

# Revision Notes

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**Syllabus Section:** Religion

**Syllabus Area:** Religious Organisations

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**Issue:** Church, Denomination, Sect and Cult

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## Introduction

In this part of the course we are going to look at a number of aspects of religious belief and activity across a range of societies (including our own). In particular, we are going to look at:

- **Definitions of basic concepts:**

### Theories of religion

- **Religion as a force for social stability and change**
- **The changing nature of religious belief**
- **The process of secularisation and its implications**
- **The analysis of multicultural societies and the role of different religions**
- **The relationship between religious activity and social class / status.**

In relation to the above, before we can analyse the nature of religious belief and religious activity across a range of different societies, it is necessary to construct some sort of "working definition" of the concept of "religion".

At first sight, this should be relatively simple, given we are all aware of "religious beliefs" in our society and "common sense" directs us towards some notion about what is involved (whenever we hear the powerful keyword "religion", for example, some picture of religious activity forms in our minds).

Before I offer some definitions of the concept, you might like to try and outline your definition of the term and then compare this "common sense" version with that offered by a variety of sociologists. My concept of religion involves:

1. A system of beliefs - an "ideological framework" (or paradigm) - that explains both the nature of the world (both physical and social) and the individual's relationship to those worlds.
2. The particular form of belief structure that defines religious beliefs as different to magical belief structures or scientific belief structures is one that involves some form of collective organization for the communal expression of those beliefs.
3. Religious beliefs / systems require social mechanisms for the organization of communal religious activity - churches, temples, sacred monuments, etc. Religious activity, therefore, involves:

Communal activity

The reinforcement of religious norms and values through collective ceremonial activity.

4. A religious belief system (unlike scientific belief systems) venerates the "sacred". That is, they involve a commitment to the belief that a "higher", superhuman or supernatural, power exists over and above the abilities of human beings. This power is normally personified in terms of a "god" or "gods", but may also be expressed simply in terms of abstract "supernatural powers".

The world of the Dugum Dani of New Guinea is organized around supernatural beings called "mogat" - the ghosts of the dead.

The world of the Teton Sioux in America is controlled by the "Waken" powers.

5. Religious activity involves a process of socialization and social control, insofar as it involves an ethical code of conduct. The adoption of such a moral code (sometimes expressed as a set of direct commands from "god") is both a characteristic of religious organization and a means of integrating the individual into the religious community (for example, the "Ten Commandments" of Christianity) and, most importantly, the worship / veneration of an abstract, unrevealed, power. It will also involve some form of collective and individual system of worship.

6. Religious activity is symbolic, insofar as it involves both sacred symbols and, most importantly, the worship or veneration of an abstract, unrevealed, power. It will also involve some form of collective and individual system of worship.

Religion, (as an organized system of beliefs that focuses upon the relationship between human beings and superhuman beings or forces), does, of course, take many forms across different societies. This involves not just differences between religious forms of belief (Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism and so forth) but also differences within religions (the Catholic and Protestant forms of Christianity, for example). In addition, religious expression - in terms of the way in which it is socially / collectively organized - also has many forms. One way of thinking about some of these different forms is to explore the concepts of church, denomination, sect and cult.

**As an exercise, see if you can find definitions and examples of the concepts of Church, Denomination, Sect and Cult.**

**Forms of Religious Organization.**

As we shall see when we look at theories of religion, religious experience, organization and activity in any society varies considerably both between societies and, most importantly, within societies. To complete this brief overview of some of the basic concepts involved in relation to forms of religious organization in society, it would be useful to look in a bit more detail at the nature of the concepts of church, sect, denomination and cult in terms of their significance as forms of religious organization and activity in any society.

**The Church Type of Religious Organization.**

A basic definition of the Church type of religious organization, according to Stephen Moore ("Sociology", 1988), involves the following:

**"A Church...tends to be both large in membership and to hold values that are broadly in line with the general values of society. Often churches are closely related to the State and like the Church of England may be recognized as the State religion; in such circumstances, the church is known as the Established Church."**

In this respect, we can note that Churches:

1. Tend to be monolithic organizations, in that they aim to be the only form of religious organization recognised by the society in which they exist.
2. Are inclusive in terms of their organization, in that an individual is considered a member of a Church simply on the basis of being born into a society in which a Church is the major religious organization in that society.

