INTRODUCTION

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From the beginnings of Christianity – and, no doubt, of other religions too – sectarian movements have been directly or indirectly responsible for calling forth a huge and varied body of literature. There is no sign that this productivity is on the wane. It includes proclamation (because for the sectarian the present moment is a kairos) and apologetic, polemic and counter-polemic, from the sects. There is the literature from the mainline churches with their own polemic and counter-polemic, and their warning to their members and to the ruling powers that the sect is subversive of both Church and State. There are primary and secondary historical records, some belonging to the sect and some to the other bodies, which yield evidence of persecution and other forms of conflict (see Morgan). There is the literature of hostile witnesses. For in the struggle between Church and sect, the Church prevails in the last resort by virtue of its greater power. Thus, in many cases, what we know of sects is largely limited to what their opponents have said about them – opponents whose impartiality can hardly be relied on. There is also anti-sectarian literature of a more popular variety. The sect is denounced, and exposés by disillusioned sectarians are often presented in lurid fashion (see Beckford and Cole).

But, in addition to these ‘committed’ forms of literature, there is a tradition of writing that seeks to set on one side the partisanship which words like sect or cult, with their pejorative overtones, popularly suggest – a tradition of writing that aims for sobriety and caution in describing and analyzing the sectarian phenomenon. This kind of study among ecclesiastical and secular historians has been challenged and enriched in recent decades by the predominantly sociological scholarship which has emerged in the wake of the new religious movements (NRMs) during the 1970s. Such scholarship would seem to be much better placed, compared with an historian’s search for information about a sect which persisted briefly a thousand years ago and which left few visible traces. In fact, modern research into NRMs is complex and demanding. Some are all but closed to the investigator.
There is no consensus about methodology. An account of some of the problems here is given in the last essay of this collection, whose author has been, and is, a leader (if not the leader) in this kind of scholarship (see Wilson). So there is now a need for the development of interdisciplinary approaches to both new and old religious minorities.

No attempt will be made in this Introduction to embark upon the choppy waters of definition of such concepts as 'sect', 'cult', 'new religious movement', 'denomination', 'church'. Stable meanings are hard to find, not least because much depends upon the philosophical, ideological and geographical location of the person carrying out the investigation. The reader for whom all this is new territory should therefore be warned that the varied use of these concepts points to many open questions about content and method. It should be noted, in addition, that the sects define themselves differently in relation to other sects, to the point which they have reached in their histories, and to the social situation in which they find themselves (see Ward).

In commissioning and assembling these seventeen essays, presented here in chronological order, the editors have borne several considerations in mind.

First, it is useful to take a representative look at patterns of sectarianism across several centuries. The longitudinal perspective may disclose common characteristics among groups widely separated by time. Also, it can be instructive to examine in this way the origins of a religious tradition - origins which possess sectarian features. Using this perspective, one could consider early Christianity (see White), Montanism (see Frend), the Reformation (see Nicholls and Pettegree), the era of revivalism (see Billington) and the present century (see King).

Second, there is value in studying a group of sectarian bodies which belong to the same era, seeking, for example, to understand and account for both the similar and dissimilar fortunes which they enjoyed (see Hempton, Lineham, Billington, Thorp).

Third, as far as material and method is concerned, the study of sects and NRMs might appear to offer a choice between the subjective prejudice of the sectarians and their opponents, and the hoped-for objective neutrality of the historian and sociologist. A further, under-explored, option is the sectarian's own self-critical attitude which straddles that subjective/objective polarity towards his or her religious movement (see Gelberg and Thorp).

Fourth, although this collection is principally dealing with offshoots of the Christian religion in the West, the importance of transreligious study must be represented. Such enquiry is essential for considering possible constants and variables across major traditions. It also explores the nature and influence of mutual borrowings as religions penetrate new cultures with existing majority faiths, and as religions mix more dramatically in certain contemporary multi-faith societies (see Gelberg, Romarheim).
Fifth, sects and NRMs do not develop in a religious or social vacuum. The form which a sect takes may be in the nature of a response to an outside influence of, for example, more or less toleration (see Nicholls and Pettegree). Again, it seems that the resistance offered by the Jehovah’s Witnesses to Nazism was not an expression of principle, since Witnesses’ teaching avoids contact with all governments, but a human and a religious response to a dire emergency (see King).

Sixth, a central but elusive theme concerns the factors which affect the rise or decline of a sect or NRM. It is suggested, on the one hand, that these movements arise when major religious traditions have become complacent and conventional. The sect then becomes the medium by which it is possible (according to the sect) to return to the beginnings of that religion pure and undefiled (see Lineham). Some argue, on the other hand, that sects and NRMs arise principally on account of instability and mobility in society at large.

Whatever may be the objective conditions that foster the birth of sects and NRMs, many of these bodies certainly see themselves as ‘renewal movements’ in relation to their parent-religions and want to be recognized by others as such. So they try by various means to legitimate themselves, to persuade others to see them as they see themselves. Some adherents of the Aquarian movement have used ‘Christ’ as their central religious symbol, in seeming continuity with historical Christianity, but have then gone on to claim that the meaning which they give to ‘Christ’ is more authentic than any to be found in the Churches (see Romarheim).

Seventh, it is notable that, in comparison with the mainline Churches, some, but by no means all, sects and NRMs have offered to women greater opportunities as leaders in worship and pastoral care, and as prophets. This is certainly the case in many of the new independent African churches and with some modern Japanese movements. But it occurs with some frequency in the older Christian tradition (see Frend and Billington).

Finally, it may be asked what light, if any, the sects and NRMs shed on the claims that are made about the decline of religion and the progressive secularization of society. Some see these movements as harbingers of a new religious springtime. In so far as theories of secularization – to generalize from a tangled debate – are dealing, not with the atrophy of religions as such, but with their loss of authority, power and dominance in and over society, it may be that not too much must be claimed for sects and NRMs. First, they are (for the most part) numerically small, and do not begin to offset the numbers lost by the mainline Churches in modern times. Second, many of these movements do not see their present purpose as concerned with the transformation of society. But it is not safe to predict the future of these movements. The rise of the independent churches in Africa is a case in point (see Thompson). Already by 1970 they represented
between 4.5 per cent and 5 per cent of the total Christian population in
the world. By 1987 the figure had risen to more than 7 per cent.

All the essays in this collection break new ground, some with the
help of new evidence of a documentary kind, some offering new
interpretations of older evidence. It is a field in which theologians,
historians and sociologists of religion are busily occupied, but usually
not within calling distance of each other. The editors hope that this
collection of essays may make a contribution to mutual commu-
nication and to scholarly co-operation in an area where advances in
scholarship have rich consequences not only for the understanding of
sects and NRMs in their own right, but also for our understanding of
the religious phenomenon as such.