

VATICAN RESPONSE TO THE NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

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IN MAY OF 1986 the Vatican published a lengthy document on sects, cults, and new religious movements (NRMs, for short),¹ thereby demonstrating that the highest levels of authority in the Catholic Church are concerned about the impact these groups are having on the faithful, especially on young adults.² The fact that the document was issued by several Vatican Secretariats (those for Promoting Christian Unity and for Non-Believers) and Pontifical Councils (those for Inter-Religious Dialogue³ and Culture) indicates that the increasing activities of numerous religious and spiritual groups⁴ are considered to be an important issue that needs to be addressed. New religions, whether they survive or not, can leave a lasting impact on various aspects of

¹ The title of the original French version of this report is "Les 'Sects' ou 'Movements Religieux': Défi Pastoral"; it was published in *Documentation catholique* 69 (June 1, 1986) 547–54. The official English translation, "Sects or New Religious Movements: Pastoral Challenge," can be found in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English version) 19 (May 19, 1986) 5–8. The version in *Origins* 16 (May 22, 1986) 1–9 is entitled "Vatican Report on Sects, Cults, and New Religious Movements." In *The Pope Speaks* 31 (1986) 270–83 it is labeled "Challenge of New Religious Movements (Sects or Cults)." The document is also reproduced in Allan R. Brockway and J. Paul Rajashekar, eds., *New Religious Movements and the Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1987) 180–97, where it has the same title given in *L'Osservatore Romano*. The abbreviation "NRMs" is common in the social sciences and was adopted in the Vatican Report. The words "cults" and "new" do not appear in the title of the French version.

² It should be pointed out that concern about the rise of sects and cults predates the Vatican Report. In the U.S., for example, it has long been acknowledged that the success evangelical sects have had among Latin American Catholics calls for a pastoral response; see the Pastoral Letter of the U.S. Bishops, "The Hispanic Presence: Challenge and Commitment," *Origins* 13 (1984) 529–41.

³ When the Vatican Report was published, the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue was known as the Secretariat for Non-Christians. The name change was made in early 1989 and was explained in an editorial in the Council's *Bulletin* 24 (1989) 1 "as a new encouragement to interreligious dialogue which the Church of the Council recognized as one of 'the signs of the times.'"

⁴ For a discussion of these terms see Robert Ellwood, "The Several Meanings of Cult," *Thought* 61 (1986) 212–24. The title "New Religious Movements" has become the most commonly used term in academic circles, even though it is not completely adequate. In academic literature the word "cult" is often used interchangeably with "new religious movement."

religious and cultural life. And, though the document is presented as an "interim" report until further studies are concluded under the direction of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (I.F.C.U. or F.I.U.C.), it offers more than a hint as to the general direction that the official Catholic attitude and reaction to new religions are taking.

The research conducted by the F.I.U.C. is in full swing,⁵ but it is more than likely that several years will pass before a final report with appropriate suggestions reaches the various secretariats and councils for further discussions. During this period of research, two major official pronouncements from the Vatican have been made independent of the work of the F.I.U.C.⁶ The most authoritative directive has come from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) which, in December 1989, issued a letter on Christian meditation,⁷ in which the nature of Christian prayer and contemplation and their relationship to the various Eastern meditation techniques are discussed. Four months

⁵ The F.I.U.C. is organizing international symposia or conferences on NRMs on different continents. The North American symposium took place on May 12–14, 1991 and was held jointly with the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at Creighton University in Omaha. The European meeting is scheduled to take place in Vienna, Austria, October 21–25, 1991. Seminars in Manila and Costa Rica are being planned for 1992.

⁶ One should also note that since the publication of the Report, several National Bishops Conferences have directly addressed the issue of new religions. In France, e.g., a task force is studying the matter. On Christmas Day, 1990, Cardinal Godfried Danneels, Archbishop of Malines-Brussels, issued a comprehensive pastoral letter on NRMs. This letter, entitled "Le Christ ou le Verseau," contains a somewhat lengthy and detailed outline and evaluation of the New Age Movement. Danneels's letter was published in *Documentation catholique* 73 (February 3, 1991) 117–29. A translation of the section about the New Age Movement appeared in *Catholic International* 2.10 (May 1991) 480–88. In the U.S., concern about the activities of evangelical sects among Latin American Catholics seems to predominate, and several recent documents deal precisely with this issue. See, e.g., U.S. Bishops, "Stemming the Outflow of Hispanic Catholics," *Origins* 18 (November 24, 1988) 386–88; Bishop Raymond Pena, "Opening the Door to Life in the Church," *Origins* 17 (August 17, 1989) 195–98; and Catholic Bishops of Alta/Baja California, "Dimensions of a Response to Proselytism," *Origins* 19 (March 15, 1990) 666–69. References to the pastoral issues raised by the NRMs has also been made by Pope John Paul II. E.g., in an address during his trip to Mexico in May 1990, he talked about the proselytizing methods of the new movements and stated that weaknesses in the Church and its members were reasons for their success, particularly among migrant workers; see his speech to Mexican Bishops on May 12, published in *L'Osservatore Romano* 23 (May 14, 1990) 1–2.

⁷ The Latin text of this letter, *Ad totius catholicae ecclesiae episcopos: De quibusdam rationibus christianae meditationis*, can be found in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 82 (1990) 362–79. An English text was published in *Origins* 19 (December 28, 1989) 492–98. The letter was signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the President of the CDF, and Archbishop Bovone, the Secretary of the same congregation.

later, in April 1991, the cardinals met in Consistory to consider two issues: the value of human life and contemporary sects and cults.⁸

It is the purpose of this essay to outline briefly and reflect critically on the contents, meaning, and import of these official Vatican statements.⁹

THE VATICAN REPORT

The 1986 Vatican Report is a unique document for several reasons. It is the result of the cooperation of four different Vatican offices. Unlike many Vatican documents, it does not claim to be an authoritative statement on doctrinal issues. Because it does not contain specific teachings, moral directives, or pastoral injunctions, its contents might appear too general and could easily be subjected to various interpretations.

The Report is divided into three major parts. The first introduces the reader to the phenomenon of cults and sects, drawing attention to the pastoral problems that their evangelizing efforts have created. Various causes that might have triggered the modern phenomenon of NRMs are mentioned.

The second part dwells on the reasons why these movements have come into being and flourished. Nine universal human needs and aspirations are described: (1) the quest for belonging, (2) the search for answers, (3) the search for wholeness, (4) the search for cultural identity, (5) the need to be recognized, (6) the search for transcendence, (7) the need for spiritual guidance, (8) the need for vision, and (9) the need for participation and involvement. Sects and cults, according to the Vatican Report, appear to be satisfying some genuine religious desires, even though the forceful recruitment programs of some groups might account, in part, for their success.

The third part outlines the pastoral challenge that the NRMs present. The Report argues that the way to stop defections to the cults is to pay more attention to the religious and spiritual aspirations of young adults who form the majority of cult recruits. It is suggested that Catholic parishes can offset the attraction of the NRMs by providing the faithful with better opportunities for: (1) building commu-

⁸ The Consistory's communiqué and shortened versions of the two major addresses of Cardinals Arinze and Tomko have been published in English in *Origins* 25 (April 25, 1991) 746–54. The same version of Cardinal Arinze's speech and the five geographical reports can be found in *Catholic International* 2.13 (July 1–14, 1991) 605–11 and 612–18 respectively. For Arinze's talk, which is by far the most substantive, we have used the full English version distributed by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue.

⁹ The texts of most of these documents are divided into numbered sections to which references are made in this paper.

nity, (2) continuing their religious education, (3) catering to a personal and holistic approach, (4) providing the means to cultural identity, (5) enhancing prayer and liturgical life, and (6) encouraging people to become involved in the Church through participation and leadership.

The Report makes no attempt to evaluate the new religions from a theological perspective, to pass a judgment on those Catholics who abandon their faith in order to dedicate themselves to a new religious belief system and lifestyle, or to specify the relationship that the Church could establish with the novel faiths. Acknowledging that the cult issue is global and complex, the Report admits that more research and study are necessary before any definite proposals can be made and an official Catholic response formulated.

Since the Vatican Report is not a policy statement, but rather an informative and comprehensive narrative of what was reported by the hierarchy about the NRMs in different parts of the world, it contains conflicting views of what the cults are and apparently irreconcilable opinions about the attitude and response the Church should adopt towards them. It must, therefore, be read with care, and attention must be paid not only to what it actually says, but also to what it purposely omits.

Hoeckman's Interpretation

The most thorough examination of the document's contents and intentions have been made by Remi Hoeckman, O.P.,¹⁰ who played a major role in its composition. In an address delivered at an Ecumenical Conference on New Religious Movements at the Catholic University of America on April 27, 1987 and later published in *Origins*,¹¹ Hoeckman attempted to update the Holy See's position on these religious groups and to summarize the results of the Consultation on New Religious Movements convened jointly by the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation (WCC/LWF) a few months after the Vatican document was issued.¹²

With regard to the Vatican document, Hoeckman makes several enlightening observations both about the way the Report should be read and its main features. He stresses that the document is a progress

¹⁰ Hoeckman was initially in charge of the F.I.U.C.'s research project on NRMs. He has been succeeded by Dr. Michael Fuss, who teaches at the Gregorian University and who has the title of "Project Leader."

¹¹ "The Pastoral Challenge of New Religious Movements," *Origins* 17 (July 30, 1987) 136-43. Hoeckman's paper was originally entitled "The Roman Catholic Church, the World Council of Churches, and the New Religious Movements."

¹² The report and papers of this consultation have been published in Brockway and Rajashekar, *New Religious Movements and the Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1987).

report and is designed as a first step in the process of gathering information leading to further study. Its concerns are not "what future anti-sect or anti-cult strategies can be worked out,"¹³ but rather the pastoral issues and challenges that face Catholic parishes. Consequently, the Report draws attention to the Church's need for self-examination and spiritual and ecclesial renewal. Hoeckman emphasizes that it should not be read as an anticult document:

Although the report guards against naivete in the matter ("we cannot be naively irenic"), the underlying concern and approach have nothing to do with an anti-cult crusade mentality. Therefore whoever reads the report with the expectation to dig into a piece of "official fundamentalist anti-cult literature" will be very disappointed.¹⁴ . . . The report is obviously not the outline of a bellicose Roman Catholic anti-sect, anti-cult or anti-new religious movement strategy, a "wide-ranging program of actions to block the growth of certain non-Catholic religions," as someone who had been "hearing rumblings from Rome" before its publication expected.¹⁵

Further, Hoeckman maintains that the Report does not attempt to solve the great debates about the nature of the cults and their activities or to provide a "cult catechism" with handy answers for all the questions about sects and cults.¹⁶ He insists that the document must be read as a whole.¹⁷ Its tendency to generalize, and hence to make only a few of the necessary distinctions, should be understood as an inherent limitation of documents of this nature.¹⁸ In his opinion, the Report is a sincere and prudent statement about certain religious events that are creating concern among many Catholics.¹⁹

Hoeckman also discusses the delicate issue of dialogue and remarks that the Catholic Church is not at the moment considering establishing official channels of dialogue with the NRMs, as it has done with many Christian Churches and world religions. He restricts, rather than rules out, dialogue: "At this stage the possibility of dialogue is mainly thought of, I believe, in a local community setting on the level of dialogue between sincere individual believers rather than on a broad institutional level."²⁰ Hoeckman admits that there are specific difficulties in any dialogue with the cults, particularly because their

¹³ "The Pastoral Challenge" 136.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 137.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 138. Hoeckman does not reveal the identity of the person referred to in this quote. The names of several Catholic priests who are heavily involved in the anticult movement in the United States are hardly secret, since their views have been expressed in public talks and in Catholic newspapers and magazines.