In this respect a Church offers to minister to the religious needs of everyone in a society, regardless of whether or not the individual consciously embraces the religion.

In addition, a characteristic of the Church type is the fact that there tend to be few, if any, membership tests or entry qualifications (something shared with denominations but not with sects).

3. Historically, Churches have tended to accommodate themselves to the secular order in society (although in many instances - especially in Feudal society - the Church is recognized as playing an active part in the creation and maintenance of the secular order in society).
4. In the above respect, therefore, Churches have historically tended to be aligned with the ruling powers in society. That is, they have tended to support the political and economic objectives of ruling classes and factions.
5. A Church is not necessarily a national organization. In many instances it aspires to be a supra-national organization (that is, one that operates in many countries - good examples being the Roman Catholic form of Christianity and the Islamic Church), spreading it's interpretation of religion across many different societies.

A classic example of this type of monolithic, monotheistic (that is, a belief in only one religious doctrine concerning the nature of God), Church type is the Roman Catholic Church prior to the Reformation of the 16th century. According to Bruce ("Religion in Modern Britain", 1995), the Reformation can be loosely defined as dating from 1517 when Martin Luther "first issued his catalogue of complaints against the medieval church".

Following the Reformation we see the eventual development of a number of different (Protestant) Christian denominations around a variety of charismatic leaders such as Martin Luther (Lutheran Church), John Calvin (Calvinism) and John Wesley (Methodism).

In general terms, it is probably debatable as to whether or not it is possible, at the end of the 20th century, to identify the Church type of religious organization as existing in a viable form. Rather, it is perhaps more plausible to argue that the Church type has given way to a loose coalition of denominations (something we will look at further in a moment).

### **The Sect Type of Religious Organization.**

According to Moore ("Sociology", 1988), a sect type of religious organization involves the idea that:

**"A sect...is usually fairly small in membership and very exclusive in their acceptance of members. They place great stress on obedience and strict conformity to the rules of the sect. They believe that only they know the correct way to Heaven. Examples of sects include the Moonies and Jehovah's Witnesses."**

In addition, it is also useful to note that the leaders of some sects (although not all) claim a divine relationship with God and, occasionally, some kind of divinely-given supernatural power. The Reverend Moon might be an example in this respect.

Ernst Troeltsch ("The Social Teaching of Christian Churches", 1931) emphasized the difference between two main types of religious organization - the Church-type and the Sect-type. For Troeltsch, the Church-type:

**"...is that type of organization which is overwhelmingly conservative, which to a certain extent accepts the secular order [that is, the way in which societies are ordered around non-religious affairs and which may be broadly opposed to religious teachings], and dominates the masses; in principal, therefore, it is universal - that is, it desires to cover the whole life of humanity."**

The sect-type, on the other hand:

**"...are comparatively small groups; they aspire after personal inward perfection and they aim at a direct personal fellowship between members of each group. From the very beginning, therefore, they are forced to organize themselves in small groups, and to renounce the idea of dominating the world. Their attitude towards the world, the state and society may be indifferent, tolerant or hostile, since they have no desire to control and incorporate these forms of social life; on the contrary, they tend to avoid them; their aim is usually either to tolerate their presence alongside of their own body, or even to replace these social institutions by their own society."**

**On the basis of the above, what do you think is the likely relationship between the State, different social classes and each of these two types of religious organization?**

- a. Church-type**
- b. Sect-type**

For Troeltsch, a basic difference in the relationship between these two types of religious organization and the State was reasonably clear-cut. He saw the "fully-developed" Church as having a close relationship with the secular State, such that the former is able to utilize many of the services provided by the latter and, in so doing, weaves these into the fabric of its own existence.

