

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Truth about Error

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A phenomenon of the contemporary religious scene is the growth of the heretical cults. Through aggressive propagandizing by means of publications—electronic media such as radio, television, phonograph records, and tapes—and personal contacts, the cults have established amazing numerical growth records. Their growth rates are the envy of the major Protestant denominations, which at present are not even keeping pace with the population expansion. The cults are growing not only in the United States, where most of them have had their start, but also throughout the world. Especially has this growth of the cults been evident in recent years in the traditional missionary areas of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The contemporary growth of the cults has been not only in numbers but also in influence and public acceptance. Modern religious liberalism accepts them all without question as manifestations of contemporary religious life. They are listed without notation of any kind in *The Yearbook of American Churches* and Mead's *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*. A current debate among evangelical Christians centers on classifying Seventh-Day Adventism as a heretical cult or a standard Christian denomination. A leader of a cult within a decade has held a United States cabinet post as secretary. Another serves as governor of a large and strategic state and is a potential presidential candidate of a major party.

Paralleling the contemporary numerical growth of the heretical cults is their proliferation. The cults grow not only by addition but also by multiplication. New cults are springing up constantly. They seem to find fertile soil for development especially in California and Florida, although they spring up anywhere. They find recruits largely among the elderly and the minority groups such as the Negroes. Any idea or issue can serve as the basis for a new cult. One of the most recent is trying to make a religion out of the use of psychedelic drugs.

All of these factors of numerical growth, widespread attention, increased public acceptance, influential leaders, and constant proliferation tend to focus interest upon the cults and to confuse people, including evangelical Christians, about their true character. Where confusion exists error thrives. Therefore, these circumstances amply justify a discussion of the truth about error.

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Definition of Terms

One of the first problems to face is that of definition of terms. At least two terms are in view—*cult* and *sect*. These terms are popularly used interchangeably as basically synonymous. I think a valid and proper distinction of meaning between them can be drawn. This distinction will be clarified in the discussion that follows.

A definition of a cult which I accept is the following from Walter Martin. He says that cults are religious groups holding “to doctrines which are pointedly contradictory to orthodox Christianity and which yet claim the distinction of tracing their origin to orthodox sources.”¹ The various ethnic religions as a result are not properly classified as cults. On the other hand, this definition would classify modern religious liberalism as a cult, which I am convinced evangelical Christians should make a point of doing. Martin later condenses his definition to a religious group which represents a “major deviation from historical orthodox Christianity.”² Modernism or liberal Protestantism still passes the test as a cult.

Gerstner prefers to use the word *sect* for these heretical groups, but he is not as careful to provide a formal definition. He explains that the Roman Catholics apply the term *sect* to all groups other than the Church of Rome, which they view as the church. Liberals frequently apply the term *sect* to all groups because they feel none of them qualifies as the church. “Evangelicals,” he continues, “generally use ‘sect’ when referring to those Christian denominations not regarded as evangelical.... Those which do not hold to evangelical principles are not usually called churches at all, but sects or cults.”³ This is quite vague and confusing.

I prefer to follow Martin in defining a cult as he does, which is essentially how Gerstner defines a sect. I would reserve the term *sect* for groups representing minor deviations from historic orthodox Christianity. For example, with Gerstner, Lindsell, and many others, I would classify Seventh-Day Adventism as a cult. On the other hand, I would classify the Seventh Day Baptists, whose sole divergence from orthodox Christianity is the seventh-day doctrine, as a sect. Similarly, I classify the Jehovah’s Witnesses as a cult; but I would classify the Advent Christian Church, which is orthodox except for some deviations in eschatology, as a sect.

¹ Walter Ralston Martin, *The Rise of the Cults*, pp. 11–12.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ John H. Gerstner, *The Theology of the Major Sects*, p. 9.

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Historical Truths about Cults

Although heresy has been a part of the history of the Christian faith from its beginning, the modern cults are almost exclusively the product of the American ecclesiastical scene. A few of the cults are British in origin—British-Israelism for example—and some have other national origins; but the vast majority developed in the United States. Although new cults are springing up constantly, the major ones had their birth during the nineteenth century. Their growth nationally and their world-wide expansion have come in the twentieth century, especially since World War II; but the major cults began in the nineteenth century.

At least two reasons exist for the rise of the cults in the United States. The first is the traditional American policy of freedom of religion which has been a part of our philosophy of civic life from the settlement of the New World. This policy is expressed governmentally in our constitutional doctrine of the separation of church and state. The established or state church system, even when softened by modern religious toleration laws, is not conducive to the origin and growth of independent movements, whether orthodox or heretical.

