

Salvation in Selected Religious Movements

The Problem of Definition

This lesson is entitled, "Salvation in Selected Religious Movements," as a broad category designed to encompass "new religious movements" (often called "cults") and established, non-Christian religions, like Islam.

Recognizing that the term "cult" is typically pejorative, we should be very careful in applying it to particular movements or organizations. If you are ever asked whether a particular group is a cult, make sure you define terms carefully before answering the question. The *Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions and the Occult* defines a "cult" in the following way:

"A relatively small, often transitory religious group that commonly follows a radical leader. A cult, unlike a sect, espouses radical new religious beliefs and practices that are frequently seen as threatening the basic values and cultural norms of society at large. Therefore, people who are involved in cults frequently exhibit antisocial and neurotic behavior. In recent times, orthodox Christians have used the term to describe those religious groups that deny the Trinity and specifically the deity of Jesus Christ. Their teachings are contrary to historic Christian orthodoxy. The three dynamics of a cult are sociological, psychological (behavioral), and theological."¹

Similarly, Ruth Tucker writes,

"A 'cult' is a religious group that has a 'prophet'-founder called of God to give a special message not found in the Bible itself, often apocalyptic in nature and often set forth in 'inspired' writings. In deference to this charismatic figure or these 'inspired' writings, the style of leadership is authoritarian and there is frequently an exclusivistic outlook, supported by a legalistic lifestyle and persecution mentality."²

Some researchers find it helpful to list common characteristics of cults. Here are some that were noted by Walter Martin and his staff at the Christian Research Institute:

1. They are usually started by strong and dynamic leaders who are in complete control of their followers.
2. They add to or change the Bible in some way.
3. They possess rigid standards for membership.
4. They are actively evangelistic.
5. Their leaders are not trained clergy, but faithful followers.
6. Their system of doctrine and practice is continually changing.
7. They believe new revelation can supersede or contradict the Bible.
8. They claim access to truth not available to other groups or persons.

¹George A. Mather and Larry A. Nichols, *Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions and the Occult* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 86.

²Ruth A. Tucker, *Another Gospel: Cults, Alternative Religions and the New Age Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 16.

9. They develop their own theological jargon, often investing traditional terms with new meaning.³

It should be noted that very few groups will demonstrate all of these characteristics. That's what makes the classification so difficult. In a recent article for *Kindred Spirit*, I described the definition this way:

Experts disagree on the definition of a cult, but one helpful approach begins by distinguishing between a cult and a sect.

A sect is a group that pulls away from the mainstream of an established religious tradition in order to create a more purified assembly. Such groups may deviate slightly from their tradition, but generally affirm it strongly. A cult, on the other hand, does not *affirm* tradition but instead *violates* it. For example, those groups that deny the Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, or the personhood of the Holy Spirit clearly violate the tradition of Christian orthodoxy. Even if they claim to be Christian, they should be regarded as cults.

While the test of Christian orthodoxy is an important one, most cults also follow a particular sociological pattern. In fact, some groups are often considered cults because of their structure and practices even though they affirm orthodox beliefs. Stated very broadly, most cults consist of emotionally needy people who are indoctrinated into a tightly-knit (and ultimately abusive) community around a charismatic leader.

Most often, individuals are drawn into cults during a time of major transition—changing careers, living away from home, or unusual stress—that has made them particularly vulnerable. Many have a nominal Christian background but are unhappy with the answers they have received from parents, peers, or other sources of authority.

From this perspective, the cult may function as an attractive alternative. One's initial exposure to the group is usually very positive and encouraging as the cult members offer acceptance, friendship, security, and a sense of community. In this sense, the cults have been described as “the unpaid bills of the church” providing a haven for those whom churches have ignored or driven away.

The cult community seems to provide clear answers, a structured lifestyle, and a cause in which to believe, all of which are generally lacking in our existential society. Cult leaders replace initial warmth and friendliness with rigidity as they tell converts what to do and what to believe. The biblical gospel of grace is almost always perverted into a doctrine of salvation through works performed in the service of the cult's leader. Tragically, new converts are often defenseless against such instruction due to physical exhaustion, isolation from family, and alienation from the Spirit of God (Eph. 4:17-18; 2 Tim. 3:1-7).