In short, the church becomes an integral part of the existing social order (there is a form of mutually-dependent existence). In this respect, the Church serves to both stabilize the existing social order (by, for example, adopting ideological interpretations of the social world that legitimise and support existing social relationships), and, to some extent, determine that social order.

However, in so doing, the Church enters into a form of tacit relationship (or alliance) with the ruling class (the class that dominates the organization of the State), such that the affairs of the Church are bound-up with the development of the ruling class. Historically, for example, in Britain the affairs of both the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church have, at various times, been closely associated with those of the State - the break between Catholicism and the State normally being seen as being marked by Henry VIII th's excommunication by Rome and the founding of the Church of England.

**Thinking about the above relationship between the organization of the Protestant Church and the modern secular State in Britain, can you identify the various ways in which this mutually-dependent relationship is expressed?**

**For example: The Queen as both Head of State and Church of England...**

Sects, on the other hand, were seen by Troeltsch as predominantly a lower-class phenomenon, insofar as they tend to draw their membership from "disaffected" members of the lower-middle and working classes. This aspect of "disaffection" is significant in relation to both religious practice and social orientation since, in Troeltsch's phrase they,

**"...work upwards from below, and not downwards from above".**

In other words, one of the main characteristics of a sect is their non-establishment orientation - their relationship to the State tends to be one of opposition (or at most, toleration) and in organizational terms, sects tend to practice a general withdrawal from mainstream society into communities of their own.

More recent developments in the organization of sects have tended to accentuate this "disaffection" as a defining characteristic - the "Moonies" and Church of Scientology, for example, have actively recruited members from amongst University and school students - targeting the young (as a cultural grouping) rather than any one particular social class. In America, the phenomenon of TV. Evangelists (cf. the "Praise The Lord" ministry) has tended to target working class blacks and whites.

In relation to the above, the concept of asceticism (abstinence and austerity for spiritual benefit, the practice of self-discipline) is a useful one to note, In that it represents a clear means of differentiating between Churches and sects.

As Troeltsch argues:

**The asceticism of the Church:**

**"is a method of acquiring virtue and is a special high watermark of religious achievement, connected chiefly with the repression of the senses, or expressing itself in special achievements of a peculiar character; otherwise, however, it presupposes the life of the world as the general background and the contrast of an average mortality which is on relatively good terms with the world."**

**The asceticism of the sect**, on the other hand:

**"is merely the simple principle of detachment from the world, and is expressed in the refusal to use the law, to swear in a court of justice, to own property...The sects...lay stress on the simple but radical opposition of the Kingdom of God to all secular interests and institutions."**

According to Troeltsch, therefore, one of the main distinguishing features between a Church and a Sect is that members of the latter tend to advocate and practice a systematic withdrawal from the affairs of wider society. However, it is clear that, just like Churches have many variants (the practises of the Catholic Church, for example, vary quite clearly from those of the Church of England), so too can sects differ in type.

J. Milton Yinger ("Religion, Society and the Individual", 1957) argues that we can delineate a typology of sects based upon an evaluation of the way in which they arise

out of the different needs of their members and the way in which they, collectively, produce different forms of response to these needs. As he notes:

**"This can be done in terms of three possible responses to an undesired situation: One can accept it, one can aggressively oppose it, or one can seek ways to avoid it. All three of these responses are usually found in a sect movement, but one is likely to predominate."**

Before we look at Yinger's typology, it is evident from the above that his typology stems from an implicit theoretical view about both the nature of sects and, most importantly, the way in which they arise.

**Can you identify three assumptions that Yinger uses about the nature of both society and people's experience of social structures?**

- 1. Society is experienced in terms of...**
- 2. Social structures are seen as...**
- 3. People's behaviour is seen as being...**

Yinger's three types of sect are those based upon:

<p><b>Acceptance</b></p>	<p>Although the members of such sects are confronted by social / economic problems that the established Churches are not helping them to solve, they do not interpret such problems in social terms. Such sects are largely middle class in membership and society, on the whole has been personally good to them. The key problems of wider social and economic deprivation, therefore, are seen in terms of "lack of faith, selfishness and isolation, not an evil society". The resolution of social problems, therefore, is seen to have its roots in faith, friendship towards fellow human beings and the coming together in congenial groups to forge common solutions to social problems.</p>
<p><b>Aggression</b></p>	<p>Amongst lower-class sects, there is a radical reaction to the problems of poverty and powerlessness. This tends to be expressed - in terms of Christianity, for example - in a radical-ethical return to the primary teachings of Jesus Christ - the Christ who was a teacher and social reformer, the Christ who threw the money-lenders out of the temple, and so forth. For such groups, there is an implicit opposition to the society which treats them so badly and the solution to social problems is the radical reorganization of society. As one might expect, such sects run into strong opposition (and, Yinger argues, pretty certain failure). As a result, they tend to either disappear or evolve into a third type...</p>
<p><b>Avoidance</b></p>	<p>Such sects tend to devalue the significance of this life by projecting their hopes into the supernatural world (and, meanwhile, reducing feelings of deprivation by forming a communion of like-minded individuals). Such sects address social problems (poverty, suffering, injustice, powerlessness and so forth) by appealing to a higher social order and, in consequence, cannot be so easily confronted by failure - as in the second type - since it is clearly impossible to prove that the "other life" will not redress the ills of this life.</p> <p>As Clark ("The Small Sects in America", 1949) notes, this type of sect is millenarian in nature (that is, they await the intervention of God, upon this world, to remove secular evils and create the both a temporal kingdom and eternal bliss in heaven for "true believers"). An example, here, might be that of Jehovah's Witnesses or Rastafarians, insofar as they both avoid secular contacts and are generally millenarian in nature.</p>

As with any attempt to produce a typology of this type, there will be similarities and differences between different writers (they may be trying to do different things, new variations may arise at different times and so forth).

Prior to moving-on to consider theories of religion in more detail, it would be useful to return to the question posed earlier in relation to Yinger's assumptions about both society and social structures in order to understand the way in which religious activity in general - and sects in particular - can be related to wider social experiences and changes. In this respect, we can outline a number of basic reasons for the emergence of sects:

**Max Weber ("The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", 1904):**

Weber argued that there was a close link between religion and social stratification and, in particular, he put forward the idea that different social classes interpret religion according to their social experiences and circumstances. Thus, as people seek to make sense of both the world and their social position within it, religion provides a "ready made" ideological framework for interpretation. The attraction of sects to marginal social groups was that they provide both an explanation of a person's position in society and, most importantly, they provide a source of prestige or status - the members of a sect feel as if they are an elite (whether this involves a privileged position in the eyes of God, access to knowledge denied to the "non-elite" or whatever). In this respect, membership of such groups provides the individual with a source of desired social status that is denied to him / her by secular society.

In the above respect, we can see an important part of Weber's general sociology, insofar as the explanation of the attraction of religious sects is seen in terms of:

1. The structural (or objective) position of the individual

Theorized in terms of class, status, power and so forth.

2. The interpretation that the individual places upon this structural position

How the individual perceives his / her objective social position and devises subjective (i.e. personal) responses to the denial of status and so forth.

**Can you identify any marginal groups in the world who might be, or have been, susceptible to the attraction of religious sects?**

**C.Glock and R.Stark** ("Religion and Society in Tension", 1965):

Glock and Stark outlined an account of the emergence of sects in terms of two ideas:

1. Religious dissent

A disenchantment with either the prevailing religious orthodoxy as prescribed by the established Church or the "compromising" of religious ideals by that Church's contacts with secular authorities

2. Social discontent / unrest

As a social protest against feelings of deprivation

Following the work of Niebuhr ("The Social Sources of Denominationalization", 1929), Glock and Stark argue that there is a dynamic interrelationship between Church and Sect. Thus, as a Church becomes established and begins to compromise with the secular order, some of its members may begin to feel that the Church is no-longer true to its religious traditions. These dissenting members then break-away to form a new religious grouping (a sect). Whilst many such sects mature over time into Church-like organizations - in Von Weise and Becker's terms ("Systematic Sociology", 1932) they become "denominations" - when they are newly-formed they recruit their membership from the economically-deprived (what Niebuhr has termed the "disinherited classes of society"). The emergence of a sect is, therefore, tied to both religious dissent and economic deprivation.