The second reason for the rise of the cults in the United States is the frontier spirit and milieu. The fierce independence of the frontier mentality fostered the proliferation not only of the heretical cults but also of orthodox Christian groups. Divisions were more the result of personality clashes and minor doctrinal differences than of major theological cleavage. In addition, the open frontier always beckoned. The dissident separatist and the theological outcast, like their social and economic counterparts, could always move west to the fringe of civilization or beyond and build their own empire. This led the Mormons, for example, to Missouri and Illinois, and finally to Utah.

Doctrinal Truths about Cults

Somewhat bridging the areas of historical and theological truth about the cults is the fact that most of the cults are simply modern versions of ancient heresies faced by the early Christian church. The Christology of Christian Science, for example, is a modern expression of the docetic heresy the Apostle John refuted in his First Epistle (1:1–3; 4:1–3). The Christology of the Jehovah's Witnesses, on the other hand, is a modern form of Arianism proscribed as heretical by the Council of Nicea. The Christian Science emphasis upon the nonreality of evil, disease, and death comes from neo-Platonism, which rests in turn upon Platonic and Zoroastrian dualism with the concepts of the essential evilness of matter.

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Many of the contemporary heretical cults, furthermore, are imbued with the Judaistic and/or the Gnostic spirit that was confronted and refuted primarily by the Apostle Paul. The Sabbathkeeping, the dietary laws, and the legalism of Seventh-Day Adventism, for example, reflect the Judaistic spirit. On the other hand, the emphasis upon going beyond the simplicity of the Christian faith and becoming an initiate into special truths which is found among the Jehovah's Witnesses and also to some extent the Mormons reflect the spirit of Gnosticism.

It is also important to remember that no cult is completely wrong. By definition, a cult is a "major deviation from historical orthodox Christianity," but elements of orthodox Christianity obviously remain. Cults represent a mixture of truth and error, and herein lies their danger. The attention of the unwary can be focussed upon the truth without realizing that it is vitiated or contradicted by the error until the poison is swallowed. Part-truthism is one of Satan's favorite tools.

Practical Truths about Cults

A practical fact concerning many of the contemporary cults is that they have been founded by women or have women prominently connected with their leadership. Examples are Mary Baker Eddy of Christian Science, Ellen G. White of Seventh-Day Adventism, the Fox sisters of Spiritualism, Helena P. Blavatsky and Annie Besant of Theosophy, the Brooks sisters of Divine Science, and Mrs. Charles Ferguson of the School of Practical Christianity. This prominence of women in the cults is understandable in the light of the Scriptural exhortation to "let your women keep silence in the churches" (1 Cor. 14:34) and the example of Paul that "I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (1 Tim. 2:12).

Many persons are misled by the sincerity, enthusiasm, and missionary zeal of some adherents to the cults, concluding from these external things that the system must be true. Such dedication by exponents of error should be a rebuke to complacent Christians. May God use it to goad us into consistent personal witnessing. But these traits are not essential ingredients of truth. The crew of the airship *Enola Gay* flew to their deaths in the middle of the Sahara Desert far beyond their home base, sincerely but mistakenly believing that the airport still lay ahead of them. Even the cults do not match the dedication and self-sacrifice of the atheistic Communists. Truth resides in content, not in attitude.

Many persons also are misled by the exemplary lives and good works of some adherents to the cults into concluding that the system must be true. Admirable as such things are, they are not essential ingredients of truth. The Pharisees of Jesus' day were good people, but He likened them to "whited sepulchres" (Matt. 23:27). In this connection Paul instructs us: "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into

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the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:13–15).

Conclusion

Christians should not be dismayed by the contemporary growth and proliferation of the heretical cults. This is to be expected as the Christian church moves into the last days of its formation (cp. 1 Tim. 4:1–3; 2 Tim. 3:1–8; 2 Pet. 2:1–3; Jude 4, 8, 10–12, 16–19). Furthermore, truth by its nature is singular and unitary, while error is multifarious and multitudinous. Finally, Christians can be prepared to withstand the onslaught of the cults by following Peter's injunction to "sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (1 Pet. 3:15) and John's instructions to "believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1). This is the truth about error.⁴

⁴ Witmer, J. A. (1967). "The Truth about Error." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 124, 248–253.