

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH AND THE NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS: TOWARDS THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

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FOR MORE than a decade Western society, in particular the United States of America,¹ has seen the rise and proliferation of religious and spiritual groups which the public has undiscerningly and indiscriminately labeled "cults." Many of the adherents of these new groups have come from the background of the traditional Christian churches. Most of them, by abandoning the beliefs and practices of their forefathers, have passed a negative judgment on the Christian Church and its relevance to contemporary life. The so-called cults have often been in the public eye because of the legal actions and Congressional investigations instigated by anticult organizations. Anguished parents, whose children have become cult members, have turned to self-styled deprogrammers, who have at times operated outside both civil and moral law. Yet the mainline Christian response to the new religions can, with few exceptions, be categorized as one of neglect and apathy. Though the churches have made extensive efforts to come to grips with the cultural upheavals of the mid-1960's,² their attempts to meet the challenge of the cults have, on the whole, been slow, sporadic, and superficial. Many Christians, theologians included, have failed to grasp the significance of the new religious movements, which are already leaving an impact on society at large and on Christianity itself. It is unfortunate that we still lack a systematic treatment of the theological implications of these movements.

The only concerted Christian response has come from evangelical Christianity, which has directed a considerable amount of literature³ to

¹ See *The Spiritual Community Guide* (San Rafael, Calif.: Spiritual Community, 1978) and Gordon Melton, *The Encyclopedia of American Religions 2* (Wilmington, N.C.: McGrath, 1978). For lists of similar groups outside the United States, cf. *A Pilgrim's Guide to Planet Earth* (San Rafael: Spiritual Community, 1978). The periodical *New Religious Movements Up-Date*, published in Denmark, contains accounts and reports on the new religions in Europe and in the United States. G. Guizzardi's "New Religious Phenomena in Italy," *Archives des sciences sociales des religions* 42 (1976) 96-116, gives a summary of the Italian scene.

² Cf. *The New Religious Consciousness*, ed. Charles Glock and Robert Bellah (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1976) 205-44.

³ Some of the more recent works are : K. Boa, *Cults, World Religions and You* (Wheaton, Ill.; Victor, 1979); R. Enroth, *Youth, Brainwashing and the Cults* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); Joel MacCollam, *Carnival of Souls, Religious Cults and Young People* (New York: Seabury, 1979); and Pat Means, *The Mystical Maze: A Guidebook through the Mindfields of Eastern Mysticism* (San Bernardino, Calif.: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1976).

counteract cultic activity and has inspired the founding of resource centers and counseling programs aimed at informing the public of the dangers of the cults and at reclaiming those who have become involved in them.⁴ The evangelicals have developed a systematic way of dealing with the cults—through a doctrinal analysis of the main beliefs of the new religious movements and an evaluation of these beliefs in the light of the Bible.⁵ The practical goal of evangelization, largely unco-ordinated and uneven, has often assumed the posture of an anticult movement ready to wage war against apostates and unbelievers.

Two major theses lie at the base of the evangelical rejoinder to the new religions. First, the cults are interpreted as a successful attempt at brainwashing. It is claimed that those who have joined a cult have succumbed to the hypnotic mind-control machinations of pseudo-religious leaders whose intentions and moral lives are open to suspicion. This theory is often used to justify kidnapping and deprogramming.⁶ This explanation of cults is psychological rather than theological. Its major flaw is that it implicitly tends to deny both free will and the possibility of conversion. While evangelical writers do not deny these qualities, some psychologists have done so explicitly.⁷ From a theological point of view, free will is a requisite for a person's moral response to God's call.⁸ Further, the biblical emphasis on *metanoia* is central to the Christian faith. No understanding of the cults is possible without some knowledge of the theology of conversion.⁹ The psychological theory of brainwashing by itself cannot explain the successful rise of the new religious movements.

The second interpretation which evangelicals advance explains the rise of the new religions as an apocalyptic sign that the end of the world is near; cults become an expression of the Antichrist. Satan is seen as

⁴ The Spiritual Counterfeits Project, a branch of the Berkeley Christian Coalition (Berkeley, Calif.), is the best known in the field. Others include the American Family Foundation (Mass.), Acts 17 (Calif.), Christian Apologetics: Research and Information Service (Calif.), Christian Outreach to Cults and Occult (Wash.), Institute of Contemporary Christianity (N.J.), Jesus People Information Service (Calif.), Jesus People U.S.A. (Ill.), and Reconciliation Associates (Mass.).

⁵ The classical textbooks of this approach are still Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), and John H. Gerstner, *The Theology of the Major Sects* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960).

⁶ This is the view of MacCollam (n. 3 above).

⁷ See Paul A. Verdier, *Brainwashing and the Cults* (N. Hollywood: Wilshire, 1977) esp. 88 and 94.

⁸ Cf. the essays on "Freedom" in Karl Rahner, ed., *Sacramentum mundi* 2 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 349-62.