However, as we have seen with Yinger's typology, if a sect is to survive it must channel dissent by containing it within the ideological structure of the sect. As Glock and Stark argue,

**"The containment is accomplished through a process of derailment. The sects provide a channel through which their members come to transcend their feelings of deprivation by replacing them with feelings of religious privilege. Sect members no-longer compare themselves to others in terms of their relatively lower economic position, but in terms of their superior religious status."**

Once the members have been fully-contained, Glock and Stark argue, the sect begins to take-on the appearance of a Church and, in many instances, may become a Church or denomination. Whilst broadly agreeing that this kind of emergence and transition does take place, in many instances, Glock and Stark argue that new religious groups may:

1. Emerge in a form other than that of a sect (such as a cult)
2. Not necessarily draw their initial membership from the economically-deprived.

Accordingly, Glock and Stark argue that the schismatic theory underlying the Church-Sect relationship is inadequate as an explanation of the emergence of all types of sect because:

1. It does not account for sects that emerge independently of Church organizations (such as the Black Muslim movement in America)
2. Although deprivation is seen as a necessary condition for the emergence of a sect, they argue that there are forms of deprivation in society other than purely economic deprivation.

**Before we look in more detail at Glock and Stark's typology of deprivation, what do you understand by the term "schism"?**

**Glock and Stark: Five kinds of Deprivation...**

**"Deprivation, as we conceive it, refers to any and all of the ways that an individual or group may be, or feel, disadvantaged in comparison either to other individuals or groups or to an internalised set of standards."**

1. Economic:

Stems from differential distribution of incomes in society and the limited access of some individuals to the necessities and luxuries of life. This involves both:

- a. Objective deprivation: "You have a car, I don't"
- b. Subjective deprivation: "My car's a Reliant Robin 2-Wheeler Sport, you don't have a car, but I really want a Ferrari..."

In this sense, therefore, the concept of relative deprivation is significant because it means that people who can be shown objectively not to be economically deprived may still believe themselves, subjectively, to be deprived...

2. Social:

This is seen to arise out of the differential distribution of highly regarded social attributes (such as status, prestige, power and so forth. These social attributes may involve things like greater rewards going to:

- men than women
- whites than blacks
- young than old.
- educated than uneducated

In basic terms, the difference between economic and social deprivation is akin to the difference between class and status - although the two fit together closely, the correlation is not perfect...

## 3. Organismic:

This idea relates to status differences based upon physical and mental health / deformity.

Deafness  
Disability

Psychotic  
Neurotic

## 4. Ethical:

This form of deprivation stems from a value conflict between the ideals of an individual or social group and the ideals of society in general. Such incompatibilities may derive from many different sources. For example:

Contradictions in social organization

Veblen ("The Instincts of Workmanship and the State of Industrial Arts", 1943) notes that role strain may develop between **"...engineers who are torn between their own attachment to efficiency and excellence as standards for judging their own products and the value of maximum profits imposed by management"**

Incompatibilities in the values of society

An individual being encouraged to consume products but, because of unemployment, being unable to afford them

Intellectual conflicts

Staying true to one's ideals or "selling-out" to the demands of society

## 5. Psychic:

This occurs when individuals find themselves without a meaningful system of values by which to interpret and organize their lives. This tends to result from severe, unresolved, social deprivations whereby people lose their commitment to existing social values.

In effect, this represents a form of anomie and, since truly anomic situations cannot persist for any length of time, the search for new values tends to find its expression amongst religious groupings who offer a "ready-made" ideological framework that is radically different to the existing frameworks that have failed the individual.

