

The Sociological Typology of New Religious Communities

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Abstract: The researcher summarizes the existing in modern sociology information about main organizational forms of religions: a sect, a cult, a denomination and a church. First of all the author differentiates theological and scientific approaches to the phenomenon of the sect. Then he concentrates on the concepts of the sect (established sect), the cult, the audience cult and the client cult, indicating their social features and spread in the modern society.

INTRODUCTION

After the Second World War the North-american and the european societies faced the new religious wave when different religious groups with sincretic doctrines quickly spread and became rather popular among people. They radically changed the structure of the north-american, european and later also russian religiosity. Nowadays, the situation in the religious sphere of the society is characterized by the intensification of the eschatological mood, the emergence of the virtual spirituality (carma-cola), the activation of charismatic persons, who attract the attention of god-seekers, the commercialization of the activity of religious groups and unfortunately by the renaissance of the religious radicalism in a new guise.

Some sociologists call them new religious movements, others non-traditional religious organizations. The public and the mass media often call them sects or cults. Because of this the terms got the negative and offensive meaning.

All this actualizes the necessity of appealing to sociological concepts of new religions which show their social nature, social characteristics.

We are sure that the article would be interesting not only to social scientists but also to the general public, to everyone who is interested in religious processes which take place in the modern society.

SOCIOLOGICAL TYPOLOGY OF NEW RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

The german scientist Weber^[1] was the first one who made the sociological analyses of different types of religious groups. He distinguished a church and a sect. In order to understand better Weber's newness, it's necessary to examine theological understanding of the above mentioned terms.

Christians, from the very beginning, identified their community as a church. But alongside with the established church with a large number of members there were also different small groups which had alternative christian views. Church writers began to refer to them as sects in order to show that their beliefs and practices are heretical (non-orthodox). In other words theological understanding of the church and the sect concentrates primarily on doctrinal questions.

Weber^[1] differentiated a church and a sect according to 3 criteria: an attitude towards the world, the membership, organizational peculiarities^[1]. If a religious group doesn't confront society, admits its culture and tends to be universal, inclusive one, we deal with a church in this case. A critical view on society, cultural values and norms are typical for sects.

As for membership, doors of a church are open to everybody (including babies). Requirements are mild. Sects commonly practise the exception of the guilty (so called exclusivity). According to Weber, the church has a beaurocratic structure with a difficult system of rituals. Sects tend to charismatic leaders and simple organizational forms. In any case it's necessary to underline that Weber considers the church and the sect to be equal organizational forms of a christian religion (ibid).

The american researcher R. Niebuhr noticed that over time some sects lose their typical features. Confrontational relations with the society are replaced by acceptance of the existing social order. The criterion for membership simplifies. Moral norms soften. But nevertheless such communities lack universalism (they still are not connected with all the layers of the society). Niebuhr called them denominations.

The scientist H. Becker noticed that there are also religious communities, in which interactions between believers are either minimized or missed at all. But people are united in spiritual sense: they share the same values, ideas, etc. Becker called them cults^[2]. Different spiritual, theosophical communities can be marvellous examples of cults.

Over time the concept of the cult develops and recieves the following understanding. The cult is a group which 1) doesn't have any historical connection with the established religious groups and 2) has tense relations with the society. The first charachteristic differentiates sects and cults. And the second characteristic pull them together. At least we can find this approach in works of such famous sociologists of religion as Yinger^[3].

The sociologists R. Stark and W. Bainbridge, taking into consideration the organizational variety of cults, distinguished several types of them. The audience cults are characterized by a lack of interaction between believers. People are united spiritually (with the help of reading the same literature, listening to the same radio programmes, etc.). In so called client cults believers systematically visit different lectures, trainings but there aren't fixed membership and obligations. In cultic movements you can find both formed structure and fixed membership, social control, official leaders, obligations, etc^[4].

The sociologist of religion J. Yinger described such type of a religious community as an established sect. On the one hand it has professional religious leaders and the

formed structure. On the other hand, it continues to demonstrate moral strictness, social isolationism and confrontation. But they are more symbolic than real. So, as we see, this religious group has features of both sects and denominations. It occupies an intermediate position between a sect and a denomination^[3].

Thus, modern sociologists use in order to describe various organizational types of new religions such terms as "a sect/a cult", "an audience cult/a client cult", "an established sect", "a denomination". Herewith the analysis is based on peculiarities of 1) the inner environment in religious communities and 2) believer's interactions with the society.

Let's study the social characteristics of the above mentioned types more detailed. A sect/cult is distinguished by the rejection of the social order. It criticizes some social institutions (a family, an educational system, etc.), organizations (especially the established churches), norms which regulate human interaction in the society. The logic consequence of this attitude towards the society is the symbolic or real social isolation^[5].

Clothes of definite colours and style, religious slang, the emphasized political indifference are the characteristic features of symbolic religious separatism. The real social isolationism of a sect manifests itself in the solitary life of the commune which minimizes social contacts.

Sects/cults insist on believers' maximun involvement in communities' life (ritual, missionary, economic). First of all every follower is a member of a religious group, and only then s/he has family, professional or civil duties. Such attitude is formed by the leaders, co-believers and intragroup doctrinal literature.

As a result the group orientation on the full involvement in the community life leads to the rejection of friendship or marriage with non-members. But thanks to this group endogamy the sects/cults provide their integrity and further development.

Membership in sects/cults is impossible without strict observance of intragroup norms. It must be preceded by spiritual conversion the conscious desire of an individual to moral and spiritual perfection. And this conversion should be confirmed by the experienced members. For example, already early Jehovah's Witnesses admitted to baptism only those people who passed the test for knowledge of the doctrine. The repeated violation of the established norms, the religious doubt lead to the exclusion from the community. But we should remember that the exclusion is seen by sects/cults as an educational measure: a believer has the possibility to join the community again.