⁹ Cf. André Feuillet, "Metanoia," *Sacramentum mundi* 4, 16-22. For a theology of conversion, see *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*, ed. Walter E. Conn (New York: Alba, 1978) esp. 3-61 and 203-77. *Conversion Careers: In and Out of the New Religions*, ed. James T. Richardson (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1978), provides some useful insights into the conversion processes of those who join the new religions.

predominating our culture, and the cults are but one example of satanic influence. Like the previous theory, this explanation presents serious problems. Its millenarian and apocalyptic vision, a world view shared by several of the new cults themselves, is surely theologically debatable, as is the insistence that Satan dominates the world of our times. Alternative theologies are available, explaining the relation between the Christian Church and the world without giving Satan the upper hand.¹⁰ Blaming the devil for the rise and success of the new religions provides a shallow answer to a contemporary religious crisis, the roots of which can be placed more realistically in the deep-felt questing of the human spirit and in God's call to salvation, which is extended to all, sometimes in mysterious ways.

The above interpretations of the cults are related in that the anticult movement can conceive of brainwashing as a satanic activity. Thus the change that occurs in people when they become cult members is likened to demonic possession. As Anson Shupe has observed, deprogramming can be seen as a rite of exorcism.¹¹ Both approaches, taken separately or together, are characterized by a lack of serious endeavor to study the cults objectively, to explore their religious features, and to understand the operative religious dynamism so apparent in their activities. The study of the cults has been viewed as a dangerous pursuit which might open up the researcher to demonic influences. The uneasiness and suspicion with which the deprogrammers and their allies view scholars studying the new religions can be understood in the light of the evangelical perspective on cults. Theories of brainwashing and satanic influence do not need to be buttressed by much knowledge of the cults. As David Breeze assures us in *Know the Marks of the Cults*,¹² there is no need to spend time studying them, for we know that they are false and deceitful and our main task is to refute their errors.

The evangelical approach to the new religions offers no theological analysis or interpretation of this important phenomenon of our times. Its spirit is condemnatory, its attitude hostile, and its demeanor somewhat supercilious. Surely there is a better Christian procedure for discerning the import of the new religious movements, an approach which would rely on solid biblical and theological foundations and which is characterized by empathetic understanding, by a studied effort to respond and adapt to current changes in our culture, and by a genuine spirit of self-reform and growth in one's religious faith.

¹⁰ Vatican Council II's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" is an excellent example; cf. *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: America, 1966) 199 ff.

¹¹ "Deprogramming: The New Exorcism," *American Behavioral Scientist* 20 (1977) 941-56.

¹² Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1978.

This paper attempts to lay the foundation for such an approach. It will first explore the theological issues which the cults have brought to the fore, giving practical guidelines and suggestions about what the Christian reaction to the new religions should be. Then several models for understanding the cults will be briefly sketched. The goal of these reflections is mainly to open avenues for exchange of ideas and speculation leading to a Christian theology of the new religious and spiritual movements of our times.

THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

Before a Christian response to the new religious movements can be outlined, the theological problems have to be located and clearly understood. Four major questions should be the focus of theological investigation: (1) Why should the Christian Church be concerned with the new religions? (2) How is the Christian Church related to these movements? (3) What attitudes should a Christian foster towards them? (4) What activity should the Church direct towards them?

Christian Concern with the New Religions

There are several reasons why the Church should be concerned with the rise and influence of the new religious movements. First, the cults are developing their own theologies, which at times run counter to the religious teachings and assumptions of the mainline Christian denominations. Thus, one can detect a general theory, commonly shared by many of the new religions, about the relation between experience and theological reflection and knowledge. The major tenet inculcated by these new religious groups is that religious knowledge which stems from one's experience is as important as knowledge which has been traditionally handed down, if not more so.¹³ The Christian Church seems to have paid little attention to personal religious experience and to have given priority to tradition and authority. Consequently, a theology of religious experience is still in the making.¹⁴ The cults may be filling a theological need here, namely, that of specifying the role of religious experience in one's life.

Further, some of the new religions are elaborating a theological system aimed at explaining, rightly or wrongly, some areas which Christianity

¹³ I have already made this point in my article "Contemporary Religious and Spiritual Movements: Problems of Research and Classification." This paper was delivered at the Second International Symposium on Belief: The Emerging Religious Consciousness of Our Times, held in Vienna, January 1975. The paper was published in the Proceedings, *Vecchi e nuovi Dei*, ed. R. Caporale (Turin: Valentino, 1976).

¹⁴ For some initial work in this area, see Rosemary Haughton, *The Theology of Experience* (Paramus, N.J.: Newman, 1972), and Donald Gelpi, *Experiencing God: A Theology of Human Experience* (New York: Paulist, 1978).