¹⁶ "The Pastoral Challenge" 137-38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 137.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 138.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 139.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

religious claims are often looked upon with suspicion. He contends that some of the NRMs may not provide authentic spiritual options. Though the Report does make a distinction between religious and pseudoreligious groups, the distinction is left unspecified because further study is needed.

Finally, Hoeckman comments on the September 1986 consultation of the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation, the results of which, he thinks, are complementary to the Vatican Report.²¹

Hoeckman's carefully-worded address provides some guidelines for understanding a rather ambivalent report and presents a balanced approach to the new religions. He makes it clear both that there is no way in which a blanket approval of the cults' belief systems and activities is even remotely possible, and that some of their evangelizing methods are, to put it mildly, hardly commendable. Yet, he also leaves no doubt that the Church's response is not a general summons to a crusade against the NRMs and their members. The Report is a call for Catholics to live a deeper Christian life and to consider adopting reforms that make parishes more vibrant spiritual communities, thereby making the evangelizing efforts of all religious groups largely ineffective.

Academic Critique of the Vatican Report

Two main and diametrically opposed examinations of the Vatican Report have appeared in scholarly literature. They reflect the continuing debate about the nature of the NRMs and the response to their activities.

From an academic point of view, William Dinges's critical analysis²² of the Report represents reservations which have often been voiced, particularly by social scientists. While observing that the Report adopts a positive tone²³ in that it "calls for ongoing study and Catholic self-examination,"²⁴ Dinges finds several flaws in it. He points out that it starts with a muddled and derogatory definition of sects or cults, a position which, one might add, indirectly confirms the popular view of the cult as an evil organization. Further, by adopting a theory of religious deprivation to explain the rise and success of the NRMs, and by

²¹ Ibid. 141. The WCC/LWF document entitled "Summary Statement and Recommendations" can be found in Brockway and Rajashekar, *New Religious Movements and the Churches* 171-79.

²² "The Vatican Report on Sects, Cults and New Religious Movements," *America* (September 27, 1986) 145-47, 154.

²³ Ibid. 145, 147.

²⁴ Ibid. 154.

paying too much attention to their recruiting strategies and indoctrination methods, the Report is reductionistic.²⁵ Dinges suggests that it also tends to be superficial. He writes:

A realistic appraisal of the "pastoral challenge" of these new religious movements cannot fail to acknowledge the need for fundamental structural alterations in the manner in which the church constitutes and expresses itself. Merely trying to out-evangelize them or to intensify Catholic identity and enthusiasm will not arrest their spread. Studies have made it clear that religious movements grow not only because they meet deficiencies and psychosocial "needs and aspirations"; they grow because they are more congruent with emerging social and cultural structures than existing institutional arrangements. This is why the quest of inculturation—as the reports acknowledges—is "a fundamental one."²⁶

While Dinges's examination of the Report relies on the bulk of socioscientific studies on the new religions, the reaction of Walter Debold²⁷ depends exclusively on anticult publications.²⁸ His essay, published in a professional religious journal that promotes interreligious understanding and dialogue, strikes a discordant note. Debold complains that many Catholic periodicals²⁹ have published materials "sympathetic" to the cults, though he does not specify what kind of literature he would consider "sympathetic."³⁰

The stress on two themes of the document dominates Debold's reflections, namely its major contention that the new cults aim at satisfying genuine human religious needs and desires and its relatively minor reference to the manipulative techniques of cults and sects. He

²⁵ Ibid. 146–47. Critique of the document's "personal inadequacy" theory has come also from non-Catholic sources. See, for instance, George D. Chryssides, "Britain's New Pluralism—Attitudes to New Religions," *Faith Freedom* 42 (Spring 1989) 15.

²⁶ Ibid. 147.

²⁷ "The New Cults: A Threat to Unity and Authentic Humanity," *Journal of Dharma* 12 (1987) 63–70.

²⁸ His article does not contain a single reference to the numerous sociological studies on the new religions and carefully leaves out any mention of the psychological and psychiatric literature that does not support his anticult stand.

²⁹ He is probably referring to both Catholic scholarly periodicals and popular magazines, though he provides no citations. Incidentally, one might add that the Catholic response to the cults, especially that expressed in literature aimed at the general public, has been ambivalent and varied and that Debold's comments cannot be corroborated by a survey of U.S. Catholic publications on the new religions.

³⁰ One is left with the impression that, for Debold, any publication on NRMs that does not unequivocally condemn them is "sympathetic" to their beliefs and practices. Treating the cults and their members fairly and charitably would thus constitute undue and undesirable sympathy. This would make the Vatican Report a document sympathetic to the NRMs.

assumes that the document supports the brainwashing theory of cult formation, a theory which he apparently thinks rests upon indisputable evidence,³¹ and which he assumes justifies the belligerent approach to the cults. The deprivation theory of cult formation buttresses his opinion that the NRMs take advantage of legitimate human needs and aspirations to entice people into joining them, thereby hiding the fact that their real goals are more political and economic than religious.³² He makes no mention of the fact that the Report makes a connection between a theology of religions and a theology of the cults and records, without any critical comment and much less disapproval, the opinion that some dialogue with the cults might be a constructive possibility.³³ The WCC/LWF Consultation and Hoeckman's overview of the Vatican Document, both of which were unavailable to Debold, are equally open to the possibility of dialogue. Debold's approach rules out dialogue with the cults and rapprochement with their members as impossible and undesirable options.

Negative Interpretation of the Report

Negative interpretation of the Vatican Report seems to enjoy some popularity. The American Family Foundation,³⁴ known for its anticult publications and activities, distributes copies of the Report as supportive of its main interpretation of the NRMs. Thus it is necessary to examine the document in some depth, in order to determine why it has been read by some as an anticult manifesto.

One can certainly develop an argument to show that the negative interpretation of the report is corroborated by the commentary that

³¹ The majority of scholarly publications do not favor this theory. On the contrary, sociologists are almost unanimous in rejecting it as an inadequate explanation of the rise and spread of new movements, and many psychologists and psychiatrists who have examined members of the new religions have had recourse to other theories to account for the conversions to cultic beliefs and lifestyles. For a comprehensive survey of literature see John A. Saliba, *Psychiatry and the Cults: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1987), and *Social Science and the Cults: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1990).

³² The debate about the religious nature of the NRMs is important because it directly influences the response of the mainline churches. See John A. Saliba, "Religious Themes in the New Religious Movements," *Research Project on New Religious Movements* (Rome: F.I.U.C., 1990) 133-87.

³³ Vatican Report, sec. 1.6.

³⁴ Located in Bonita Springs, Florida, this organization publishes a newsletter, *The Cult Observer*, and a journal, *Cultic Studies Journal: Psychological Manipulation and Society*. It has consistently held that cults are destructive entities that use brainwashing techniques to recruit and maintain members. It is one of the foremost organizations that distribute anticult literature and organize anticult conferences.

accompanied its English translation in *Origins*. The editors of *Origins* included three comments presumably aimed at helping readers interpret the report.

The first comment quotes the reaction of Father James LeBar, whose popularity as an expert on cults was enhanced by his participation in an exorcism that was aired by one of the major networks.³⁵ LeBar³⁶ found the Vatican document helpful because it advances good reasons (that is, various deprivations) to explain why people join the cults, and because it demonstrates why the cults have been successful (that is, by reason of their deceptive recruitment strategies and indoctrination processes). He regrets that no mention was made of satanic cults, even though he must be aware that their prevalence and success cannot possibly be compared with the rise and spread of, for instance, Pentecostal groups, particularly in Latin America.

In his recent book³⁷ LeBar reproduces the Vatican Report but includes no general commentary on it. He has definitely not been influenced by its generally mild, tolerant, and understanding tone. Moreover, he misunderstands the document, which stresses the need for ongoing education (sec. 3.2), when he confuses this education with a program to enlighten people about the dangers of the cults and their deceptive methods.³⁸ He definitely does not favor dialogue with the NRMs,³⁹ even though such dialogue is listed as one possible, and presumably legitimate, Catholic approach. He interprets the participation of Hoeckman in the 1987 ecumenical conference,⁴⁰ which included members of some of the NRMs and which stressed dialogue and rapprochement with their members, as a malicious attempt by the con-

³⁵ Selections from the actual rite of exorcism were included in ABC's program "20/20" on April 5, 1991. On the same evening Fr. LeBar, together with Fr. Richard P. McBrien of the University of Notre Dame, debated the issue on ABC's "Nightline." Unfortunately, the latter exchange dwelt, almost exclusively, on the Christian belief in the existence of the devil as a personal being who can take over or possess a person. Little time was spent on what the real signs of possession are. The behavior of the young woman portrayed on television appeared to be more contrived and psychotic than diabolical. For reactions to the filming of the exorcism, see Dick Ryan, "To Hell and Back Again with ABC's '20/20,'" *National Catholic Reporter* 27 (April 19, 1991) 13-14.

³⁶ *Origins* 16 (May 22, 1986) 4-5.

³⁷ *Cults, Sects, and the New Age* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1989).

³⁸ *Ibid.* 31-32.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 171 ff.

⁴⁰ This meeting was organized by the American Conference on Religious Movements (of Rockville, Md.). Besides clergy from various denominations, some of whom, including the author of this essay, have counseled cult members and their families, several leading members of the Unification Church, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and the Church of Scientology participated. Franklin H. Littell and Dean M. Kelly were among the main speakers. Hoeckman's paper referred to in this essay was delivered as the opening address at the conference.

ference sponsors "to lend further credence to their project."⁴¹ His remarks show no knowledge of, and provide no references to, the contents of Hoeckman's paper read at that Conference.