Glock and Stark sum-up their "deprivation" argument thus:

**"We suggest that a necessary precondition for the rise of any organized social movement, whether it be religious or secular, is a situation of felt deprivation. However, while a necessary condition, deprivation is not, in itself, a sufficient condition. Also required are the additional conditions that the deprivation be shared, that no alternative institutional arrangements for its resolution are perceived and that a leadership emerge with an innovating idea for building a movement out of the existing deprivation...Religious resolutions are likely to compensate for feelings of deprivation rather than eliminate its causes. Secular resolutions, where they are successful, are more likely to eliminate the causes and, therefore, also the feelings."**

Re-read the preceding quote from Glock and Stark and, in your own words:

1. Define the idea of a "necessary precondition":

2. Define the idea of a "sufficient precondition":

Glock and Stark have argued that:

**"Religious solutions to economic deprivation, while not literally revolutionary, are symbolically so".**

Make a plan of the arguments you might put forward in an essay in order to evaluate this idea. For example:

Define "symbolic solutions"

Is religion an escape from "social reality"? - Is this always true? Examples?  
Why do symbolic solutions tend to support the status quo?

**Bryan Wilson** ("Religion in Sociological Perspective", 1982):

Wilson has argued that the tendency of sects to develop in a society is related to conditions of social change and disruptive social processes. Again, this is a variant on the concept of anomie, whereby social / technological changes proceed at a pace that is too rapid for many people / social groups - traditional norms and ways of doing things are disrupted, leaving people with a feeling of hopelessness, confusion and despair. Sects provide a "solution" to such problems, insofar as they provide both a ready-made ideological framework for the individual and feelings of warmth, comfort and so forth. Established Churches are not seen as a viable alternative because they may be too-closely identified with the social changes that give rise to anomie (the mutual-relationship between Church and State identified earlier).

An elaboration of this argument is summed-up by Marcus and Ducklin ("Sociology", 1990), using the ideas of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*:

**"Wilson connects the growth of sects to the movement from what Toennies ("Community and Association", 1887) termed "Gemeinschaft" to "Gesellschaft" forms of society. The Gemeinschaft society is distinguished by an emphasis on community with social cohesion, commitment and a sharing of common opinions, values and goals. The Gesellschaft society is one in which the social bonds are voluntary and self-interest over-rides. The inevitable transition from one to the other, according to Wilson, leads to a decline in religion, except in sects."**

**Wilson gives the example of the rise of Methodist sects in Victorian England as an example of this process of social change leading to the emergence of religious sects. Can you identify:**

**The kind of social changes in England at this time that might have created social disruption?**

Contemporary examples of sects that might have emerged as a response to the rise of automation and computerization in our society?

We can sum-up some of the basic characteristics of the Sect-type of religious organization by noting that:

1. Membership of a sect is normally by choice, rather than birth. This means that a conscious commitment has to be given to join this type of religious organization.
2. Entry normally involves a period of probation followed by some form of testing before an individual is given full sect membership.

3. Sects tend to appeal most to the poorest sections of society; people who are looking for some kind of religious solution to moral and social problems. Sects, in particular, tend to focus upon themes such as the imminent creation of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth (Jehovah's Witnesses, for example), the end of the world (the Millennium) or some form of Millenarian return to a spiritual homeland (for example, Rastafarians and the return to their spiritual homeland of Ethiopia).

4. Sects rarely develop a formal priesthood, as such, although there is often some form of hierarchical structure involved (for example, the Unification Church or "Moonies" - followers of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon). In its place there tends to evolve some form of more-or-less democratic priesthood of all believers rather than a paid, professional, clergy.

### **The Denomination Type of Religious Organization.**

According to Moore ("Sociology", 1988), a denomination:

**"...is a general description of sects that have become respectable in the eyes of middle class society. Membership is usually democratic with all members having a say in the affairs of the denomination. There is no claim that the clergy have supernatural powers. A denomination lies between a church and a sect and some examples might include Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists."**

Methodism is a classic example of a sect that has turned into a denomination. Originally founded by John Wesley in England in 1739, Methodism developed the concept that all that was required for salvation was to believe that Jesus Christ died for the sins of everyone. All that was required for ultimate salvation, therefore, was to have faith in God. Wesley and his followers originally worked within the established Church (Wesley himself was a cleric in the Church of England), but their religious estrangement from the dominant ideas of the Church and their gradual physical banishment (many Methodists were banned from preaching in Church) led to the establishment of a distinct Methodist sect after they were formally expelled from the Church.