may have left unanswered. For example, Christianity teaches that the coming of Christ brought salvation once and for all. During Advent most mainline Christian Churches select passages from Isaiah for their liturgical services. These readings often depict the coming Messiah as the source not only of spiritual renewal but also of material well-being.¹⁵ Yet, one could argue, almost two thousand years have passed since Christ's coming and there seems to be no visible sign of material transformation. The theology of the Unification Church, for example, claims to have solved the problem by pointing out that Christ achieved *spiritual* salvation, while the Rev. Moon has the divine commission to bring about *physical* salvation.¹⁶ The theological appeal of the Unification Church is that it furnishes a practical program for the completion of what Christ started but never fully achieved.¹⁷ Another example is the attempt of many Hindu groups, such as the Divine Light Mission, to incorporate world religions into the system. Guru Maharaj Ji's talks are at times filled with references to Christ, Buddha, and Muhammad.¹⁸ Those who join such groups are offered a solution to the problem of religious diversity. In the last fifteen years or so, many colleges, universities, and high schools have introduced courses on world religions. Understandably, the method followed was adopted from the social sciences, history, or phenomenology. Students who attended these classes learned about the religious beliefs and practices of world religions but were rarely offered an ideological framework for understanding the conflicting mass of religious data. They could not comprehend the variety of world religions from one particular belief system, since such an understanding was not provided on the local parish level. The Eastern religions in our midst may be offering their members a popular theology of religions. Hence some of the new religions are proposing viable theological options on important issues which the Christian Church has not dealt with at the level of the average parishioner.

Second, the Christian churches are already being influenced by the new religious movements. One has only to mention "Christian Zen" and

¹⁵ See, e.g., Isa 2:1-5, 11:1-10, and 35:1-6, 10, which are assigned to be read respectively on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Sundays of Advent in the Roman Catholic Lectionary.

¹⁶ *The Divine Principle* (5th ed.; New York: Holy Spirit Assn. for the Unification of World Christianity, 1977) 139 ff.

¹⁷ The Christian who reads *The Divine Principle* and hears lectures on it will tend to conclude that Christ's mission was a failure. Unification Church apologists argue that his mission was just incomplete. Unification theology does not incorporate the passion and death of Jesus as part of Christ's salvific event (cf. *ibid.* 142-47). Consequently, Moonies have to radically reinterpret God's plan of salvation through Christ.

¹⁸ These talks are reproduced in the magazine *And It Is Divine* (now extinct) and in the bimonthly *Divine Times*.

"Christian Yoga"¹⁹ to realize that Eastern religions are having a real and lasting impact on Christian thought. Similarly, the charismatic movement, as part of the new religious scene, is exerting a powerful influence on current religious trends. The charismatics, who generally keep their affiliation with the church of their upbringing, are a strong contributing force to the shift to conservatism of the mainline Christian churches. Specifically, one element in the Catholic charismatic renewal provides a good illustration of the move towards more conservative theological positions. One of the most noticeable contributions of Catholic charismatics has been the many liturgical and devotional hymns, composed over the last decade, which are used regularly in Sunday parish worship. One feature of charismatic hymnology is that the words are frequently quoted verbatim from the Bible. Because the average Catholic congregation is not accustomed to private reading of the Bible, and because biblical exegesis has not reached the Catholic masses, charismatic songs tend to carry with them the message of Bible fundamentalism. This approach is in harmony with evangelical Christianity. Further, because the average Catholic is unequipped to understand modern scriptural exegesis (which has been encouraged by Pius XII²⁰ and by Vatican Council II²¹), he or she runs the risk of confusing the biblical message with the cultural garb in which it is dressed. Biblical fundamentalism has led Christians to believe that the cultural conditions portrayed in the Bible are the best, if not the only possible, Christian position. Such an assumption has led evangelicals to resuscitate the debate between religion and science, especially on the question of evolution, and to canonize such cultural conditions in biblical times as St. Paul's views on the relationship between the sexes. It is therefore not surprising that the modern world is looked upon as an arena congenial to Satan's work and that cultural and social changes are so readily called satanic. These attitudes are to some degree part of the Catholic charismatic movement.²² Because charismatics do not break away from their respective denominations, their theological views are part and parcel of mainstream Christianity and are likely to affect the course of the Christian Church as a whole.

Third, the Christian Church and the new religious movements share a number of religious practices, concerns, and interests. Many people

¹⁹ *The Annual Directory, Houses of Prayer 1979-80* (Albany, N.Y.: Clarity Publishing) lists several retreat houses which incorporate Eastern techniques in their spirituality.

²⁰ Encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943).

²¹ Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, no. 12.

²² One should note that not all charismatics fit into this mold. Gelpi is one of the more prominent exceptions; see his *Pentecostalism: A Theological Viewpoint* (New York: Paulist, 1971) and *Pentecostal Piety* (New York: Paulist, 1972).

involved in the cults are in search of spiritual direction and guidance. Gurus tend to fulfil the role of teachers of the spiritual life. Spiritual direction has been central to several Christian churches, most clearly in the Roman Catholic tradition, where it forms an integral part of the lives of members of religious orders and congregations and where it often figures prominently in retreats organized for the laity.²³ One can also refer to the elaboration of ritual in some of the new religions, such as the "arti" performed by the members of the Divine Light Mission and group chanting by the Hare Krishnas. These rituals contain such classical religious elements as the worship and praise of God and revering an accepted prophet. The main concerns of the new religious movements have been part of the theological preoccupations of the Christian churches: the place of the human person in the universe, the relation between the individual and God or the ultimate reality, the nature of religious commitment, the goal of life, and the question of life after death. The Christian Church may claim to have provided satisfactory answers to these perennial questions, but it cannot ignore the alternative solutions many Christians are exploring.