The second commentary included in *Origins*⁴² quotes from an address delivered by Cardinal König of Vienna in 1985, before the Report's publication. Entitled "Dialogue: A Demanding Struggle,"⁴³ König's talk deals with the uncertainties and obstacles in Catholic missionary work caused, in part, by some Vatican documents and papal teachings regarding religious freedom and interreligious dialogue. After mentioning several types of NRMs, the cardinal adopts a deprivation theory of cult formation. Reflecting on the Church's response to their presence, he asks: "Are particular defense measures needed? Or is it enough to have human contact, dialogue, personal action, for leading them to Christ's authentic message?"⁴⁴ The reader is bound to conclude that a more belligerent, confrontational approach to the cults may be required.

The third short commentary quotes from an address of Rabbi Gordon Tucker of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 1984.⁴⁵ The short selection chosen for inclusion in *Origins* calls to our attention the tragedy of Jonestown which, Tucker assures us, "is certainly not an isolated occurrence,"⁴⁶ even though there is no empirical evidence whatsoever that any other new religious group has ceased to exist in the manner of the People's Temple. Pursuing an approach typically espoused in anticult literature and conferences,⁴⁷ Tucker makes the sweeping statement that the new cults "may incite a lower level of alarm than Jonestown, but they are less extreme manifestations of the same phenomena."⁴⁸ For Tucker, the cults are so dangerous that we should be concerned more with those individuals who join them than with those who simply abandon their faith. His apprehension must be

⁴¹ *Cults, Sects, and the New Age* 174.

⁴² 16 (May 22, 1986) 5-6.

⁴³ The full text of this document can be found in *Origins* 14 (April 4, 1985) 692-95.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 694. This passage is quoted in *Origins* 16 (May 22, 1986) 6.

⁴⁵ His address, "Youth: Faith and the Quest for Life's Meaning," was published in *Origins* 14 (June 14, 1984) 75-80.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 78.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Rachel Andres and James R. Lane, eds., *Cults and Consequences: The Definitive Handbook* (Los Angeles: Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles, 1988).

⁴⁸ *Origins* 14 (June 14, 1984) 78. This quotation is given in *Origins* 16 (May 22, 1986) 7. There is little foundation for taking Jonestown as typical of contemporary new religions. For some major differences between Jonestown and other NRMs see James T. Richardson, "People's Temple and Jonestown," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19 (1980) 239-55.

seen in the context of the disproportionate Jewish representation in many of the NRMs.⁴⁹ Written a couple of years before the Vatican Report and the Summary Consultation of the WCC/LWF, his approach favors a direct assault on the cults and allows no room for understanding and dialogue or any type of harmonious relationship with the NRMs. Using an unofficial Jewish anticult address in 1984 to throw light on the official Vatican Report of 1986, which is surely not an anticult tirade, involves a curious twist of interpretative logic that can have only one meaning, namely that the editors of *Origins* prefer a negative reading of the document.

Is the Report an Anticult Statement?

This negative interpretation of the Report in an authoritative and influential Catholic publication requires some explanation, especially since Hoeckman's careful analysis does not endorse it. It must be admitted that several statements within the Report itself appear to favor a negative reading of the document. A number of reasons can be advanced to show that some parts of it sanction the position that the NRMs are evil organizations that should be combated with all the forces at society's disposal.

From the very start the Report condones a negative definition of sects or cults, even though the difficulties of definition are emphatically acknowledged. The Introduction quotes in full only that definition of a cult found in popular literature:

As we are speaking here of special groups which usually pose a threat to peoples' freedom and to society in general, cults and sects have also been characterized as possessing a number of distinctive features. These often are that they are authoritarian in structure, that they exercise forms of brainwashing and mind control, that they cultivate group pressure and instill feelings of guilt and fear, etc. (sec. 1.1).⁵⁰

This is precisely the definition which has been embraced by anticult groups and which has been largely rejected by the social sciences. The

⁴⁹ Though these alarmist views are common in Jewish circles, one should note that several Jews have balanced such concern with challenging reflections. Thus, e.g., Richard J. Israel observed, at a time when the reaction to the Jonestown tragedy was at its height, that the Jewish community loses more young adults to suicide than to the Hare Krishna Movement. See his essay, "The Cult Problem is a Fake!" *National Jewish Monthly* 94 (January 1980) 34.

⁵⁰ One is left wondering whether the Vatican Report is suggesting that some of the features mentioned, like authoritarianism and group pressure, belong exclusively to cults.

explicit reference to Dave Breese⁵¹ as a representative of this view, might easily be seen as a confirmation of the pejorative meaning the document assigns to the words "cult" and "sect." Breese, an Evangelical Christian, adopts a common Protestant fundamentalist response to the NRMs. He denounces them, among other reasons, for their claim of extra-Biblical revelation, their offer of a false basis of salvation, and their presumptuous messianic leadership. He seems to find corroborative evidence of their theological errors in the popular view that they have enslaving organizational structures and are guilty of financial exploitation. In his Introduction he assures us that the book "is not really a study of the cults themselves; they are deserving of no such attention."⁵² Breese's approach to the new religions contradicts and opposes both the Vatican Report itself, which recommends further study,⁵³ and Hoeckman's carefully articulated interpretation. His book, which has no standing in the academic community, cannot be taken as representative of a Catholic approach. Its mention in the report was simply intended as one example of how people (including some Catholics) have reacted to the NRMs. Unfortunately, its very mention in the report tends to lend credence to the anticult position.

Furthermore, while the document proposes a deprivation theory for understanding the success of the NRMs, it also suggests that the recruitment and training techniques of the cults themselves are also partly responsible for attracting new members and maintaining their commitment. In Part 2, two general reasons for their spread are outlined: (1) "Needs and Aspirations: What the Sects Appear to Offer"; and (2) "Recruitment, Training, Indoctrination." The first, and by far longer, treatment contains the tacit allegation that the sects only "seem" to offer an answer to the good and legitimate aspirations of humankind. When describing the new needs and aspirations, the document specifies in each case what the sects "appear" or "seem" to offer.⁵⁴ The second explanation for the spread of the cults, alluded to elsewhere in the document (sec. 1.5), mentions conversion methods that "achieve a type of mind control through the use of abusive behavior-modification techniques" (sec. 2.2). Included in the description of

⁵¹ David Breese, *Know the Marks of Cults* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1975).

⁵² *Ibid.* 11.

⁵³ That the Vatican Report acknowledges that sociological and psychological studies should precede any evaluation of the new religious movements is clearly indicated by the "representative" bibliography appended to the document. Christian fundamentalist writers, like Breese, tend to disparage such studies.

⁵⁴ The phrase "what the sects seem [or appear] to offer" occurs ten times in sec. 2.1 of the document, a section that has the subheading "Needs and Aspirations: What the Sects Appear to Offer."

these techniques are practically all the negative allegations (such as "deception" and "love-bombing") that one hears repeatedly in anticult conferences and literature and in books written by former cult members.

Further, in its concluding summary, the Report also points out that (1) "the attitudes and methods of some of [the NRMs] can be destructive to personalities, disruptive of families and society, and their tenets far removed from the teachings of Christ and his church," and that (2) their interests are "totally foreign to a genuine concern for the 'human' and are usually 'human' for inhumane purposes" (sec. 4). Such comments are misleading because they confuse moral and theological with social and psychological evaluations. They also can be readily generalized into a blanket condemnation of all NRMs, even though reference is made to the extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 1985,⁵⁵ which asserted, echoing the words of *Nostra aetate*,⁵⁶ that "the Catholic Church refuses nothing of what is true and holy in non-Christian religions" (sec. 5.3).⁵⁷

Those who resist any kind of contact and/or dialogue with the members of the new religions find support in the Vatican Report, which is obviously concerned about the heavy proselytization of some of the NRMs. "We may know too from experience that there is generally little or no possibility of dialogue with the sects; and that not only are they themselves closed to dialogue, but they can also be a serious obstacle to ecumenical education and effort wherever they are active" (sec. 4).

The appeal to the Vatican Report to buttress a negative approach to the NRMs is, therefore, not based on one or two brief and obscure references in the document. The main problem with this interpretation, however, is that it fails to take into account those sections of the document that portray a balanced and responsible overview of an ad-

⁵⁵ See sec. D, no. 5 of "The Final Report," *Origins* 19 (December 19, 1985) 450.

⁵⁶ Since its publication, the *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* has influenced Catholic official statements on other religions. The text of this document can be found in Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966) 660-68. For a recent assessment of the document, see René Latourelle, *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989) 3.161 ff.

⁵⁷ This quote is from *Nostra aetate*, sec. 2. Originally, this document was intended to deal with the relationship between the Catholic Church and the major religious traditions of the world (Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism). However, given the very nature of the document's treatment of non-Christian religions, it is legitimate to ask whether both tribal religions (of Africa and elsewhere) and the NRMs should not also be included in the Church's efforts to pursue a more positive interreligious dialogue.

mittedly complex phenomenon. Moreover, it reads into the report opinions that are not condoned by its overall tone and intent.

Understanding the Report

These divergent reactions to the Vatican Report call for a more reflective examination of what the document attempts to do and closer attention to some of its achievements and failures.

The first reflection concerns the manner in which the Report was produced. The procedure started in 1983 with the drafting of seven questions that were sent to the national and regional bishops' conferences.⁵⁸ How these conferences formulated their replies to the questionnaire is not disclosed. One presumes that local "experts" were assigned the task of drafting the answers. But since these remain unnamed, one is not sure how they were selected and what their qualifications were. And since the replies include not only theological, but also psychological and sociological interpretations, one is left wondering how many psychologists, psychiatrists, and social scientists actually took part in responding to the questionnaire. *Origins*⁵⁹ names Fr. LeBar as one expert who was "informally consulted by the Vatican Committee which produced the document." Exactly when this informal consultation took place and what it consisted of are not revealed. The Communiqué which accompanied the publication of the Vatican Report stated that the report was based "on the pastoral letters, articles, and other publications received from various dioceses," and that "the help of specialists enabled us to create a synthesis."⁶⁰ No names of experts, however, were provided.⁶¹ The Report seems to admit that more experts in the field need be consulted before a comprehensive

⁵⁸ These questions, in abbreviated form, are: (1) To what extent and in what way is the problem of the sects present in your country or region? (2) What are the principal pastoral problems posed by this phenomenon? (3) What action has the Church in your country been able to take concerning this problem? (4) What seem to be the reasons for the success of sects among Catholics? (5) What attitude does the Gospel require us to take regarding this situation? (6) What significant documents or books have been published in your country or region? (7) Are there people with special competence in this matter who could take part, at a later stage, in carrying this consultation further? These questions, listed in an appendix to the Vatican Report, are reproduced in *Origins* 22 (May 22, 1986) 3.