The cult's teaching usually comes from a single powerful leader who is thought to have unique authority as a prophet or as an interpreter of Scripture. This person may function as a parent or god-like figure, and much to the amazement of outsiders, converts come to view him or her with unquestioned allegiance.

Of the 700 or more cults in this country, most fit this general pattern while also violating orthodox theology. They violate a two-fold standard of biblical doctrine and biblical behavior. Some of the more established cults, separated from their founders by several

³Condensed from Walter Martin, *The New Cults* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1980), 17-21.

generations, may not appear as destructive, but their doctrine remains dangerously false. Others appear to defend orthodox doctrine yet substitute cultic principles of mind control for biblical patterns of ministry. Violation of either standard merits classification as a cult.⁴

The descriptions which follow are very brief, and they will focus on the issue of salvation. All of the groups discussed here reject orthodox trinitarianism (particularly the nature of Christ as stated in the Definition of Chalcedon), but we will not dwell on that here except to say that a misunderstanding of the person of Christ causes one to distort the work of Christ. Much more information can be obtained through the bibliography that follows these notes.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the "Mormons")

History

Founded in approximately 1820 by Joseph Smith (1805-1844), who was succeeded by Brigham Young (d. 1877).

Current membership exceeds 8 million.

Outline of Soteriology

1. Pelagian model of original sin ("We believe that all will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression" [Article 2 of the *Articles of Faith*])
2. The fall of Adam was ultimately beneficial in that it allowed other spirit children to be born and eventually to become exalted as gods.
3. The death of Christ brings immortality for all people.
4. The death of Christ makes further exaltation possible for those who will obey. ("We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel" [Article 3]).
5. Formerly taught blood atonement, continue to teach baptism for the dead.

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (the "Jehovah's Witnesses")

History

Founded in 1884 by Charles Taze Russell, who was succeeded after his death in 1916 by Judge Joseph Franklin Rutherford (d. 1942).

⁴*Kindred Spirit*, May-August 1993.

Membership grew to over 2 million until the late 1970's, when hundreds of thousands quit due to yet another failed prophecy of the Lord's return and a crackdown on dissent. Membership has again been increasing steadily since that time.

Outline of Soteriology

1. The death of Jesus, as the highest of created beings, removed Adam's sin with the result that people can now work out their own salvation.
2. Deny immortality of the soul (annihilationist) and reality of resurrection (the recreation of a different "person" based on God's memory of our "life pattern"). Result: no real personal salvation.
3. Deny eternal security and imply salvation by works.

The Way, International

History

Founded in 1955 by Victor Paul Wierwille (1916-1985), who was succeeded in 1982 by Craig Martindale. Both men had evangelical roots – Martindale was a student leader in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and the Baptist Student Union.

Outline of Soteriology

1. The human spirit disappeared as a consequence of the fall, leaving mankind with a body and a soul only (like an animal, in their understanding).
2. Salvation brings the "holy human spirit" to the individual. The "holy spirit" cannot sin, but sin continues to reside in the body and the soul.
3. The presence of the "holy spirit" is always manifested in tongues (which is treated as a mechanical process one can generate) and eight other manifestations (word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, interpretation of tongues).

The Local Church

History

Established from 1948-1962 in Taiwan and in the Philippines as an extension of Watchman Nee's "Little Flock" movement under Witness Lee.

Came to the United States in 1962.

Churches bear no name other than the locality (e.g., "The Church in Anaheim").

Outline of Soteriology

1. Anthropology employs a rigid trichotomy (body, soul, and spirit).

2. Salvation consists of the "mingling" of the Holy Spirit with our spirit.
3. "Calling on the name of the Lord" often regarded as a mechanical process of repeating His name ("Oh, Lord Jesus"). This may lead to quick "conversions" through evangelism.

The International Churches of Christ (the "Boston Movement")

History

Began in 1979 when Kip McKean gathered 30 "disciples" who were ready to be "totally committed" from the Lexington (later renamed "Boston") Church of Christ.

The movement has grown to include over 100 congregations and over 50,000 members (1991 statistics).