Fourth, the cults are becoming a popular avenue for East-West contact. In the field of Christian relations with the great religions, the work of the World Council of Churches and of the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Christians in fostering dialogue has encouraged understanding between the many faiths of humankind. Attempts to develop Indian²⁴ and African²⁵ Christian theologies which have their roots in the religious traditions of indigenous peoples have become common. Endeavors of theologians in these fields have not, however, reached the average Christian. The way in which Christians are acquiring an awareness of the presence and possible usefulness of Eastern thought and practice is through the Eastern religious movements in our midst, an unconscious dialogue, unplanned and unstructured—qualities which might be to its advantage, though it also lacks guidance and depth. Because comparisons between Eastern and Western religious beliefs and practices made on the popular level are frequently superficial, misunderstandings and misinterpretations both of Eastern religions and of Christianity can be the unwanted result. The new religions in the West can provide an arena for East-West dialogue on a large scale. It is certainly to the advantage of the Christian Church that it participate fully in such a dialogue.

Fifth, the rise and growth of the new religious and spiritual movements

²³ Cf., e.g., John English, S.J. *Spiritual Freedom* (Guelph, Ont.: Loyola House, 1975).

²⁴ Robin Boyd's *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1969) is a good introduction to this relatively new missionary enterprise.

²⁵ Cf. Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology: Adaptation or Incarnation* (London: Chapman, 1975).

is not just an external development occurring outside the Christian context. It also has a strong internal base. The charismatic movement, for example, has roots both in Christian theology and practice and in the new religious consciousness. Many of the social and psychological forces which spurred the charismatic renewal into being are also responsible for the spread of the Eastern religious groups. Other movements which are also based on Christian theology are the "Basic Christian Communities,"²⁶ the "Focolari" movement,²⁷ and the many cult-like devotional beliefs and practices relating to the Virgin Mary which have blossomed in the last decade.²⁸ The Christian Church cannot realistically view the new religions as an outside phenomenon with little or no impact on Christian life and the development of Christianity as a whole.

Finally, there are pastoral reasons why the Christian Church cannot ignore the new cults. The success of the new religions challenges the effectiveness of Christian ministry. Those who are considering joining one of the new groups, those who have given up their allegiance to the cult which recruited them, and the parents of those who are committed to one of the new religions should all be the object of pastoral concern and action. Unfortunately, little has been done to include them in the Church's ministry. The Christian who faithfully attempts to carry out his or her ministry in this respect does not even have the ideological and theological framework to begin the task. The evangelical approach, which stresses brainwashing and Satan's influence, is certainly not the best counseling technique for the Christian minister.

Relation of the Christian Church to the New Religions

The second area requiring theological investigation is the relationship between the Christian Church and the new religious movements. The immediate tendency of a Christian is to look on the members of the new religions as being outside the Church. Those who abandon the faith of their parents to join one of the cults are very easily called heretics, apostates, or pagans. This negative designation has the effect of curtailing our understanding. Is there any sense in which the new religions can be conceived as being part of the Church? Do we have theological categories to include the new religious and spiritual groups as part of the Church's economy of salvation? Can the work of theologians investigating the

²⁶ There is an increasing literature on this topic; see D. Clark, *Basic Communities: Towards an Alternative Society* (London: SPCK, 1977). The periodical *Teaching All Nations* (published in the Philippines) 15, no. 3 (1978) contains several articles on basic communities and a short bibliography.

²⁷ John Reilly, "The Focolari Movement," *Teaching All Nations* 15, no. 4 (1978) 240-51.

²⁸ For one of the most prominent examples, see P. Nobile, "Our Lady of Bayside," *New York* 11 (Dec. 11, 1978) 57-60.

relationship between Christianity and the great religions also include the new religions?

It is possible to see the new religions, especially those which derive from Christianity, as an extension of the Church, its experimental branch or vanguard. In an age of fast social and cultural change, such experimentation is inevitable if the Church is to maintain its relevance and to adapt itself to developing human conditions. Experiments play an important part in the process of discovery and growth, even if they have no lasting value in themselves and are later judged to be defective. Further, religious experimentation is closely related to faith. Experimentation is always a risk, requiring courage and determination but often leaving the experimenter in doubt. The Christian life of faith is also one of risk. Faith and doubt are inseparably linked. It takes courage to believe.²⁹ Because Christians have been originally acquiring their faith not principally by conversion but through the process of enculturation, the experience of risk has ceased to be an operating factor in the life of many Christians. Faith frequently becomes sheer custom, and to say "I believe" no longer involves a courageous act. But the adherents of the new religious movements have taken a very risky step: they have decided to accept a belief system in spite of the opposition and persecution of their immediate family and society at large. The words of a member of the Unification Church express this risk in no uncertain terms: "I am not absolutely sure," he said, "that the Rev. Moon is the Messiah, but I am prepared to bet my money on it."³⁰ One can also add that conversion, *metanoia*, is a key characteristic of the members of the new cults, in sharp contrast to many Christians who have not experienced a deep-felt conversion to God.

