

The Sect and the Church: Religion and its Branches*

Kulbir Kaur

Assistant Professor, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee College, Department of Sociology

Abstract: -The paper describes the definition as well as the nature of two religious groupings-the church and the sect, and an attempt has been made to answer the questions—what is a sect? What is a church? What kind of relationship exists between the two? In what respect, both are similar or different? What is their attitude towards the world? Can a sect be routinized into a church?

Key Words: *Berger, Sect, Church, Weber, Troeltsch, Yinger*

**This paper is a revised version of the chapter, 'Religious Groupings: Theoretical Background', M.Phil Dissertation, 'Two Modern Sects of Hinduism: A Sociological Analysis', School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University.*

The sect has been characterized as an “island formation” within society, essentially subjective, unique and transcendent'(Berger:1956:473). In order to understand it fully we should distinguish it from the Church. There is no doubt about the fact that despite having many differences, both are considered as social-religious groupings.

The two ideal types of church and sect were first introduced by Weber, though the typology is identified more with his student, Ernst Troeltsch.

Weber describes the sect as ‘an exclusive association of religious virtuosos or of especially qualified religious persons, recruited through individual admission after establishment of qualification’(Weber:1958:6). The Church is an organisation to which each member belongs by birth.

To distinguish the nature of sect from church, we would take into account two terms used by Weber-political institutions and charisma. When we consider the system of church as a political institution, it turns out to be an organisation capable of exercising authority or force over its members. Thus defined by Weber that church ‘is a political association which maintains its order by psychological force through the granting and withholding of sacramental goods’(Berger:1954:468). On the other hand, the sect, a voluntary and a marginal religious movement, does not adhere to the policies of using force and controlling people.

In church, the membership is by birth and members are not supposed to possess certain ‘required qualities’. However, a sect can be joined only by those who are fit to be initiated in the organisation for which a religious qualification is required which includes moral qualification as well.

Charisma is based on the system of office in church while in sect, it is directly attached to the religious leader. The characteristic authority of the leader is based on his personal qualities but this very charismatic authority, during the course of time, can change itself into a traditional or a rational-legal authority. Why? The reason is that one is born into a church and it is hereditary. Unlike the church having hierarchical force, the sect recruits members on a ‘choice-basis’ and it is a voluntary organisation. Therefore, a threat is always posed to the existence of the sect after the passing away of the leader and it becomes necessary “to enshrine the charisma in a traditional or a legalistic order’(Berger:1956:469).

The major contribution of Weber, as argued by Berger, is ‘not his definition of the sect but his discovery of the process of “routinization” in the development of the sect(Berger:1956:469). Ernst Troeltsch agrees with Weberian definition of the sect as well as of the church and defines both the groupings as ‘independent sociological expressions of two variant interpretations of Christian tradition. He considers the church as an institution which is conservative, universal and dominating in nature. On the contrary, the sect “shuns” any exercise of dominion over others’(Benton:1967:125) and is a ‘select group of the elect’(Troeltsch:1957:419), which has a hostile attitude towards the world. Whatever the differences in nature, both are closely related with the development of society.

Troeltsch's definition is similar to Weberian definition but he separates 'mysticism' from both the sect as well as the church and argues that mysticism is more individualistic based on the personal quest of salvation. But he ignores the fact that most of the sects have been formed by 'renouncers' or 'mystics'. Troeltsch makes another distinction based on grace and law. The former, that is, 'grace' is a characteristic of the church which governs an organisation of masses while the 'sect is described as based on the idea of law governing a small "holy community" set aside from the world. Can a distinction be made solely on the basis of 'grace' and 'law'?

Thinkers like Milton Yinger, Howard Becker, Peter L. Berger have modified and expanded the classifications described by Troeltsch. He made an attempt to classify religious group differences based on the dichotomy of church and sect. But Howard Becker suggests that instead of two, there are four religious group types common to society: the cult, sect, denomination and ecclesia. The cult is a loosely organised and individualistic group which has a very fluctuating membership. The sect, on the other hand, is an informal grouping and it emphasises on personal inward perfection. The denomination, more formal than the sect, is a grouping which has lost its separate attitude but has made some peace with the world. The ecclesia, which can be of national level (e.g. state churches such as the Lutheran in Scandinavia) as well as of international level (e.g. the Roman Catholic church), is an established religious body "which has developed a vested interest in the social situation, causing it to remain conservative, although expressing universalising attitudes" (Johnson:1967:123). Watch also points out that Zoroastrianism and Mahayana Buddhism have produced ecclesiastical bodies.

