leader is at the center of the group, demanding total loyalty and devotion. The leader has authority over both doctrine and practice, and members accept interpretations of “truth” without questioning. The members’ sense of identity and life goals are redefined and only make sense in connection with the leader.
2. **Opposition** – The beliefs, practices, and values of sects stand in opposition to those of mainstream culture and religion. They often position themselves as adversaries to major societal institutions.
3. **Elitism and Exclusivity** – The sect considers itself the only group that possesses the truth. Leaving the group puts a person’s salvation at risk. New revelations, usually given to a prophet, founder, or leader, form the basis of their “new truth.”
4. **Rules and Regulations** – Strictly structured autocratic groups operate within a rigid legal framework that governs both spiritual matters and everyday details of life. They are filled with rules and regulations. Practices and procedures established by the leadership control specific aspects of members’ lives and often go to extremes. Sometimes, these restrictions also apply to outsiders visiting the group. It is not uncommon for sects to dictate dress codes, hair length, and types of permitted jewelry—if any are allowed at all. Even groups that do not have an obvious religious uniform or outward symbols often regulate certain aspects of their members’ appearance.
5. **Subjectivity** – Sects place great emphasis on experience, feelings, and

emotions. Personal experience and emotional dominance take precedence. This is especially true for psychotherapeutic groups and self-improvement movements. Subjectivism is closely linked to anti-intellectualism, as these groups seek to suppress rational thought and devalue knowledge and education. Feelings become the highest authority.

6. **Persecution Mentality** – A strong sense of persecution is a hallmark of almost all new religious movements. Their literature, public statements, and internal training emphasize that mainstream Christianity, the media, parents, or the government have singled them out as targets of persecution.
7. **Emphasis on Sanctions** – Sects demand conformity to their established practices and doctrines and quickly impose penalties on non-conforming members. Those who fail to demonstrate proper devotion, ask too many questions, disregard rules, or openly rebel are punished, formally excommunicated, or asked to leave the group. Various control mechanisms are used to ensure members' loyalty. More extreme groups regularly manipulate their members through fear, intimidation, and guilt. Members are often instilled with the fear that leaving the group will result in terrible consequences for themselves, their families, or their friends. Disobedient members may be subjected to emotional public confession and humiliation, including physical punishments such as slapping. Other means of control include signing contracts and making vows of loyalty.
8. **Esotericism** – Sectarian religions are shrouded in secrecy and concealment. Eastern religious sects, in particular, operate with divided levels of truth—an *inner truth* (the real truth) and an *outer truth* (a more appealing but limited and often misleading version).
9. **Emphasis on Laity** – Sects are typically composed of laypeople. They lack paid clergy or professional religious officials, as seen in other religions. However, sects do have a hierarchical structure. Anti-clerical groups emphasize the active participation of all members; everyone is given a role, and every member has equal access to the truth. This opposition to traditional clergy stems from the need of sect founders to justify their separation from mainstream orthodox teachings. Anti-clerical cults often choose not to conduct their religious ceremonies in buildings commonly associated with traditional religions. Instead, they gather in community centers, assembly halls, private homes, or meditation spaces [2].

Categories of Sects

The term *sect* is a useful tool for identifying a complex range of behaviors and traits within a single concept. To understand the diversity of sects and new religious movements, it is helpful to classify them into different categories. Professor Bryan Wilson categorizes sects into groups that oppose the world, those that are indifferent to the world, and those that seek to enhance it [7].

Sects with a negative stance toward the world emphasize the corruption of the world system and the need to be protected from it. They tend to isolate their believers from broader society and establish separate, communal (though not monastic) lifestyles.

Sects that take an indifferent approach to the world tolerate secular society while simultaneously encouraging their followers to strive for a purer and more spiritual life, aiming to be *in the world but not of the world*. Members of such groups primarily interact with one another but typically do not establish separate communities. They engage in normal worldly activities such as employment and education.

Sects that seek to *enhance* the world include groups that consciously aim to increase their enjoyment of participation in broader society. Many of these consider and declare themselves to be non-religious groups. Although some of these groups perceive themselves as being sensitive to society, their ultimate goal is self-transformation and self-improvement [2].

Another classification system is outlined in the book *The Lure of the Cults*, which describes five fundamental categories of new religious movements:

1. Mystical Eastern
2. Deviant Christian
3. Mental-Spiritual or Personality Development
4. Eclectic-Syncretic
5. Psycho-Cultural-Astral [3].

When discussing all religious groups that today fall under the term *sect*, it is necessary to mention a sixth category, which includes institutionalized or established groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Science, and the Unity School of Christianity [2].

No matter what classification system is used or what list of characteristic features is compiled, there will always be gaps. Some classifications may be inadequate, overlap, or even contradict each other. Each sect is unique and requires its own study. However, we must be cautious not to be influenced by

generalized stereotypes—just because a well-known sect exhibits certain traits does not necessarily mean that all groups labeled as sects share those same traits [8].

From a purely academic perspective, the term *sect* can oversimplify a complex phenomenon and obscure significant differences between sectarian groups. However, a Christian observer must always strive to recognize the fundamental patterns of evil and false teachings that are present in all groups that deviate from God's revealed truth.

Conclusion

The effort to define the word *sect* can be very complicated. At different times and in different places, groups such as Lutherans, Mennonites, and Methodists have been labeled as sects. In fact, the entire Christian Church was once considered a sect.

A sect is essentially a small group that believes a larger group is entirely wrong. The early Christians were critical of both pagan Rome and traditional Judaism. Lutherans separated from the Renaissance papacy, Mennonites distanced themselves from all institutionalized churches of the 16th century, and Methodists opposed the moral laxity they perceived in the Anglican Church of the 18th century.

Some cults, over time, contributed to the Christian Church by introducing greater fervor, new understanding, and stronger devotion among their members. Others broke away from Christianity and either established competing institutions or quietly faded away. Every sect, however, presents a potential challenge to the Church by asserting that the Church is mistaken or not what it should be.

It is clear that the Church, being composed of people, is not always what it should be and sometimes makes mistakes. If a group points out the Church's flaws, this does not automatically mean that the group is bad or dangerous. After all, the prophets in the Bible did not hold back when criticizing their contemporaries.

So how can Christians evaluate sects, new religions, and other groups that exhibit sectarian characteristics?

First and foremost, it is essential to compare the teachings of a given group with core Christian doctrines. Despite the differences that exist between Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Catholics, Christians agree on certain

fundamental teachings. Equally important is assessing how a group influences human lives.

As human beings, we are not just intellects without bodies. We have emotional and physical needs. We live within a network of relationships that include family, coworkers, friends, and others. A good religion must have sound doctrine and positively impact the daily lives of its followers.

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