As Bruce ("Religion in Modern Britain", 1995) notes, in 1767 Methodists numbered about 23,000 in total; by 1900, this had grown to nearly 800,000. In terms of numbers alone, therefore, Methodism became a religious organization of a substantial size. However, size alone does not turn a sect into a denomination; perhaps the most important characteristics required are:

- a. That the sect is tolerant of other religious doctrines and
- b. It's members are seen to be relatively respectable in terms of their position in society and the actions they take in relation to their religious beliefs.

In terms of the basic characteristics of denominations, we can note the following:

1. Unlike sects, denominations are not exclusive religious organizations. In this respect they are similar to Church type organizations in that they involve no real membership tests.
2. people may either choose to join a denomination or they may be born into such an organization (through their parents' membership, for example).
3. Denominations have a professional form of clergy who tend to minister to a relatively large membership.
4. Denominations, unlike Churches or sects, do not claim a monopoly of truth. Denominations do not claim to know the one true way to an individual's spiritual salvation. Although such organizations have a particular vision about salvation and the like, they are tolerant of other forms of religious organization and the spiritual messages that they propagate.

This is particularly significant in that denominations are able to co-operate with each other in relation to spiritual missions, crusades, welfare efforts and the like.

As I have already noted, denominations are probably the most common form of religious organization in our society. Their very existence is indicative of a form of cultural religious pluralism (that is, a situation in which different denominations compete with each other for members) which illustrates the fact that the Church type of organization is no-longer viable in modern, relatively secular, societies.

### **The Cult Type of Religious Organization.**

A Cult, according to Giddens ("Sociology", 1989)

**"...resembles a sect, but has different emphases. It is the most loosely knit of all religious organizations, being composed of individuals who reject what they see as the values of outside society. Their focus is on individual experience, bringing like-minded individuals together. People do not formally join a cult, but rather follow particular theories or prescribed ways...Like sects, cults quite often form around an inspirational leader."**

Examples of cults might include spiritualism, astrology and Transcendental Meditation (TM).

The cult form of religious organization is significantly different from other forms in that religious experience tends to be highly individualistic and varies considerably with the individual's personal experiences and interpretations. A cult tends to be a very loose-knit social group (and probably hardly qualifies as an organization in the accepted sense of the word) that collects around a set of common themes, beliefs or interests. In this respect, cults tend to differ from sects (which they loosely resemble) on the basis that they lack a clearly defined, exclusive, belief system for all their followers.

Cults, for the above reasons, tend to be highly individualistic and lacking in formal organizational structures (clerical hierarchies, meeting places and so forth). The followers of a cult tend to resemble consumers rather than members, since there is

rarely any formal joining mechanism; people who are interested in a particular cult theme (spiritualism, transcendental meditation and so forth) are encouraged to buy-into the cult to varying degrees (TM, for example, sells a number of stages to spiritual enlightenment that the consumer can buy as and when they want to).

Some characteristics of cults that we can identify might be as follows:

1. They are a loose collection of people who share a common belief in something (for example, extra-terrestrial life as evidence of God).
2. Cults tend to be relatively short-lived. In this respect, they tend to go in and out of fashion over relatively short periods.
3. Cults are tolerant of dissenting views. Since they rarely possess anything akin to a priesthood whose role is to interpret the word of God for their followers, discussion, argument and dissention are probably an integral part of the organization of cults.
4. Where a cult is selling some special aspect of spiritual enlightenment (TM, Astrology and so forth), members are rarely retained over a long period of time. There may be two reasons for this:
  - a. Cults lack the formal socializing mechanisms available to other religious organizations.
  - b. Once people have learnt the rudiments of the knowledge required (how to relax using TM, for example) they tend to see little reason for formal involvement within the cult. They may still practice the techniques they have learnt, but this tends to be individualistic rather than as part of an organized social group.