⁵⁹ 22 (May 16, 1986) 4-5.

⁶⁰ *L'Osservatore Romano* 19 (May 19, 1986) 8.

⁶¹ About a year before the Symposium at Creighton University, the F.I.U.C. published a lengthy dossier, *Research Project on New Religious Movements* (Rome, 1990), containing the symposium papers. At the end of the volume (751-53) 33 participant/authors (experts) and 26 other participants are listed. LeBar's name is not included in this list, and he was not present at the Creighton University meeting.

response to the NRMs can be formulated. Question seven of the questionnaire sent to local bishops asked: "Are there people with special competence who could take part, at a later stage, in carrying this consultation further?"⁶²

Similarly, it is not known whether the first draft of the document was subjected to the evaluation of scholars who have written scholarly books and articles on various aspects of the cultic phenomenon. Some of the critical remarks made by Dinges⁶³ suggest that several of the Report's defects could have been avoided with more professional and academic input.

The document, moreover, incorporates contradictory views on the new religious phenomenon. This is, in fact, not surprising. The debate on the cults has raged for almost twenty years, and no unanimity on the matter has been reached. The individual who studies the Report, however, is given no clues about whether there was a majority viewpoint in the replies and what criteria were used to include or exclude statements and opinions on the new religions. Thus, to give an example, there is no indication of how many of the diocesan reports stressed the manipulative techniques of the cults and how many dwelt on the need for dialogue.

A second reflection that might contribute to the understanding of the document regards the need to determine the atmosphere or climate it creates and the attitudes it promotes, not only by what it says but also by what it consciously leaves out. The first impression one gets, even from a cursory reading of the Report, is that it views the presence and success of the cults as a challenge, not as a threat. And the challenge is not a call to do battle with the cults, to instill a crusading and confrontational spirit, and to mount a campaign to wipe them out. It is rather a challenge to self-improvement and institutional reform. The cults, even if they only "appear" to offer some benefits to their members, are teaching us a lesson, namely that, as Catholics, we have a long way to go to serve the legitimate spiritual needs of the faithful.⁶⁴

Third, while the Report manifests concern for those individuals who abandon their Catholic faith, it betrays no fear of the cults. Even though it observes that "the phenomenon is considered by almost all the respondents as a serious matter, and by some as an alarming matter" (sec. 1.2), it does not use language that tends to increase one's

⁶² *L'Osservatore Romano* 19 (May 19, 1986) 3.

⁶³ See, e.g., his critique of psychomotivational theories, in "The Vatican Report on Sects, Cults and New Religious Movements" 146.

⁶⁴ For a broader view of the lessons that can be learned from an examination of the success of the NRMs, see John A. Saliba, "Learning from the New Religious Movements," *Thought* 61 (1986) 225-40.

apprehension. It indulges in no vapid denunciations, condemnations, or tirades. It methodically refuses to have resort to hyperbolic adjectives and consciously avoids making hysterical pronouncements on the evils of cultism. There is no hint, and much less mention, of Jonestown as a paradigm of all sects and cults. The overriding message of the document is not one of panic at the onslaught of the cults, but rather one of optimistic hope that their presence can actually lead the Church to renewal and reform.

Fourth, the Report nowhere contains any apologetic argumentation. It makes no attempt to defend the Catholic faith or to attack the belief systems of the cults. It is an exercise in self-examination. It contains more critical reflections on the Church's pastoral ministry than on the cults' doctrines and activities. This general approach is more in harmony with the dialogue which the Catholic Church has been carrying on with other Christian Churches and world religions since Vatican II.

Fifth, it is interesting to note that the document is more concerned with ways of preventing young Catholics from abandoning their faith and joining one of the new religions than it is with reclaiming cult members to the faith of their upbringing. It contains no reference to the need to evangelize the cults and their Catholic members. A number of unspecified reasons might lie behind this reticence. Those Catholics who have become members of new movements are usually alienated from, and often antagonistic towards, their traditional faith. Direct efforts to evangelize them might be interpreted as an application of the same form of proselytism that the document implicitly rejects. Evangelization might lead to nothing but fruitless religious debates that can have little positive impact in an atmosphere already charged with suspicion and hostility. Unlike so many religious books on the NRMs, the Report carefully avoids using language and making suggestions that might lead to the deterioration of the hostile relationship that exists between many cults and the Christian faith.

Sixth, one of the strong points of the document is that it approaches the issue of NRMs on a global level, thereby hinting that some radical "restructuring" may be taking place not only in people's religious awareness but also in the way they express themselves and behave religiously.⁶⁵ It further draws attention to the Church as an institution

⁶⁵ Robert Wuthnow, a leading sociologist of religion, has theorized that the growth of specialized groups (sects and cults) is one way in which faith is revitalized and is a form of social restructuring in American religion. See his *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ., 1988). Given the social and cultural upheavals on many continents, his theory could probably be adapted to incorporate religious developments in other parts of the world.

that exists to minister to its members. In so doing, the Report indirectly adopts a broader view of the universal Church as the People of God and addresses all Catholics on a subject that touches them deeply—the role they play in the life of the Church.

Finally, the Vatican Report, no matter what its deficiencies might be, is a carefully worded document. Its tone is mild and tolerant, rather than confrontational and aggressive. It indirectly admits that, given the variety of religious movements in several continents and the emotionally charged opinions about them, sweeping generalizations on their nature, intentions, and effects are premature, improper, and imprudent. That explains why further scholarly research and study are proposed.

THE CDF'S LETTER ON CHRISTIAN MEDITATION

The *Letter of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on Christian Meditation*⁶⁶ is probably the most important of the Vatican's reactions to the NRMs, because it is both instructional and directive. While the Vatican Report contains little assessment of the new religions and proposes no theological evaluation of their beliefs and practices, the Letter attempts both to explain the nature of Christian prayer and to offer a critique of Eastern meditative methods and a theology of religions. And, though the Report concedes that more research is required, the Letter assumes that enough studies are available to propose a definite appraisal to guide those Catholics who come in contact with Eastern forms of contemplation.⁶⁷

The Letter is obviously not intended for the average Catholic layperson. It presupposes some traditional theological background for the understanding of Christian prayer and its relation to Catholic doctrine, especially to revelation and the Trinity. Its contents, divided into seven sections, can be briefly outlined as follows:

⁶⁶ The Letter, dated October 15, 1989, was released at a press conference on December 14. At this conference it was revealed that the Letter was largely drafted by the late Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. See Jacques Servais, S.J., "In Search of the Hidden God," *30 Days* (January 1991) 32–34. Since von Balthasar died on June 26, 1988, he must have written the Letter more than a year before its publication. For von Balthasar's treatment of Christian meditation one can consult his book, *Christian Meditation* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989). A brief, critical appraisal of his views on meditation in Christianity and other religions can be found in Daniel J. O'Hanlon, "Hans Urs von Balthasar on Non-Christian Religions and Meditation," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 5 (1978) 60–68.

⁶⁷ Copious footnotes are appended to the Letter, but there isn't a single reference to contemporary literature on the new religions. Nor is there any mention of any books or articles on Christian Zen and Christian Yoga.

1. It is acknowledged from the start that there is a Catholic interest in Eastern meditative methods, and the question of whether these can be used to enrich Catholic tradition is raised. The nature of Christian prayer is briefly expounded.

2. Christian prayer is examined in the light of revelation. Reference is made to prayer in the Bible and attention is directed to the trinitarian aspect which is present whenever a Christian prays.

3. Erroneous forms of prayer are outlined. Two major errors which have their origin in early Christianity are singled out: (1) the Gnostic approach which links prayer with a superior and secret knowledge ("Pseudo-Gnosticism"), and (2) the charismatic approach that judges prayer to be an experience of the divine ("Messalianism"). The Letter contends that these unorthodox ways of prayer still flourish in our times and implies that Eastern techniques⁶⁸ contain one or both errors and should make us aware of the problem of syncretism.

4. The Letter then dwells on the Christian way to union with God. Here the goal of prayer and the methods used by Christian saints to achieve this goal are specified. In this context a theology of religions is articulated that interprets Christianity as the fulfillment of all religions.

5. Next, the question of what methods can be used to attain the Christian goal of union with God is taken up. The traditional stages of Christian perfection (purgative, illuminative, and unitive) are mentioned. Two points dominate this section: (1) the final goal cannot be achieved through one's own efforts and/or the exercise of techniques; and (2) various kinds of methods could be adopted to help the individual in the *via purgativa*, in which renunciation of one's personal selfishness occurs.

6. The value of Eastern meditation techniques is directly addressed, and they are accredited with two main benefits: (1) they are said to prepare the body for prayer and can thus be compared to some Christian methods (sec. 26); and (2) they have "valued psychophysical symbolism, often absent in Western forms of prayer" (sec. 27). The document warns, however, of the danger of allowing prayer to degenerate "into a cult of the body" and of leading "surreptitiously to considering all bodily sensations as spiritual experiences" (sec. 27).

7. Finally, repeating some of its earlier observations, the Letter draws attention to the centrality of God in Christian contemplation.

Reactions to the document have been rather mixed. Many have seen

⁶⁸ These Eastern methods are never explicitly identified or referred to in the text. Footnote 1, however, states that they are inspired by Hinduism and Buddhism, and it mentions Zen, Transcendental Meditation, and Yoga as examples.

it as a criticism or blanket condemnation of Eastern methods of contemplation. Others have pointed out that it actually accepts them, provided they are harmonized with Christian theology and spirituality.

Public Reactions to the Letter

Commentaries in Catholic newspapers⁶⁹ have alluded to some of the dangers that the influence of practices like Yoga and Zen pose to Catholic spirituality. The general press appears to have read in the Letter a negative treatment of Eastern meditation.⁷⁰ In spite of the fact that the Letter refers several times to the positive elements in Eastern meditative techniques, these reports and commentaries can lead the reader to the conclusion that Eastern meditative techniques should not be encouraged and, if used, should be applied with extreme caution.

The Hindu reaction in the United States has been even more negative. *Hinduism Today*,⁷¹ in a report on the publication of the Letter entitled "Catholic Church Denounces Yoga," calls it "a blessing in disguise," and accuses the Vatican of "making a number of subtly belittling statements about Hinduism and Buddhism." It declares that "Hindus and Buddhist alike [have] reacted with outrage" at the publication of the Letter.⁷²

Catholic Theological Reactions

In spite of the approving commentaries on the Letter in official Vatican publications,⁷³ Catholics involved in interreligious dialogue and cooperation have found it inadequate both in its understanding of Christian prayer and contemplation and in its handling of other faiths.