E.T. Clark criticises Troeltsch by saying that his typology is primarily functional in nature and Clark gives his own definitions based on cultural differences, i.e. variations in rituals and beliefs etc. He describes seven types of sects.

1. Pessimistic or Adventist Sects see no good in the world and think that it is rushing to hell
2. Perfectionist Subjectivist Sects seek holiness and personal perfection of life.
3. Charismatic or Pentecostal Sects want the "blessings", "gifts", the "spirits of prophecy and "the spiritual endowments of various kinds"
4. Communistic sects separate themselves from the world in order to secure the social approval which they could not get elsewhere
5. Legalistic or Objectivist sects reject or deny some practices and replace them by their own
6. Ego-centric or New Thought Sects regard the attainment of the physical comfort as the main objective
7. Esoteric or Mystic Sects are the followers of the mystic and are mostly the branches or the break-up groups of Hinduism.

Having given the classification, Clark admits the fact that no one classification is suitable for all purposes. Johnson is also of the opinion that it is not easy to apply Troeltsch's typology to classify religious groups since his definition of sect and church contains a large number of characteristics or elements. We can cite one example. For instance, sects are considered as voluntary organisations by Troeltsch but several groups, named as sects by thinkers, have an ascribed system of membership like the Amish sect. Weber gives the answer by saying that it is due to the fact that most of the religious groupings have been moulded by prophets or charismatic religious leaders, during the course of time.

Weber makes a distinction between two kinds of prophets—the emissary prophets and the exemplary prophets. To the former category belong those 'who promulgate the idea of a personal supra-mundane god who makes specific demands on men' (Johnson:1967:127), e.g. the Prophet Mohammed. This prophecy conveys the idea that 'men's ultimate fate depends on how well he is a servant of Lord's will' (Johnson:1967:127). The Exemplary prophets 'promulgate the idea of an impersonal cosmic law which can be appropriated by men' (ibid), for example, the Lord Buddha. This kind of prophecy teaches that men should forget his own worldly interests and rather join others to promote the ethical interests of the Lord.

Weber argues that 'the world religions of the west were for the most part moulded by emissary prophecy, whereas the religions of the Orient were moulded by exemplary prophecy...' (ibid). Johnson opines that we can assume, according to Weber's definition of prophecy, that 'the church-sect distinction may be applied to most groups in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions and following the footsteps of Weber, he proposes a classification based on social environment' (Johnson:1967:121). This distinction makes a shift from the classification based on the form of organisation to the one based on the group's reaction to its environment.

Richard Niebuhr criticises Troeltsch's typology for its static nature and argues that sect type, during the course of time, can have emerged as a church. He defines church as a "national group" like nation and family and the sect can be referred to as a "voluntary association". He also takes up the relationship of both the groups to the world and makes an observation that the church is an "inclusive social group" which allies with national, economic

and cultural interest, that is, it can very easily accommodate the ethics of civilization. What is more, it's a majority group representing the whole organisation of masses. On the other hand, the sect represents the minority group. Keeping the same ideology in mind which is based on the responses of the sect to the values and relationships prevailing in society, Wilson proposes four types of sects-

- 1 Conversionist sects seek to alter the world as well as the men;
- 2 Adventist or Revolutionist sects predict the sudden change of the world;
- 3 Introversionist replace the existing values with higher inner values and
- 4 Gnostic sects 'accept in large measure the world's goals but seek a new and esoteric means to achieve these ends-a wishful mysticism'(Bryan:1959:5).

This classification proposed by Wilson is more sociological in nature. While describing the sect as an order of spirit and the church as an order of law, Carl Mayer highlights the notion of 'spirit' which also helps us to understand the attitude of both of these organisations to the world. But what is meant by the term 'spirit'? It also becomes essential to define what kind of spirit is present in each of these types, or in other words, what is the inner meaning of the religious phenomenon concerned. The spirit is 'an object which appears to faith as a subject in action'(Berger:1954:474). It helps the person to encounter a religious and a sacred experience. The spirit has the power to manifest itself in many forces-'in a human being or animal, in certain objects, in a specific holy place sometimes natural and sometimes artificially created'(Ibid).Therefore, sect can be said to be related to the spirit which is immediately present while the church has a remote spirit.