The new movements mirror the Christian Church, reflecting some of its major features while exhibiting both the virtues and the faults of the Christian community. As one scholar remarked, "when Churches criticize movements like the Jesus People or Transcendental Meditation or Pentecostalism, for example, they are drawing portraits of themselves."³¹

Christian Attitudes towards the New Religions

The third area of theological study is the attitude Christians should have towards the new religious and spiritual movements. There are three major positions a Christian can adopt.³² The first is characterized by

²⁹ See Gerhard Ebeling, "The Courage of Faith," in *Toward a Theology of Christian Faith*, ed. Michael Mooney et al. (New York: Kenedy, 1968) 323-32; Karl Rahner, *Meditation on Freedom and the Spirit* (London: Burns & Oates, 1977) esp. 7-29.

³⁰ This comment was made at an informal seminar, attended by this author, held at the Unification Church seminary in Barrytown, N.Y., in November 1979.

³¹ Walter George Muelder, "What Should Be the Churches' Response to the Religious Rebirth?" *Encounter* 39 (1978) 1.

³² I am relying here on Raimundo Panikkar's analysis in *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 1978) xiv-xix.

exclusivism. The believer of one particular religion strongly maintains that all other religions are false. Insistence on the truth of one's religion is integral to any belief system. Many of the members of the new religions are themselves appropriating this exclusive attitude. Thus, members of the Divine Light Mission insist that, even though all paths might lead to God, their approach is the best and the most certain way to the divine. Such exclusiveness may be a necessary position for justifying one's status in the new religion; as Panikkar has remarked, this "attitude has a certain element of heroism in it."³³ Such an attitude might bestow certainty on the believers of a particular religious tradition, but only at the risk of encouraging an uncompromising and intolerant view of the position of others. Further, the exclusivist approach is fraught with dangers: spiritual pride, naive and uncritical acceptance of one's own position, lack of openness, undue restriction on God's grace, and absence of Christian love. The attacks which many evangelicals have directed against the new religions are often indicative of this mentality.

A second way of handling the diverse religions and creeds, including the new movements, is to affirm that all run parallel to one another and that they will converge at the end of time. Thus, all religions should maintain their own course and there should be no mutual interference, borrowings, or proselytizing. The task of the Christian would be to become a better Christian; of the Hindu, to be a better Hindu. This method has some positive elements to recommend it: respecting different religious traditions and eschewing condemnation of others, it avoids spurious syncretisms and encourages self-reform. It is, unfortunately, an unrealistic approach. Religions cannot live in isolation any longer. Historically, we know that many religions have been influenced by others. One would think that co-operation and dialogue between the different religions might lead to mutual influences, but this approach is definitely not applicable to the new movements, because these cannot survive without some form of evangelization or proselytization. Besides, mutual borrowings between Christianity and the new religions have already taken place and any approach to the cults must take this phenomenon for granted.

The third attitude is one of inclusiveness. The scholar who adopts this approach affirms that other belief systems do contain truths which can be interpreted so as to make them conform to one's own religious tradition. The advantage of this approach is that it tolerates others, avoids condemnation, and considers the possibility of entering into communion with other faiths. But like the first two attitudes, this approach has some serious problems: degenerating into a kind of "relativism" where truth becomes one thing for the Christian and quite another for

³³ *Ibid.* xv.

the Hindu or the Buddhist, and fostering a condescending atmosphere where one's position is interpreted as including and evaluating everything else. Several elements of this approach are found in the contemporary Christian response to world religions. Many theologians have no difficulty admitting that religious truths are found in the different faiths of human-kind.³⁴ Christian scholars, comparing their faith with those of others, have noted that definite points of contact exist between the respective belief systems.³⁵ In spite of its flaws, this approach is more conducive to understanding than the exclusivist and parallel paths outlined above. In spite of its limitations, it proposes a theologically sound view of God's revelation and activity in the world, one which with some modifications could be tentatively applied to the new religious movements. Some elements of truths found in the new religions might thus be seen as signs of God's revelatory activity in our times, though the validity of this notion will have to be determined after further study is carried out on the new movements.

Christian Action towards the New Religions

Finally, the Christian practical reaction to the new religious movements must be considered. For the Church to respond fully to the presence and influence of the cults, some program of action has to be developed. Two main areas of concern require consideration. First, should one construct preventive measures against the cults? Certain prevention techniques are already in existence: minicourses on the cults and their dangers in parish-run schools, talks geared to inform and forewarn students who attend Sunday School, and popular literature against the new religions. In general, all these measures have been negatively oriented. They have presented a terrifying picture of the cults as deceiving and victimizing those who eventually fall under their sway. This is an exaggerated and overgeneralized view of the situation: not many cults indulge in clearly deceptive recruiting techniques; and though much of the anticult propaganda assumes that only young people join the new religions, it is certainly not a universal phenomenon. Many of the people involved in occult activities and in human growth movements are adults, well above the age of college students.

It is difficult to determine to what degree this kind of propaganda against the cults has helped in preventing people from becoming involved in them. The bad press which the new movements have been given may

³⁴ This attitude, expressed by many theologians, also found its way into Vatican Council II's "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (Abbott, *Documents* 660 ff.).