⁶⁹ See, e.g., the report in *Our Sunday Visitor* 78 (December 31, 1989) 17.

⁷⁰ Confer, e.g., the coverage in the *Washington Post*, Dec. 16, 1989, B6, col. 1, and the *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 15, 1989, A22, col. 1. Charles Madigan, reporting in the *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 20, 1989, 23, col. 2 lampoons the Vatican's warnings that Zen and Yoga can create a problem for authentic prayer.

⁷¹ This is a monthly newspaper published by the Himalayan Academy in Concord, Calif. It describes itself as "The Hindu Newspaper Affirming the Dharma and Recording the Modern History of Nearly a Billion Members of a Global Religion."

⁷² *Hinduism Today* 12.12 (December, 1990) 27. Several months later (May, 1991, 13–16), the same newspaper printed a historical chart of Hinduism. One of the main 1990 events listed is: "Vatican Condemns Yoga."

⁷³ See, e.g., the following two commentaries: Thomas Spidli, S.J., "Christ and Krishna: The Pros and Cons of Eastern Meditation for Christians," *L'Osservatore Romano* 23 (March 12, 1990) 1, 5; Mariasusai Dhavamony, S.J., "To Meditate as Christians," *L'Osservatore Romano* 23 (May 28 1990) 8.

Basil Pennington, in one of the few lengthy reviews of the Letter,⁷⁴ attempts to read it in the proper perspective, namely that it addresses Christian meditation at an opportune time when the West is being flooded with Eastern forms of meditation. While agreeing with the Letter's theology (which he correctly calls rather "dense"), Pennington indicates several critical points where he thinks the document falls short of its own praiseworthy purpose and legitimate pastoral concerns.

Pennington's most telling criticism regards the Letter's references to contemplation and the contemplative life. He complains that its authors "have very limited experience of the Christian contemplative way."⁷⁵ He points out that the Letter highlights psalmody and scriptural prayer but "has less to say about the more contemplative traditions of the Jesus Prayer and that of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Centering Prayer)."⁷⁶ As a member of a contemplative order, Pennington is obviously disappointed by the Letter's handling of the lifestyle and prayer traditions of contemplative monastic institutions. He writes:

The letter does not seem to have a real appreciation for the value of contemplation and the contemplative way in itself. It sees the value of prayer and contemplation in their orientation to action. In this, the letter reflects an attitude that has prevailed in the Western Church during the last few centuries, which has led to a dearth of masters and guides among us, and has led many to believe that it is necessary to turn to the East to find such.⁷⁷

Even more drastic criticism has come from some Catholic commentators in mission lands. For instance, Ama Samy, an Indian Jesuit Zen Master,⁷⁸ after pointing to various positive elements in the Letter (such as its recommendation of a master who guides the apprentice in his or her prayerful life), goes on to draw attention to its serious inadequacies. He makes the following points: (1) The definition of prayer there adopted, namely that of a personal dialogue between man and God, ignores the "presence, awareness, mystery, silence, and resting"⁷⁹ that describe more accurately what happens when one prays. (2) The references to classical Christian writers is rather selective and favors

⁷⁴ Basil Pennington, O.S.C.O., "Christian Meditation: The Ratzinger Letter," *Pastoral Life* 39 (December 1990) 6–10.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 9. Pennington has written several works on this topic, e.g., *Centering Prayer* (New York: Doubleday, 1980).

⁷⁷ "Christian Meditation" 9.

⁷⁸ See his articles "May a Christian Practice Zen or Yoga?" *Inculturation* 5.1 (Spring 1990) 28–32 and "Can a Christian Practice Zen, Yoga, or TM?" *Review for Religious* 50 (1991) 535–44. The more recent essay is an enlarged version of the previous one.

⁷⁹ "May a Christian Practice Zen or Yoga?" 30.

the conceptual (kataphatic) form rather than the nonconceptual (apophatic) way of praying.⁸⁰ (3) The propositional model of revelation, on which the document relies, is both inadequate and inappropriate to describe the relationship between God and the praying believer.⁸¹ (4) The Letter seems to condemn all use of Eastern methods and techniques.⁸² (5) It has an inadequate theology of religions which does not allow for genuine inculturation and which is based on misunderstanding of Eastern religious practices.⁸³

Understanding the CDF's Letter

There is little doubt that the Letter has been the source of heated debates both within and outside Catholic circles. Several reflections on what the Letter tries to do and what it omits might contribute to a better understanding of its meaning and significance.

The first thing to bear in mind is that its main thrust is to clarify the nature of Christian meditation. It is not intended as an attack on Hinduism and/or Buddhism. Truly enough, it can be argued that the Letter indirectly disapproves and denigrates Eastern meditative practices. But these are nowhere denounced or condemned,⁸⁴ even though they are ascribed a secondary and somewhat peripheral role to the traditional forms of Christian prayer and meditation.⁸⁵

The Letter also attempts to connect the practice of meditation with its ideological roots. The maxim "lex orandi, lex credendi" (sec. 3) is a sound, interpretative tool for understanding various Eastern practices. Yoga, Zen, and TM are meditative practices that do not arise and occur in a vacuum. They are intimately connected with a particular world-view and/or theology. While the Letter does not deny that some East-

⁸⁰ Ibid. 30. On the distinction between these two forms of prayer see Harvey Egan, S.J., "Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticism," *TS* 39 (1978) 399-426.

⁸¹ "May a Christian Practice Zen or Yoga?" 30.

⁸² Ibid. 31.

⁸³ Samy ("Can a Christian Practice Zen, Yoga, or TM?" 543) criticizes as inaccurate the Letter's description of Nirvana (n. 14) as merely moral purification. To those acquainted with Buddhism the Letter's understanding of Buddhist concepts is simply inept. Confer Roger Coreless and Paul Knitter, eds. *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity: Essays in Explorations* (New York: Paulist, 1990).

⁸⁴ Servais, "In Search of the Hidden God," writing in a rather conservative Catholic magazine, states that the Letter does not condemn experiments with techniques of prayer like Yoga and Zen.

⁸⁵ Samy ("Can a Christian Practice Zen, Yoga, or TM?" 542-43) makes the point that the Letter assigns to Eastern techniques the function of assisting men and women in their ascetical struggles and in their goal of moral purification. Zen and Yoga, apparently, contribute nothing to the individual's advancement in the illuminative and unitive ways.

ern religious practices can be incorporated into Christian spirituality, it suggests caution lest a non-Christian theology and ideology be unwittingly adopted together with Eastern religious practices.⁸⁶ Indirectly the Letter raises deeper questions that are left unanswered: To what extent can Eastern meditative techniques become viable methods of Christian prayer? Can Christian theology be "inculturated" into these foreign methods of meditation? Are those Christians who take up Yoga and Zen simply adopting mechanical tools helpful for prayer? Or are they incorporating some elements of Eastern spirituality that are similar to, or compatible with, Christianity? Since some Catholic writers have pointed out that Zen, for instance, has important similarities with some forms of Christian prayer,⁸⁷ the question is whether Zen can be practiced not merely as a preparation for Christian meditation, but rather as Christian meditation itself.⁸⁸

Further, the Letter presents the common Christian position that Christianity represents the fullness of faith. Indirectly, it affirms that Christian spirituality is made up of richer and divergent traditions that should satisfy the quest of Christians for growth in their spiritual life and union with God. The Letter's theology of religions seems to be in harmony with that of the Pontifical Council of Inter-Religious Dialogue,⁸⁹ even though it betrays little, if any, knowledge of recent speculations on the relationship between Christian and other world religions.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ This is hardly a new approach to Eastern meditation. See, e.g., J. M. Dechanet, *Christian Yoga* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), who argues that the practice of Yoga can be used by Christians simply as a technique. In an appendix by Rev. Regamey, O.P., one finds the same warnings contained in the Letter, namely that the practice of Yoga might lead to the acceptance of Hindu philosophical and theological tenets (169 ff.).

⁸⁷ Daniel O'Hanlon, "Zen and the Spiritual Exercises: A Dialogue Between Faiths," *TS* 39 (1978) 737–68.

⁸⁸ See Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle, *Zen Meditation for Christians* (London: Burns and Oates, 1974) 155; and Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1972), and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968). There are serious disagreements among Catholics on this issue. The editors of *La Civiltà Cattolica* in an essay on Yoga and Zen, which makes no reference to the Letter, present a much less tolerant view than the one expressed by the CDF. They argue that Yoga and Zen are radically opposed to Christian meditation. They reluctantly concede that some Catholics, especially if they were born and raised in an Asian country, who are theologically and spiritually prepared as well as psychologically healthy, might find the practice of some aspects of Yoga or Zen advantageous. See "'Yoga' e 'Zen' possono aiutare la meditazione cristiana?" *Civiltà Cattolica* 141 (April 2, 1990) 3–15.

⁸⁹ See Robert B. Sheard, *Interreligious Dialogue in the Catholic Church Since Vatican II* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1987) 54 ff.

⁹⁰ See, e.g., Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Towards World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985) 120 ff. Hans Küng and Jürgen

Moreover, the Letter is also in accord with the spirit of Vatican II's declaration *Nostra aetate*, which is responsible for initiating a fundamental shift in Catholic attitude towards and relationship between, men and women of other faiths. The Letter certainly does not categorically rule out the adoption of Eastern meditation techniques. It explains that

Just as "the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true in these [non-Christian] religions," neither should these ways [of Yoga, etc.] be rejected out of hand simply because they are not Christian. On the contrary, one can take from them what is useful so long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured (sec. 16).

The Letter also admits that there are common elements shared by non-Christian and Christian spiritualities (sec. 26) and that meditation practices both from Eastern Christianity and non-Christian religions can make positive contribution to one's life of prayer (sec. 28).

Finally, to understand the Letter on meditation one must bear in mind that it is a document issued by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This congregation functions, in sociological terms, as "a boundary maintenance mechanism." As such, it tends to stress differences rather than similarities and often unintentionally ends up creating barriers to understanding rather than building bridges of mutual cooperation. Thus the Letter warns against syncretism and attempts to clarify the Catholic position on meditation and to show in what manner it differs from other forms of prayer and contemplation. The need for clarification is obvious. Yoga and Zen have already been incorporated in programs run in several Catholic retreat centers.⁹¹ Though the adaptation of these two forms of Eastern meditation to Christian spirituality has found favor among many Catholic theologians and retreat directors,⁹² the Letter is still wary of Eastern

Moltmann, eds., *Christianity Among World Religions* (London: T. & T. Clark, 1986) offer different perspectives for a theology of religions. See also Michael Amaloss, S.J., "Rationales for Dialogue with World Religions," *Origins* 19 (February 1, 1990) 572-77, where two main theological views are briefly outlined.