Declared brotherhood and equality of believers are successfully combined with the intragroup power institution. Usually it is based on charisma of a leader. If there isn't a living leader, his role is played by a group of the elders. The variety of moral, religious and social

restrictions which highlight the exclusivity of sects/cults allowed the british sociologist B. Wilson to say about their total influence on believers (ibid).

The audience/client cults offer a variety of spiritual practices. Some of them concentrate on meditation, others – on astrology; some groups refer to ideas of spiritual leaders of the past, others advertise their own innovative systems which help to solve many personal problems. Anyway these types of religious communities don't demonize the society. It's not surprising that they find their niche in the society: they open centres in different parts of the world, cooperate with celebrities, organize PR-campaigns (concerts, sport events), etc. Without any doubt all these methods increase the number of followers and the image in general. Nevertheless, characteristic for the audience and client cults social loyalty doesn't guarantee the sustainable interaction with all the institutions and groups of the society. Sometimes they are accused of the aggressive proselytism, the financial fraud and even mind control.

The structural amorphism of the audience cults ensures anonymous membership. There aren't social interactions among the believers: being united spiritually, they almost don't have contacts. Typical examples are the theosophy of Helena Blavatsky, the philosophy of Helena Roerich, different astrological communities, etc. However, doctrines and practices of the client cults implies the active participation of the followers: lectures, seminars, etc. For instance, the scientological counselling involves the so called auditing, different trainings, lectures.

Although, the audience/client cults also call for spiritual development, the moral rigorism is not typical for them. Consequently the followers don't face the problem of the role conflict: family, professional and other duties are performed in the same way. However some believers face the problem of interpersonal conflicts the confrontation with relatives. Usually the relatives are dissatisfied that their children/ spouses have some financial obligations to the cults (expensive courses), the dependence on methods and spiritual leaders.

A denomination is characterized by a high degree of adaptability, harmonious relations with the secular institutions. They are sure that such social problems as the spread of drugs and alcohol abuse, crime can be solved by people themselves, without any supernatural power. That's why denominations are very socially active. Their charity programmes cover prisoners, drugs and alcohol abusers, homeless people, difficult teenagers, etc. In this they are similar to churches which do charity work on all continents.

The institutional characteristics of the denominations are the following: the clearly defined role-status system (those who are on the way of conversion, spiritually experienced believers, "the stumbled ones", etc.), the

hierarchy of power (teachers and students), the autocratic leadership style. The membership criteria are flexible: anyone who shares religious, moral and social views of the community can become the member of it. Herewith the temporary doctrinal scepticism, the violation of group norms and the criticism of the leaders don't lead to the exclusion of the "deviant" member from the community. The believer is expected to demonstrate the feasible participation in the community's life (in rituals, charity and missionary events, etc.). But the obligation of the missionary service is emphasized stronger in denominations than in churches (example: The New Apostolic Church).

The established sects have a clear hierarchical structure, the mixed membership, a great number of followers (and consequently a lot of departments in different countries), a long history. These features bring together the established sects with the denominations. At the same time such religious groups require strict compliance of the norms. There is official practice of the exclusion of the guilty. The interaction with the main society is rather confrontational: it is demonized (as a result the social isolation). The above mentioned characteristics don't allow to differentiate them as denominations.

The socialization of a person takes different forms in audience/client cults and denominations on the one hand, and sects and cults on the other hand. The denominations and the audience/client cults tend to enrich the human ethos. Sharing the main social values and norms, they nevertheless criticize some trends of the development of the modern society. Among them such social phenomena as the alcohol and drug abuse, the violence, the materialism, the lack of spirituality and so on. Programmes of revival which are offered by these religious groups have the spiritual basis: they are connected with definite religious (philosophical, moral) theories. The behavioral patterns which are determined by the denominations and the audience/client cults don't have the conflict potential: they don't lead a believer to the role conflict or to the confrontation with the society.

The sects/cults (including the established ones) criticize some aspects of secular institutions of education (moral relativism), healthcare (methods of treatment), culture (pagan motives). And they develop alternative intragroup educational, aesthetic, medical and other views. Because of this they disapprove career ambitions, the interest to the secular art, political activity, military service. The pessimistic attitude to the society leads either to symbolic isolation (Jehovah's Witnesses) or to real (geographical) isolation (the russian Church of the Last Testament, members of which live in communes in Siberia).

The religious activity becomes the main role in the role set of a believer. It subdues all other roles of a person

(family, professional, etc. roles). Sometimes the behavioral patterns of believers which are deviant in their essence don't get empathy from relatives. Usually they (relatives) can't understand the non-traditional religious subculture which reject common sociocultural values and norms. That's why such new religious communities got the name of religious organizations which provoke social anxiety.

CONCLUSION

We would like to emphasize that every sect (or cult) because of its socially sharp features has the potential to become the delinquent religious group, in which leaders induce believers to violate legal norms of the society (mass disorder, murders, suicides, etc.). Usually such actions have metaphysical explanation: the destruction of this world in order to make closer the new world. The activity of notorious delinquent cults "Peoples Temple", "Heaven's Gate", "Aum Shinrikyo" serves as a warning to the society.

The unpredictable behaviour of the leaders of such communities is underlined by Eileen Barker-one of the leading british researchers of the non-traditional religiosity^[2]. This circumstance actualizes the necessity of

the study of different non-traditional religious communities by scientists and also stimulates the government and the society to more serious attitude to them.

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