³⁵ See, e.g., M. Dhavamony, "Christian Approaches to Hinduism: Points of Contact and Difficulties," *Gregorianum* 53 (1972) 89-116, and Paul Martinson, "Wisdom and Love as a Basis for Preaching in Buddhism and Christianity," *Dialog* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1978) 174-80.

have driven some people to join groups whose Christian affiliation has mollified their parents' concern. Regrettably, the countercult activity has largely been operating with the assumption that the cults are a form of brainwashing or that their enticement is the devil's work. It seems appropriate that any Christian preventive method against the cults should (1) contain no half-truths but the whole picture, (2) open up possibilities within one's respective tradition for the inclusion of the good and desirable features found in the new movements, (3) develop some theoretical models for handling the religious pluralism of our age,³⁶ and (4) dwell on the need for self-growth and self-critique as well as criticism of others.

The second area of concern is cult membership itself. Many local and national organizations have come into being during the last few years to deal with some of the problems brought about by cult membership.³⁷ Some of these organizations have been mainly concerned with ways by which people can be induced, by force if necessary, to abandon their new commitment. The majority of them have been founded either by relatives of those who have joined the new religions or by former cult members. Several broad types of groups involved in such activity can be distinguished: deprogrammers, counselors, mediators, and spiritual directors.

Deprogrammers have at times resorted to kidnapping cult members and deprogramming them against their wills.³⁸ These techniques have created legal debates and psychological problems³⁹ as well as moral issues concerning the religious freedom of young adults. The religious consequences of deprogramming are still unclear. One thing is certain: deprogramming has not answered the legitimate religious quest of those who had become cult members.⁴⁰ Moreover, the fear of being kidnapped has reached paranoid proportions in several of the new religions, making

³⁶ Many members of the new religious movements are acquiring a mentality that looks on outsiders as evil forces. It is possible that one reason why this judgmental framework develops is because people find it difficult to deal with the problem of pluralistic forms of religious beliefs and experiences.

³⁷ No complete list of such organizations seems to exist. Some of them come into being only temporarily to deal with specific problems. Among the most publicized of these anticult organizations are the International Foundation for Individual Freedom (Tex.), the Committee of Concerned Citizens (Md.), and the newly founded American Family Foundation (Mass.).

³⁸ One of the first books on the subject is Ted Patrick and Tom Dulak, *Let Our Children Go* (New York: Dutton, 1976).

³⁹ Cf. Thomas Robbins, *Civil Liberties, "Brainwashing" and "Cults": A Select Annotated Bibliography* (Berkeley: Program for the Study of New Religious Movements, 1979).

⁴⁰ Several books by former cult members have been written giving an account of what life is like in a cult. In general, these books lack depth and fail to tackle the main religious issues which membership in the new religious movements has raised. Cf., e.g., Christopher Edwards, *Crazy for God* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979), and Barbara and Betty Underwood, *Hostage for Heaven* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1979).

them more headstrong and intransigent.

Among counselors, one approach aims to persuade the cult members to consider the negative aspects of their new commitment, to evaluate their decision outside the influence of their confreres, and ultimately to renounce their allegiance.⁴¹ Rejecting kidnapping and violent deprogramming, this method relies on the persuasive abilities of the counselor. Like deprogramming, it is an anticult strategy, because it leans heavily on the exposition of the negative features of cult life, especially those which relate to the leaders and financial management. Its advantages are that it endeavors to appeal to reason and that it brings to light some aspects of cult membership which were unknown or ignored by the members themselves. It is not, however, immune from problems. For instance, one is not sure whether deceptive means are used to lure people into the counselor's office. Further, this method seems to assume that all those who have joined one of the new religious movements have been recruited through forceful or deceptive tactics and have then been brainwashed and indoctrinated. Another counseling approach carries with it the connotation that participation in the new religions is symptomatic of mental illness.⁴² The counseling method is a responsible answer to *some* of the serious difficulties which the new movements have unearthed, but from a Christian point of view its main flaw is that it often bypasses the "religious" issues raised by the new cults. The implicit assumption in so many counseling techniques is that religious expressions are but symptoms of deeply-rooted psychological and social problems. Hence one is faced with the problem of an approach which not only eschews the religious quest but is ultimately reductionistic.⁴³

A third type of response which the new religious movements have engendered is a mediation service.⁴⁴ The task of the mediator is to locate the person who has joined a new religion, contact all parties concerned, and arrange for a meeting. Tensions between the members of the new groups and their parents have been worsened by kidnapping and deprogramming procedures. Re-establishing mutual trust and understanding respects the individual freedom of all concerned and makes no attempt

⁴¹ The Freedom Counseling Center of Burlingame, Calif., is probably the only organization of its kind.

⁴² This seems to be a position commonly held by such groups as Psychologists in Action (Calif.), the American Family Foundation, and the Committee for Concerned Citizens. That the new religious movements have raised serious mental-health problems is an accepted tenet also in the scholarly world; see Dick Anthony, "The Fact Pattern behind the Deprogramming Controversy: An Analysis and an Alternative," *Review of Law and Social Change* 9 (1979-80) 73-89.

⁴³ Dick Anthony's proposal (n. 42 above) may be a welcome exception. He proposes that a "non-ideological counseling program based upon objective scholarship" be started.