⁹¹ See Patricia Christian-Meyer, *Catholic America: Self-Renewal Centers and Retreats* (Santa Fe, N.M.: John Muir Publications, 1989).

⁹² The following books are representative of the Catholic position on Zen that sees some fundamental similarities between Christian prayer and Zen: J. K. Kadowaki, S.J., *Zen and the Bible: A Priest's Experience* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); Aelred Graham, *Zen Catholicism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963); William Johnston, *Christian Zen* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); and Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*. Among those known for their attempts to relate Hindu spirituality to Christianity is Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda). See, e.g., his book *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1974).

influences and draws attention to some theoretical and practical questions which have not been fully answered. The use of Transcendental Meditation, which is in fact a newer technique, has been so heatedly debated in Catholic periodical and magazine literature⁹³ that one rightly wonders whether, and to what degree, it can be incorporated into Christian spirituality.

While the cautious approach adopted in the Letter might, in the context of the current religious turmoil, be justifiable, it unfortunately suffers from so many deficiencies that, in the long run, it is bound to create, rather than dissipate, confusion. It discusses the relationship between Christian and non-Christian forms of mysticism from a rather narrow theological stance. Moreover, it exhibits little knowledge of Eastern meditation techniques and seems quite unfamiliar with the experiences of Catholics who practice Yoga or Zen.⁹⁴ It could also be interpreted as harboring a suspicious attitude to some forms of Christian mysticism. For these reasons, it presents four main obstacles to genuine interreligious dialogue:

1. It provides little background to the current Catholic interest in non-Christian forms of prayer. Such interest predates the influx of Eastern religious movements in the West. Some evaluation, adaptation, and incorporation of these Eastern methods have, in fact, already occurred and have, consequently, led to the acceptance of "Christian Yoga" and "Christian Zen" as standard terminology in Christian spirituality. The Letter seems to be unaware that this has happened both in the traditional mission lands and in the West.

2. It does not give due consideration to the variety of mystical and spiritual traditions that are part of the history of Christianity, even

⁹³ Catholic evaluation of TM has been extremely divergent. E.g., Victor Kundalai ("The Trap: Transcendental Meditation," *Social Justice Review* 68 [1975] 249–52) maintains that its practice opens the individual to satanic influences. John Dreyer ("Can A Christian Practice TM," *Visitor: National Catholic Family Magazine* 67 [August 13, 1978] 8–9) states categorically that Catholics cannot reconcile their faith with TM. William J. Whelan ("TM: Expensive Meditation," *U.S. Catholic* 42 [January 1977] 32–36) thinks that the conflict between the Catholic faith and the Hindu origins of TM is not significant. Mariasusai Dhavamony ("Transcendental Meditation," *Bulletin of the Secretariat for Non-Christians* 12 [1977] 154–67) describes TM as "nature mysticism." Ursula Fleming ("Transcendental Meditation," *Doctrine and Life* 28 [December 1978] 641–45) expresses views similar to those put forward in the Letter. And Basil Pennington ("TM and Christian Prayer," *Contemplative Review* 9 [Spring 1976] 26–34) claims that TM leads to pure prayer and corresponds to classical Christian teaching.

⁹⁴ See Hans Urs von Balthasar ("Christian and Non-Christian Meditation," *Work and Spirit* 2 [1980] 146), who admits that he "has no experience in non-Christian meditation." If indeed he wrote the Letter, then one wonders how reliable his comments are on a spiritual experience with which he has never been in touch.

though it refers approvingly to several Christian ways of prayer. Recent studies on mysticism offer a broader and more stimulating view of the mystical experience⁹⁵ than the Letter is willing to admit.

3. Besides, while affirming that Eastern religious practices contain good elements, it furnishes few specifics. One is left with the vague impression that Eastern meditation techniques could provide alternative bodily postures and mental compositions that might be conducive to prayer and bring about some psychological benefits. Without stating it explicitly, the Letter seems to insinuate that Eastern modes of contemplation have little genuine spiritual content and cannot provide a point of contact between human beings and their Creator. These modes ultimately cannot and do not lead to God.

4. Finally, it lacks the sensitivity needed for dialogue between people of different faiths. Truly enough, Hindus and Buddhists have probably overreacted to a document that was more concerned with preserving Christian belief and practice than examining those of other religions. Nevertheless, the Letter may have inadvertently strengthened the suspicions of some adherents of other faiths that the Catholic Church uses dialogue as a subtle means of proselytization and conversion.⁹⁶

One must further add that the Letter also tends to discourage intrareligious dialogue within the Catholic Church. Its contents are in sharp contrast to the Vatican Report because the Letter focuses not on the institution but on one aspect of Catholic life, namely spirituality. Rather than addressing the Catholic Church as a whole, the CDF's doc-

⁹⁵ Harvey Egan, S. J., *What Are They Saying About Mysticism?* (New York: Paulist, 1982).

⁹⁶ For an example of the Hindu apprehension of dialogue, see S. J. Samartha, *Dialogue Between Men of Living Faiths* (Geneva: WCC 1971) 21–31. See also Sean Dwan, "How to Undermine Buddhism: The Dialogue Conspiracy," *Inculturation* 5 (Summer 1990) 42–46; here Dwan responds to a series of articles published in a South Korean Buddhist monthly magazine, where dialogue is described as a new weapon aimed at "absorbing Buddhism into Catholicism." That suspicion of motives is one of the major obstacles to dialogue is recognized in Vatican official documents. See, e.g., Cardinal Francis Arinze, "The Urgency of Dialogue with Non-Christians," *Origins* 14 (March 14, 1985) sec. 34. In a more recent document, "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (sec. 52), Cardinals Francis Arinze and Josef Tomko reiterate the same view; this paper, developed by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, can be found in *Origins* 21 (July 4, 1991) 121–35. The same suspicions are at times present between Christian churches. Several Orthodox Patriarchs have terminated their participation in dialogue with other Christians, citing as one reason the latter's use of dialogue to convert Orthodox Christians to other denominations. See George C. Papademetriou, "Orthodox Churches Terminate Dialogue with Anglicans," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26 (1989) 607–8.

ument seems to have in mind those ecclesiastics who have limited knowledge about and/or interest in developments in the theology of religions since Vatican II. Moreover, it portrays a view of meditation and contemplation that is more suitable to male monastic institutions and has little to say about contemplation in daily life for the average married Catholics who wish to deepen their spiritual life.

THE CARDINALS' CONSISTORY

The third major event marking the Vatican's increased concern about the NRMs was the Cardinals' Fourth Extraordinary Consistory of April 1991. One session was dedicated to the NRMs; its agenda title was "The Proclamation of Christ, the Only Savior, and the Challenge of the Sects." A brief Communiqué summarizing the deliberations was issued. During this meeting seven cardinals spoke. Five gave reports on the situations in various continents.⁹⁷ Cardinal Arinze, Prefect of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogues, and Cardinal Tonko, Prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, delivered somewhat lengthy presentations. Like the Vatican Report, the deliberations of the cardinals demonstrate a concern with the institutional issues that the Catholic Church must face worldwide, if it is to succeed in providing effective ministry to its members.

The Communiqué issued by the Consistory adds little to the contents of the Vatican Report. It remarks that the rise of the NRMs represents "a changing phenomenon of alarming proportions," and is "one of the greatest challenges which the Church must face with evangelical charity and apostolic courage" (sec. 2). As in the Report, there is stress on internal evangelization aimed at helping Catholics "rediscover their identity as well as the riches of their faith in Christ" (sec. 2). The cardinals mention two factors in this evangelization: the study of the Bible and the role of "ecclesial communities." They further state that both the liturgy and popular devotions must be adapted to the cultural context. The ongoing study of the cults, the promotion of a healthy theology, and an adequate pastoral strategy are recommended. One should also note that, although the cardinals requested the pope to write an encyclical on the value of human life, they made no similar recommendation with respects to the NRMs, doubtlessly an indication

⁹⁷ The following were the cardinals who spoke and the geographical areas their reports covered: Cardinal Alexandre do Nascimento, Archbishop of Luanda, Angola (Africa); Cardinal Richardo J. Vidal, Archbishop of Cebu, Philippines (Asia); Cardinal Angel Suquia Goicoechea, Archbishop of Madrid, Spain (Europe); Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo, Archbishop of Managua, Nicaragua (Latin America); and Cardinal Ernesto Corripio Ahumada, Archbishop of Mexico City, Mexico (North America).

that the official Catholic position is still being formulated and developed.

The various regional reports consist of factual accounts of the number of NRMs and their influence. There seems to be agreement about the increase in the activities of the NRMs and about the need to do something to prevent Catholics from abandoning their faith. Many ideas from the 1986 Vatican Report, such as the need for religious education, the formation of basic ecclesial communities, and the inculturation of Christianity in different cultural settings are incorporated in these regional reports.

Cardinal Arinze's Address

Cardinal Arinze's presentation, entitled "The Challenge of the Sects or New Religious Movements: A Pastoral Approach," is a well-prepared and elaborate analysis in which he first discusses four main topics: (1) the terminology used to designate the sects, (2) a typology of all the NRMs, (3) the origins of the NRMs and the reasons for their spread, and (4) the problems and challenges they bring with them. He then outlines both the general and specific responses that the Catholic Church should make. His talk is similar in structure, content, and spirit to the Vatican Report, though there are several fundamental changes.

The first is that Cardinal Arinze decides to call the sects "New Religious Movements" because he finds the term neutral and inclusive (unlike the word "cult"). He further admits that the NRMs are religious entities: "They are called religious because they profess to offer a vision of the religious or sacred world, or means to reach other objectives such as transcendental knowledge, spiritual illumination or self-realization, or because they offer to members their answers to fundamental questions" (sec. 1).

The second change is that some form of dialogue with the members of the NRMs seems to be implicitly recognized. Arinze raises the question whether dialogue is at all possible, and he suggests that the difficulty lies not in the principle itself, but rather in "how to conduct dialogue with the NRMs with due prudence and discernment." In a passage which might be interpreted as patronizing, he explains that dialogue is easier with, and should probably be restricted to, "pastors and persons well trained theologically" since "it might be useless or harmful for the faithful not well prepared to confront the forceful proselytizing of some NRMs" (sec. 33).

The third change is that Cardinal Arinze explicitly rejects a general condemnation of NRMs. While the Vatican Report favors such an attitude, it does not enunciate it in unmistakable terms. Arinze writes:

"One, however, should not engage in a blanket condemnation or generalization by applying to all the NRMs the more negative attitudes of some. Nor should the NRMs be judged incapable of evolution in the positive sense" (sec. 9).⁹⁸ And again, specifying the pastoral approach to the NRMs, he points out exactly what the Church's reaction should not be. "It should not be an attack. It should not be negative against their members, although the church might have to defend herself against the NRMs that attack her unjustly. It should rather be based on light and love" (sec. 29).