The manifestation of the spirit gives shape to a certain kind of an attitude towards the world. On the basis of this same attitude, Berger explains three types of sects.

- 1 The Enthusiastic Sects -there is a prevalence of the feeling to save or avoid the world -or to do both.
- 2 The Prophetic Sects have the militant type of attitude
- 3 The Gnostic Sects have the feeling of indifference to the world.

The same attitude towards the world, as observed by Berger, determines the inner social structure of the sect. Through the particular type of an attitude, the sect carries out its social structures related to the variety of attitudes present in the sect. Due to its militant attitude, the prophetic type has strong organisation as well as well as a strong leadership. For the third type, the world is not of any importance and it 'almost universally takes the social form of the circle of initiates, those who possess the secret and guard it against outsiders'(Berger: 1954:479).

The relationship between the sect and the world or the attitude towards the world keep changing according to the process of routinization. In the preliminary stage, the attention is stronger in the direction from the religious to the social, that is, the 'religious motif largely determines the inner social structure of the sect'(Berger:1954:480). But as the sect starts taking the shape of the church, the pressure is put in the other direction, that is, 'from the social to the religious', the church makes peace with the world and is invaded by the latter's realities, norms and institutions'(Ibid).

Wilson also refers to the transitory nature of the sect and argues that sect-type organisation can exist only for a generation and it tends to become a church in the next generation. The church is a lasting group while the sect may be viewed as a lasting or a transitory group but there are some sects which persist over several generations named as established sects by Yinger. Sects remain on the periphery of the social and religious community but these sects actually serve to reorient the individual to the society.

Two other characteristics noticed by Wilson are isolation and insulation. The most distinctive feature of sectarianism is its isolation of the reality, like keeping the guru-mantra a secret in the Indian situation. The sect or the meaning system as defined by Berger, has full authority to command one's mind. The protest against this authority may lead to excommunication. Insulation often refers to behavioral rules, e.g., distinctive dress or group endogamy and these rules serve to preserve the distinct sect values. Due to its indifference or separateness, the sect is considered as the ideal type of the protest group or the opposition group or the contra-culture social organization and the church is described as the ideal type of religious body. 'Dissent is characteristic of the sects while accommodation is characteristic of the churches'(Walter: 1957: 481).

But why should sects segregate themselves from the church? Yinger holds the view that the rise of religious sects is due to the changing environment or it is the result of the effect of social change. The exact nature of the sect's response largely depends upon its members' special needs. Sects however, bridge the gap between individual need and social situations, or in other words, sects play an important role to integrate the individual to the society. The sect offers an answer to anomie and its new value system gives meaning to life. This statement also raises another question-which one of the two organizations is more satisfying—the church or the sect.

According to Russell Dynes, 'sect members derive greater social satisfaction from church activity than do members of organized churches'(Yinger:1967:483).

Due to the direct presence of the spirit, the members of the sect form a strong, unified group. 'The religious experience itself is the unifying force'(Berger:1954:480) in the sect where members are strongly related to each other.

References

- [1]. Berger, Peter L.(1954) 'The Sociological Study of Sectarianism', *Social Research*, Vol. 21
- [2]. Brewer, Earl D.C.(1951) 'Sect and Church in Methodism', *Social Forces*, Vol.30
- [3]. Johnson, Benton(1967) 'On Sect and Church', *The Sociology of Religion: An Anthology*(ed.), Richard D.Knudten, New York
- [4]. Johnson, Benton(1974) 'A Critical Appraisal of the Church-Sect Typology' in *The Social Meanings of Religion: An Integrated Anthology*, William M.Newman(ed.), Chicago
- [5]. Needleman, Jacob; Bierman, A.V and Gould, James, A(1973) *Religion For A New Generation*, The MacMillan Company, New York
- [6]. Newman, William M. (1974) *The Sacred Meaning of Religion: An Integrated Anthology*, Univ. of Connecticut, Chicago
- [7]. O'Dea, Thomas F.(1968) 'Sects and Cults' in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, David Sills(ed.), Vol.14, The Free Press
- [8]. Wach, Joachin(1951) *Sociology of Religion*, Univ. of Chicago Press
- [9]. Wilson, Bryan R.(1959) 'An Analysis of Sect Development', *American Sociological Review*, Vol.24, No.1
- [10]. Yinger, Milton(1957) *Religion, Society and the Individual*, New York