⁴⁴ The Bay Area Interfaith Council of California runs a mediation service of this kind.

to pass judgment on the new religions or to use force to reconvert the cult member to his or her former belief system. Such mediation is pastorally oriented and should be incorporated in any genuine Christian action with regard to the new movements. One has to caution, however, that a mediation service can be superficial. In their effort to comfort both sides and to create an atmosphere of peace and harmony, mediators might ignore, minimize, or reject those undesirable qualities in the new religions which have become the just concern of parents. Some members of the new religions are fostering an exclusivistic mentality which labels the world outside the cult as either satanic or evil. Others have lost all interest in social, political, and humanitarian activities. Still others have undergone personality changes which are a cause for worry to even an amateur psychologist. To assume that all the new religious movements are viable options in a person's religious quest and merit full approval is just as naive as to state that they are one and all deceptive organizations and that all their members have to be rescued.

Finally, projects have recently come into being whose goal is to help people who have already left the cult or who are contemplating the idea of abandoning their commitment.⁴⁵ Leaving a new religious movement can be a painful experience. Losing the attachments to other group members and the security offered by the cult is the greatest difficulty a member has to overcome when leaving the group. For those members who had discovered some satisfaction of their religious needs in the group they had joined, finding a spiritual alternative is no easy task. Religious counseling might be just as necessary as psychological therapy. The originators of this ministry, who are often former cult members themselves, have conducted meetings which include a mutual sharing of the problems encountered in the new religions and of the religious aspirations of those who join them in the first place. The moderators of such gatherings play a leadership role and act as counselors or advisors on an individual basis. The interesting feature of this enterprise is that it clearly disproves the basic tenet of the anticult movement, namely, that people, especially youngsters, are cajoled forcefully and deceitfully into the cults and that once they are hooked into the system they may find it impossible to leave. Meetings held under auspices of this project show that the theory of mind control or manipulation is not universally applicable. Here one comes into contact with people who have voluntarily joined a cult and later left it without outside assistance, and with others who are still members and yet have the intellectual ability and freedom to evaluate their state within the cult and to consider the possibility of renouncing

⁴⁵ *Sorting It Out* (Berkeley) and *Shekinah Project* (San Francisco) are two recently started projects which show concern for the spiritual needs of those who have left one of the new religious movements.

their commitment. Further, this approach differs from the deprogramming and psychological counseling techniques in that it gives priority to the religious and/or spiritual aspirations of cult members. Its basic goal, like that of mediation, is service without any strings attached. It is, therefore, a method compatible with the Christian spirit, but its dangers are all too obvious. Because it is essentially an attempt at self-help, it might become a classic example of the blind leading the blind. It is doubtful whether most of the religious problems which are apparent in the new movements can be solved without expert advice or professional guidance. In spite of these deficiencies, this approach towards ex-cultists and some cult members is fulfilling a service which has so far been neglected.

The activity of the Christian Church with regard to the new religions can easily be interpreted as propaganda and proselytism. Membership in a cult goes hand in hand with a disillusionment with the traditional churches. But in practice one can suggest a number of lines of action which seem appropriate in the Christian context. First, opportunities could be opened up both on college campuses and in parishes to make Christians aware of, and to help them experience if they so desire, a wider variety of religious and spiritual practices. Organizational control should be kept to a minimum. Second, a change of attitude towards both Christianity itself and the new religions is necessary. Tolerance, respect, and understanding of the varieties of experiences possible within the Christian tradition should be included in the traditional list of Christian virtues. The Christian evaluation of the new religious movements should be honest and fair, taking into account both the negative and the positive features of the cults. Third, the attitude towards the cults most compatible with the Christian spirit is that of service or ministry, not fear and condemnation. Finally, the last two types of responses mentioned above should be encouraged, even sponsored. In general, the Christian reaction to the new religious movements should be characterized by ministry. Service without proselytizing—a service which flows from one's own deep religious commitment, which shows respect for other people's dedication and commitment, and which offers selfless assistance to those cult members who wish to reconsider their status—is the proper Christian reply to the rise and growth of religions and spiritual movements in our times.

MODELS FOR THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

The only pervasive model found in current Christian literature for understanding the new religious movements is the evangelical theory that the cults are Satan's work. The effect of this approach in preventing people from joining the new movements is debatable. It is useless when applied to those who are already members. As a counseling technique for

helping parents, its consequences can only be disastrous. We propose here the outlines of six models for understanding the presence of the cults and their relation to the Christian Church. Such models are simply tools for understanding and for action. They do not solve problems but rather provide the ideological framework for action.

The cults may be seen as "signs of the times" in the sense used by Vatican Council II.⁴⁶ Basically, this means that the rise and growth of the new religions are seen as human signs and events manifesting God's will or direction to His people. The cults are thus reactions to contemporary social, cultural, and religious conditions and have a revelatory meaning for the Christian Church. This model can be further developed by examining the relation of the Church and the world in a positive way.