The fourth novelty in the cardinal's speech is his inclusion of satanic influences among the causes of the current cult activity. This is expressed in a rather simple manner as follows: "We should not exclude, among the explanations of the rise and spread of the sects of NRMs, the action of the devil, even if this action is unknown to the people involved. The devil is the enemy who sows darnel among the wheat when the people are asleep" (sec. 17).

And, finally, Arinze appears to lean heavily towards the view that some drastic structural changes in the Church might be necessary if its ministry is to be effective. While still adhering to the traditional distinction between clergy and laity, he suggests that clericalism might lead Catholics to seek religious nourishment in groups where hierarchical distinctions are minimal or nonexistent. He asserts:

Indeed the sects or NRMs flourish more where effective priestly activity is absent or sporadic. But it is also true that the church needs dynamic lay leadership. Accentuated clericalism can marginalize the lay faithful and make them look on the church as an institution run by ordained bureaucratic functionaries. The NRMs, on the other hand, display much lay activity. . . . What is more needed perhaps is a more participatory apostolate, more opportunities for the lay faithful to hold responsibilities, more sharing between priests and lay people and greater leadership by the laity in bringing the spirit of Christ into the earthly society (sec. 40).

Cardinal Arinze's address at the consistory, while remaining consistent with the spirit of the Vatican Report, seems to have made some advances both in understanding and dealing with the NRMs. There are, however, some ambiguities in his treatment.

His indirect assertion that the NRMs are religious bodies is mitigated when he writes that "a third type of sects shows signs of a decomposition of the genuine idea of religion and of a return of paganism" (sec. 8). He seems to be voicing serious doubts as to whether contemporary paganism could be called a religion.⁹⁹ In fact he seems to

⁹⁸ The same rejection of a "blanket condemnation" appears in sec. 33.

⁹⁹ In sociological literature and in publications issued by pagan groups themselves,

hold that neopaganism puts "the self instead of God at the centre of worship" and claims "extraordinary knowledge which regards itself as above all religions" (sec. 22). Neopaganism, occultism, magic, spiritism, and devil worship are all, unfortunately, lumped together, when they should have been carefully distinguished.

Further, when discussing the problems and challenges that the NRMs have brought (sec. 19–28), it is not always clear whether Arinze is talking about new religions (like the Unification Church) and/or traditional sects (like the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons).

Moreover, even though he is careful to refer to "some NRMs" and not to the phenomenon as a whole, his address can easily be perceived as an allegation that the majority of cults are likely to bring about all the troubles he enumerates.¹⁰⁰ Statements like "Many NRMs use methods that violate the rights of other believers or religious bodies to religious freedom" (sec. 24) are too vague to be substantiated by hard data. Using means of education, evangelization, and proselytization that take into consideration the needs of individuals is hardly such a violation.

There is also some evidence that Arinze has been influenced by anticult propaganda, an influence that can be detected in his treatment of forceful proselytization (sec. 24), belligerent attitudes to the Catholic Church (sec. 25), psychological harm to individuals (sec. 26), and problems for society (sec. 27). Some of the reasons given in support of psychological harm, such as that "there is also the question of control over the salaries or savings of the members" (sec. 26), are equally applicable to Catholic religious orders and congregations. And while he is correct in stating that "some NRMs have created problems for society or the government because of their social posture" (sec. 27), he seems oblivious to the fact that some tension between religion and contemporary society is inevitable. The U.S. Bishops' pastoral letter on the economy, for instance, would certainly create such tensions, if it were taken seriously.¹⁰¹

The issue of whether the practices of the NRMs are detrimental to

the terms "paganism," "neopaganism," and "wicca" refer to the modern revival of pre-Christian European religions and/or other ancient faiths like those of Egypt. There seems to be no reason why neopaganism cannot be called "religious" in the sense of the definition provided by Arinze himself.

¹⁰⁰ Ten problems and challenges referred to in sections 19 to 28 include: the unity of the Church; ecumenism; the understanding and denial of the faith; abandonment of the faith; atheism and non-belief; proselytism; combativeness towards the Catholic Church; psychological harm to individuals; the relationship of NRMs with society; and NRMs as a phenomenon to be taken seriously.

¹⁰¹ "Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy," *Origins* 16 (November 27, 1986) 409–55.

one's psychological well-being must be settled by psychiatrists and not by theologians and evangelizers. Both the Vatican Report and Arinze's speech contain references to the purported psychological setbacks that involvement in NRMs might bring. The cryptic statement in Arinze's speech (sec. 26) might give the impression that he subscribes to one of the basic assumptions of the anticult movement, namely that the cults are evil organizations that invariably harm those who join them. But Arinze, following the Vatican Report, fails to mention that there are many studies that show that membership in the NRMs have beneficial effects on their members, relieving them of anxiety and providing them with guidance in their quest for religious meaning and in their difficulties in coping with the strains and tensions of modern industrial society.¹⁰² Again, Arinze's implicit reference to Jonestown (sec. 27) could be interpreted as an endorsement of the anticult view that all cults are embryonic replicas of the People's Temple, even though he quickly adds that "this is an extreme case." But if it is such an extreme case, then it does not deserve to be numbered with such widespread and continuously occurring phenomena as "the abandonment of faith" (sec. 22) and "atheism and non-belief" (sec. 23).

Cardinal Tomko's Address

Cardinal Tomko's address presents a sharp contrast to that of Arinze. Entitled "On Relativizing Christ: Sects and the Church," it leaves the reader wondering whether this talk would have been better addressed to a session dealing with post-Vatican II theology of religions in traditional mission lands. There is very little reference to sects, cults, and NRMs. Tomko links the rise and spread of NRMs to the lack of proper instruction in the Catholic faith. In the very first paragraph of his address, he remarks that: "Doctrinal confusion regarding the content of faith opens the way to the proliferation of sects, to their practical justification and above all to a lack of commitment in pastoral care and the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ, which establishes the Christian community."¹⁰³ The result of improper and unsatisfactory catechetical instruction is that the faithful are bewildered as to what they are supposed to believe and become easy targets of cults that offer definitive belief systems.

Tomko commends those theologians who have been engaged since Vatican II in the Church's efforts at interreligious dialogue, but he laments that some¹⁰⁴ "have developed unacceptable and destructive

¹⁰² Saliba, *Psychiatry and the Cults* xvii ff.

¹⁰³ *Origins* 20 (April 25, 1991) 753.

¹⁰⁴ Cardinal Tomko's address does not specify who these theologians are. Peter

doctrines, which can be reduced to three principal themes: Christ, the Spirit and the kingdom."¹⁰⁵ He then proceeds to outline and berate the doctrinal mistakes that are being made in the name of dialogue. He argues that the teachings of these theologians, because they water down the traditional doctrines on Christ, the Spirit, and the kingdom of God, have devastating consequences: "They are weakening the missionary spirit, reducing evangelization to mere dialogue and development, with the abandonment of proclamation, catechesis and, logically, conversions and baptisms."¹⁰⁶

It is obvious that Cardinal Tomko is writing from the Asian perspective, and he seems to be dealing more with the problems being encountered in mission lands than with the effects of the rise of NRMs in the West. Indirectly, however, he draws attention to one of the pastoral challenges alluded to in the Vatican Report, namely "the need for evangelization, catechesis, education, and ongoing formation—biblical, theological, ecumenical—of the faithful at the level of the local communities, and of the clergy and those involved in formation" (sec. 3.2). He also highlights the unresolved tension that exists between evangelization and dialogue.¹⁰⁷

Cardinal Tomko, like Cardinal Arinze, does not attack the NRMs themselves. Both agree that the reasons why Catholics join NRMs are endemic—they stem largely from the Catholic Church itself. They subscribe to the view that it is necessary to remove the "doctrinal disorientation or confusion in the Catholic community," part of which is "due to doubts sown by some Catholic theologians and others who contest some teachings of the magisterium,"¹⁰⁸ though Arinze maintains that this is just one of the many pastoral responses that must be taken into consideration. But then the two cardinals part company. Arinze believes that the very structures of the Church must be carefully examined and opts for more reforms and religious adaption to

Hebblethwaite, commenting on the Cardinals' meeting, suggests that Sri Lankan Jesuit Aloysius Pieris is "probably the kind of theologian Tomko had in mind" ("Cardinals Study Sects, Digressing to Aim at Other Targets," *National Catholic Reporter* 27.25 [April 19, 1991] 6). Pieris has been one of the more outspoken theologians on the need for inculturation. For his theology of religions, consult his *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

¹⁰⁵ *Origins* 20 (April 25, 1991) 753.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 754.

¹⁰⁷ For some reflections on this tension, see Eugene Hillman, *Many Paths: A Catholic Approach to Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989) 66 ff. Pope John Paul II, in his recent encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (December 7, 1990) sec. 50–56, distinguishes between dialogue and evangelization and sees them as complementary elements in the Church's relationship to other religions.

¹⁰⁸ Arinze, "The Challenge of the Sects and New Religious Movements," sec. 34.

contemporary culture; Tomko believes that the religious education that Catholics receive is muddled, if not wrong, and prefers to stress the strict teaching of, and adherence to, traditional dogma.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

The publication of several major official documents within a span of five years (1986–1991) reveals an intensified concern about the presence and success of the NRMs. But these same documents raise the nagging question: Why the sudden burst of interest? The new religious and spiritual groups have been around for over twenty years, and concern about the cults was already rampant by the mid-1970s. The documents belatedly reflect this public worry about sects and cults. But they may also be indirectly pointing to important religious changes that have already taken place and are bound to affect the global status of the Catholic Church.

The observer of the current religious scene in the Western world notices two main fundamental changes in traditional religion, changes not unrelated to the growth of the NRMs. The first is that the Church appears to be losing its grip on young adults, many of whom are not abandoning religion but rather joining other religious groups, Christian or other. Preoccupation with the spiritual needs of the faithful is a direct outcome of the awareness that it is increasingly difficult to retain members who were born and raised as Catholics. Several of the documents suggest that the tendency in some quarters to blame the activities of the NRMs themselves and/or the influence of our materialistic culture does not offer a sufficient explanation. One must, therefore, locate the problem within the Church itself.