Outline of Soteriology

1. Church of Christ doctrine: Pelagian model of original sin, necessity of water baptism by immersion for salvation.
2. Distinctive from other Churches of Christ in calling for rebaptism for discipleship in Boston denomination to demonstrate total commitment. Leads to exclusionary ecclesiology and is related to a demanding discipleship process.

The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity ("The Unification Church," aka "the Moonies")

History

Founded by Sun Myung Moon in South Korea in the late 1940's following his involvement in messianic movements there.

Controversial ministry in United States: "divine deception" in recruiting and conviction on tax fraud are overshadowed by Moon's claim to be "Lord of the Second Advent"

Outline of Theology

1. God exists in Male/Female polarity
2. Image of God is seen in ideal marriage.
3. Adam and Eve corrupted God's original plan.
4. Jesus failed in his attempt to restore God's plan.
5. Moon and his wife complete the restoration.

6. The kingdom will be established on earth.

Outline of Soteriology

1. Work of Christ was incomplete (cross as a mistake).
2. Salvation obtained by works supported by divine grace (synergism)

Scientology

History

Founded by science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard in 1950 with the release of the expanded edition of his book, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*.

Controversy with government over tax-exempt status

Extremely expensive "therapy"

Outline of "Soteriology"

1. Every person is actually a reincarnated "thetan."
2. The present universe is not reality, but a "game."
3. We must clear our reactive minds of "engrams."
4. "Clears" can then become "Operating Thetans" through extremely expensive "Dianetic therapy" (salvation through enlightenment)

Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism

History

"Founded" in 13th century Japan by Nichiren Daishonin, who uttered the "new" chant of *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo*.

Revived in Japan after WWII along with many other indigenous religions which flourished with the discrediting of state Shintoism.

Highly organized and active lay movement (Sokagakkai)

Extremely successful expansion throughout the world

Outline of "Soteriology"

"When we fervently chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo to the Gohonzon, our life force will permeate the universe and the Buddha nature will emerge within ourselves, enabling us to fulfill our wishes." (*Seikyo Times*, October 1972)

Islam

History

For a very helpful survey of the history and basic beliefs of Islam, see *Islam: The Straight Path*, by John Esposito (Oxford Press, 1991).

Soteriology

A thorough discussion of Muslim soteriology is impossible in a survey lesson of this nature, but several key points should be noted.

First, Allah is regarded as utterly transcendent. "No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision. He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things" [6:103]. Esposito comments, "Thus, people cannot know God directly. The Quran does not reveal God, but God's will or law for all creation" (p. 24). This does not mean that he is only a God of judgment, for Allah is also thought to be merciful and compassionate – in fact, each chapter of the Quran opens with that phrase.

Second, though Allah is thought to be both just and forgiving, there is no "mechanism" of atonement through which both aspects of his nature may be satisfied. When an individual repents of disobedience and returns to God's path (the path of Islam) Allah forgives the disobedience. Esposito writes, "Unlike Christianity, there is no vicarious suffering or atonement for humankind. Such actions are unnecessary, since Islam has no doctrine of original sin" (p. 28). In other words, people are able to turn around and obey, and that is what is expected of them.

Third, Islam emphasizes not beliefs, but actions; not theology, but law. Right beliefs may place one on the "straight path," but right behavior keeps one there. Directly related to this is faithfulness to the "five pillars:"

1. The profession of faith (*shahada*) – the public affirmation that "there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His messenger."
2. Prayer (*salat*) – Muslims are expected to pray five times a day facing Mecca, the holy city and center of Islam.
3. Almsgiving (*zakat*) – All adult Muslims are obliged to pay an annual tax on their accumulated wealth and assets "to support the poor, orphans, and widows, to free slaves and debtors, and to assist in the spread of Islam" (Esposito, 91).
4. The Fast of Ramadan – a month-long fast taking place each year in which "all adult Muslims whose health permits are to abstain completely from food, drink, and sexual activity from sunrise to sunset" (*ibid.*).
5. Pilgrimage (*hajj*) – Those who are able are expected to travel to Mecca along with others in an annual pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime.

For Further Reading

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- Watson, William. *A Concise Dictionary of Cults and Religions*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1991.

Phone Numbers (for information on specific groups)

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