A second model, found especially in Roman Catholic theology, is the fulfilment theory.⁴⁷ The cults can be viewed as contemporary means for preparing many people for Christianity. The assumption is that a large percentage of those who become cult members have had a shallow Christian foundation and that their commitment to one of the new religions is a step towards their reincorporation into Christianity. This model has often been discussed under the rubric of the "anonymous Christian" and it may be applicable not only to Hindus, Buddhists, etc., but also to the Hare Krishnas, the "Moonies," and others.

The new religious movements can further be looked upon as an educative tool in the hands of Christianity.⁴⁸ They provide a mechanism for the Church to examine herself, to study her tradition at greater depth, and to evaluate her effectiveness as a sign of God's presence in the world. The cults can indirectly teach us that Christian life and practice are in constant need of critical reflection. They point to where the Church has failed in her ministry. They furnish Christians with a learning experience which can contribute to the vitality of the Church in our times.

Two positive elements found in many of the new religious movements provide two more models to help us understand their success and their possible impact. The stress on spiritual growth and development, a characteristic feature of the new movements, is certainly not unknown in Christian tradition and experience. The cults attempt to satisfy the human need for spirituality. The study of the spirituality of the new religious movements will enhance dialogue and deepen our understanding, because it will illuminate the common features shared by those

⁴⁶ Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 4.

⁴⁷ Cf. P. Schreiner, "Roman Catholic Theology and Non-Christian Religions," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 6 (1969) 376-99. Howard A. Wilson, *Invasion from the East* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), uses the same theory to understand the new religious movements.

⁴⁸ Wilson, *Invasion* 135 ff.

involved in dialogue. The second element, prominently found in several of the new groups, is the encounter with mystery. In practice, this is often expressed in terms of secrecy, especially with regard to the rites of initiation. Such mystery is seen at times not only in the belief system but also in the members' relationship with their guru or founder, when this is central to the cult. Again, we suggest that an exploration of this theme will contribute to dialogue and understanding.

Finally, a more practical model may be used in our studies of the new religions. Catholic religious orders and congregations contain many dimensions which have been adopted, most probably unconsciously, by several of the new cults.⁴⁹ Thus, the relationships between the members of a particular cult may be similar to those found in religious congregations. Some of the new religions have advocated a spirit of mobility in their members not unlike that found in some religious orders. The obedience demanded by several of the new gurus has important parallels with the vow of obedience taken by members of Catholic religious orders. It is also possible that the reaction of the parents of those who joined the cults may have had a historical precedent in the behavior, albeit now rare, of some Catholic parents when their sons and daughters started a new life in a convent or monastery. Such parallels have their obvious limitations. Members of traditional religious orders do not decide to make a total commitment in a matter of weeks or days, as seems to be the common practice of those who join certain cults. Reflection and evaluation of religious life continues even after the neophytes have joined the religious order of their choice. The lack of such an appraisal in many of the new religious movements may have contributed to the problems they have brought about. No religious superior in the traditional orders has been elevated to the high-ranking position of guru, prophet, or messiah. An exploration of these similarities and differences is necessary if we are to counsel those in need, parents included.

CONCLUSION

This paper adopts a more positive approach to the new cults than is currently in vogue in Christian circles. It must not be inferred, however, that the new religious movements are a kind of "garden of Eden" for those who join them. Life in the new religions may be detrimental to one's spiritual growth. The point to be stressed is that by starting a genuine dialogue with the cults,⁵⁰ the Christian Church will engage in

⁴⁹ Fredrick Sontag, writing on the Unification Church, makes a similar suggestion; cf. "The New Moon Sophistry," *Religion in Life* 46 (1977) 269-77.

⁵⁰ One must note that in some local areas the dialogue has already started. The Bay Area Interfaith Council of California conducts regular meetings between the Christian churches and various cults to promote understanding.

self-critique and at the same time influence the new religious movements to examine and purify themselves and to correct the many faults of which they have been sometimes justly accused. For example, the "Moonies" are constantly criticized for their forceful evangelical techniques and harsh indoctrination methods. Merely to respond by applying violent means to reclaim them does not solve any problem. The techniques used by the Unification Church are not all new; some can also be found in Christian circles. The real question is whether a convinced and committed Christian should worry at all when approached by evangelical groups. Those who are deeply rooted in their faith will not easily be moved by smiling faces, utopian goals, and pressure tactics. The violent reaction towards the cults which some anticult organizations have exhibited may be equally a sign of religious weakness and may also have indirectly contributed to the wild enthusiasm "Moonies" have shown in their drives to recruit more members and in their efforts to combat the forces against them. Only dialogue can draw out many of the cults that have espoused an exclusivistic attitude; and only dialogue can expose their members to a critical examination of their own commitment, values, and beliefs.

Current trends suggest that the new religions have acquired a strong foothold in Western culture. Though most of the cults have now peaked, a few have registered a decline, and some others may cease to exist, it is unlikely that the cultic phenomenon as a whole will pass away, if for no other reason than that the social, cultural, and religious factors contributing to their rise are still with us. The position maintained in this paper is that rather than being a fearful threat to Christianity or a challenge to religious warfare, the new religious and spiritual movements provide an excellent opportunity for the Christian Church to further understand her mission, to adapt and react more meaningfully to the changing needs of our age, and to reform and renew herself in the spirit of the gospel.