The second fact is the growing evidence that the Catholic Church is losing its influence in many traditionally Catholic countries, particularly in Latin America; the gains of Pentecostal and evangelical denominations and sects are already altering the religious geography of that continent. The cultural/political hegemony and religious monopoly of the Catholic Church have been lost or are diminishing in those parts of the world where it once enjoyed strength and security. Catholics, young and old, are being exposed to more religious and spiritual options in the open marketplace of religious ideas, experiences, and activities. The Catholic Church is now being forced to ask how it can compete with a large variety of religious institutions in a world where the freedom of religion is a much-prized religious and sociocultural value. In this emergent religious world order the customary forms of organization, evangelization, and ministry require some scrutiny. Their effectiveness and appropriateness must be evaluated. New ways of being "religious" and of being a "church" must be explored.

Given these worldwide changes in religious consciousness and expression, the Church cannot effectively respond to the NRMs in traditional ways. And since official interest in the problems brought to the fore by the new religious groups is relatively recent, the Catholic Church finds itself not quite ready to formulate a universal policy towards the NRMs.¹⁰⁹ Arinze, in his address at the Cardinals' Consistory, notes that the "question of the NRMs does not admit of a quick and easy solution" (sec. 32). Yet the documents do point to the dilemmas that confront the Church at the end of the second millennium and to some specific directions in which official reaction to the NRMs might be heading.

It is unlikely that the Catholic Church will adopt or condone an anticult policy or program comparable to those that have been operative in different European countries and in North America. The comments and reflections of the Vatican documents on the NRMs recognize that many diverse causes are responsible for their rise and success in the second half of the twentieth century. They refrain from indulging in, or condoning, any kind of diatribes. They are not apologetic in tone and make no attempt to refute the tenets of the cults, even though they do not rule out that some apologetics in religious instruction programs might be necessary.¹¹⁰ Consequently, they cannot be confused with, and much less quoted as, anticult statements. They implicitly suggest that to treat the cults and their members unjustly and uncharitably would be counterproductive. Moreover, it will probably be more in harmony with the ideology and work of the Pontifical Councils for Promoting Christian Unity and for Inter-Religious Dialogue to recommend, besides the many suggestions included in the Vatican Report, informal (unofficial) dialogue between some Catholics and those few NRMs¹¹¹ that have shown interest in establishing such a relationship.

¹⁰⁹ The document "Dialogue and Proclamation" explicitly excludes the NRMs from its considerations, because "of the diversity of situations which these movements present and the need for discernment on the human and religious values which each contains" (sec. 13).

¹¹⁰ That some apologetics might be of help cannot be denied. See the "Letter of California's Hispanic Bishops on Proselytism among Hispanic Catholics," *Origins* 23 (June 23, 1988) 83–85, where the Bishops address some of the arguments that are used against the Catholic Church and provide Hispanic Catholics with rebuttals. It should be noted, however, that this letter does not recommend religious debates and diatribes, nor does it indulge in counterattacks against those religious groups that target Hispanics in their evangelization efforts.

¹¹¹ Three main new religious movements—the Unification Church, the Hare Krishna Movement, and Scientology—are, in fact, already unofficially engaged in dialogue with the mainline churches. The schismatic branch of the Hare Krishna Movement, New Vrindaban, located in West Virginia, also conducts regular interfaith meetings and

In this context it should be borne in mind that the program of dialogue, initiated by Vatican II and outlined in some detail by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (1964),¹¹² is universal in its scope and should include, in some form or other, the new religions, no matter how aggressive they are in their proselytization campaigns. Pope John Paul II, in a recent address¹¹³ announcing the convocation of the special assembly for African Bishops, spoke of the importance of the dialogue that the Church is engaged in with the world and with the various religions. Observing that dialogue is often a formidable enterprise in which one has "to listen to others with respect, charity and patience," he adds:

It is difficult to continue to stretch out a hand to people who offer no reciprocal gesture of response. Nevertheless, even with fundamentalists and fanatics, whether religious or ideological, the injunction of St. Paul in Romans 12:18 remains valid for us: "As far as in you lies, live in peace with everyone." The risks inherent in dialogue must be accepted, even and especially, where dialogue is difficult. . . . (sec. 56).

Consequently, the Catholic Church will continue to see the NRMs as a challenge and opportunity rather than a doomsday threat. Other religions, new or old, should elicit a positive response from Christians because, in the words of Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris missio*,¹¹⁴ "they stimulate them to discover and acknowledge the sign of God's presence." (sec. 56). Though sometimes the word "threat" is used to describe the perception of the cults' activities, it is obvious from the context that a fearful and desperate reaction to them is not what is being contemplated. In the same encyclical, John Paul II, reflecting on para-Christian sects that "are sowing confusion by their activities," still prefers the Church's approach to be ecumenical: "The expansion of these sects represents a threat for the Catholic Church and for all ecclesial communities with which she is engaged in dialogue. Whenever possible and in the light of local circumstances, the response of Christians can itself be an ecumenical one" (sec. 50).

conferences. The Unification Church has its own program for interreligious dialogue. See Amy Cuhel-Schuckers, "Ecumenism in the Unification Church," *Unification News* 10 (July 1991) 19.

¹¹² *The Pope Speaks* 10 (1964) 253-96.

¹¹³ "The Church in Africa and Her Evangelizing Mission toward the Year 2000: 'You Shall Be My Witnesses.'" This address appeared in three installments in *L'Osservatore Romano* 24 (January 7, 14, and 21, 1991).

¹¹⁴ Issued on December 7, 1990, this document can be found in *The Pope Speaks* 36 (May/June 1991) 138-83.

Because of the variety both of cults and sects and of the cultural environments in which they flourish, different approaches might be adopted. Dialogue with Pentecostal Churches has been going on for a while and attempts could be made to include newer Pentecostal sects.¹¹⁵ Recently, a dialogue group, cosponsored by the Los Angeles Catholic Archdiocesan Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California, met for the first time.¹¹⁶ The Buddhist Sangha represents nine Asian traditions and could incorporate Buddhist organizations that have been attracting largely Western individuals in search of a religious dimension in their daily lives. A similar initiative with the Hindu community is under way.¹¹⁷ Because many countries in the West have Asian immigrants, interreligious exchanges between people of different faiths could, at least in some cases, include those NRMs that align themselves with one of the major religions of the East.

The emphasis will continue to be on ministering to the needs of the faithful, not merely through improved programs of biblical and religious instruction, but also through the development of spiritual opportunities that cater to the religious need of the faithful.¹¹⁸ Direct evangelization of the cults themselves is fraught with difficulties, since many of their members are first-generation converts. To launch a counter-proselytization or -missionizing campaign might generate new problems and tensions rather than solve those created by the NRMs. Strong proselytization is frequently accompanied by a lack of respect of other faiths and by a disregard of individual's right to religious freedom.

Finally, given the stress that most of the documents put on the need for establishing "ecclesial" communities¹¹⁹ which provide faith-

¹¹⁵ The Charismatic Movement has been an important factor in the dialogue between the Catholic Church and Pentecostalism. See Peter Hocken, "Dialogue Extraordinary," *One in Christ* 24 (1988) 203-13.

¹¹⁶ "Buddhist-Catholic Dialogue: An Early Journey," *Origins* 20 (April 11, 1991) 713-19.

¹¹⁷ The start of an official dialogue between the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and the Hindu Communities (including the Vedanta Society) in Southern California was announced on March 28, 1990; see the report in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 27 (1990) 229-30.

¹¹⁸ Part 4 of the Vatican Report (sec. 34-42) elaborates the manner in which the Church can renew and revitalize her pastoral work. It is necessary to point out that what this report has in mind is not just the intellectual knowledge of one's faith, but also the experiential dimension that is so often missing in the lives of many Catholics.

¹¹⁹ Known in Spanish as "comunidades (eclesiales) de base," and in English as "base," "basic," "ecclesial," or "small Christian communities." There is a large body of literature on these communities. For a brief history, see J. Stephen Rhodes, "An Intro-

sharing experiences, it is possible that the most concrete pastoral response to the sects and cults of our age will be the restructuring of the traditional parish. In other words, merely strengthening the faithful's devotional and sacramental life and providing better opportunities for religious instruction will not suffice. The situation is much more complex and calls for a more radical approach that deals with the very heart of the matter. As William Dinges suggests, the pastoral challenge of the NRMs is to address the very viability of traditional ecclesial structures and to adapt them to modern sociocultural conditions.¹²⁰

Arinze's analysis of the problems that the Catholic Church faces on the parish level are plainly expressed in his consistory address. Talking about the reasons why the cults are successful, he affirms, in an eloquent passage that is more challenging than the NRMs themselves, that there is a pressing need for a radical reform of the way parishes are organized and run and of the method by which the faithful are so often treated. He reminds us that:

Where parishes are too large and impersonal, they [the NRMs] install small communities in which the individual feels known, appreciated, loved and given a meaningful role. Where lay people or women feel marginalized, they assign leadership roles to them. Where the sacred liturgy is celebrated in a cold and routine manner, they celebrate religious services marked by crowd participation. . . . Where inculturation is still in its hesitating stages, the NRMs give an appearance of indigenous religious groups which seem to the people as locally rooted. Where the Church seems presented too much as an institution marked by structures and hierarchy, the NRMs stress personal relationship with God. No one can doubt that the NRMs show palpable dynamism (sec. 14).

Whether the establishment of ecclesial communities will be the most pastorally effective means of responding to the cults remains to be seen. What is clear is that the ecclesial communities, once they take root in the parish structure, could have an impact on the universal Church that will transform the very role of both its clergy and its lay

duction to the Latin American Base Communities," *Cumberland Seminarian* 27 (Fall 1989) 36-45. Confer also Thomas Maney, *Basic Communities: A Pastoral Guide for Renewing Neighborhood Churches* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1984); and Thomas Kleissler, Margo LeBent, and Mary C. McGuinness, *Small Christian Communities: A Vision of Hope* (New York: Paulist, 1991). It should be noted that the Spanish phrase has political and economic connotations that are not expressed in its English equivalents; see. C. René Padilla, "A New Ecclesiology in Latin America," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11 (1987) 156-64.

¹²⁰ "The Vatican Report on Sects, Cults and New Religious Movements" 147.

members. For basic communities offer not only novel ways of ministry, but primarily a new ecclesiology that might be more suited to the changing social structures of the late twentieth century. If basic communities were to be officially sanctioned and encouraged, then future church historians and theologians might look at contemporary NRMs as a blessing in disguise. Not to rise to the real challenge of the new spiritualities and religious options will be to miss the opportunity of recognizing the "signs of the times"¹²¹ and of responding to an indirect call to reform and renewal that are integral elements of Christian faith and life.

¹²¹ This phrase, which figures prominently near the beginning of *Gaudium et spes*, Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (no. 4), occurs frequently in church documents. See, e.g., Cardinal Ahumada's report to the Consistory, 618.

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