

## METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

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Even though, in many particulars, they differ from one another, the separate and distinctive groups of religious believers that are generally designated as sects or as new religious movements may be said to constitute a field of readily recognizable social phenomena. Initially, they were distinguished from the dominant prevailing form(s) of religion within a society, and this not merely nor even primarily by virtue of their relative minority status (since the dominant denomination in one society may be a minority in another, as are Catholics in England or Episcopalians in Scotland, without thereby being considered as sects) but by their evident divergence in doctrine, practice, social ethos and form of sociation. Today, they are, by these same criteria and most specifically by their social ethos and the conduct that exemplifies it, also readily distinguished from the generality of the secular society. Almost by definition as a 'deviant' group, a sect is likely to comprise only a very small proportion of a society's total population (always allowing for occasional concentrations such as that of the Mormons in Utah or the Seventh-day Adventists in parts of western Kenya). It is divergence and intensity of commitment, with their implications for relative size, rather than size *per se*, which serve as the indicators of sectarianism.

Religious minorities, particularly among the recently-emerged new movements, do not conform to one clearly articulated type, either ideologically or organizationally, but generally it may be said that such a movement is exclusivistic, standing in some degree of protest against the dominant traditions of society and rejecting prevailing patterns of belief and conduct. The sect maintains a degree of tension with the world which is at least an expression of indifference to it if not of hostility towards it. It is a voluntary organization in the sense that individuals must make an explicit commitment to group standards of conduct and professions of belief. They must, both to be admitted to the group and for the maintenance of their affiliation, satisfy some test of merit, and they must expect discipline and even expulsion if they depart from the movement's norms. For the individual, membership in such a group is his primary source of social identity: the member is a sectarian (of whatever particular persuasion) before he is anything else, and although, in practice, the degree of intensity of commitment

inevitably varies from one individual (and sometimes from one generation) to another, the ideal of total allegiance is far more strongly presupposed than is the case with so-called 'mainline' religious bodies.

The term 'sect' is not normally one that religious groups (at least in Christendom) appropriate for themselves: few movements regarded as sects by outsiders see themselves as such, and this because the word was a term of *odium theologicum*, and is one which, in popular usage and that of the mass media, still carries strong pejorative connotations. Most of the theological writing on sects, with rare exceptions, has proceeded from the normative assumptions of that discipline and has not only tended, but has been explicitly intended, to condemn sectarianism as well as to prove that sects distorted 'true religion'.<sup>1</sup> Nor have historians whose work has involved discussion of sectarianism always demonstrated the objectivity which, with the diffusion of the principles of social science, has been increasingly demanded in studies of social phenomena. As used by sociologists, who have now virtually claimed sectarianism as a field within their discipline, the term 'sect' has become a neutral concept, without evaluative or emotional connotations. Sects are seen as social phenomena, as appropriately the field of sociological study as are other voluntary organizations, social classes, bureaucracy, or the family.

In translation, the concept of the sect has been applied to religious minorities and divisions in diverse cultures and within most, if not all, religious traditions. But the characteristics outlined above, which constitute the specific sociological indicia of the sect, are relevant specifically to movements within Christianity or which operate in Christian (or post-Christian) social milieux. Exclusivity, voluntarism, tests of merit, expulsion, and protest against dominant cultural traditions are not always, and perhaps not usually, the attributes of the various divisions and schools that are loosely called sects in other religious traditions – for example, in Hinduism, Judaism, or Islam. For a variety of reasons from a variety of sources – having to do with the character of monotheism, the relations of church and temporal power, and the distinctive sacerdotal claims of a non-hereditary class of religious professionals – deviant and separate religiosity has been a particular issue of condemnation within orthodox Christianity. The powerful negative connotation of the word 'sect' is by no means either implicit or intended when, in other countries (for example, Japan), religious groups readily designate each other as sects, or acknowledge their own status by the use of a term which is so translated. Equally, the concept as strictly understood is inappropriately applied outside the context of Christianity, quite apart from its lingering pejorative

<sup>1</sup> The pioneer study of J.H. Blunt, *Dictionary of Sects, Heresies, and Schools of Thought* (London, 1886) exemplifies the point, and even the suave commentary of Mgr Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951) oscillates between outright antipathy and alloyed sympathy.

connotations. It is culturally specific, and it is important not to project on to bodies outside the Christian ambit characteristics that are part of the cultural baggage of Christian religiosity, and that derive from its distinctive organizational character and the competitive claims to a monopoly of truth within an exclusivistic system. There may be possibilities of utilizing some concepts developed in the analysis of Western religious bodies in other cultures and different religious traditions, but discussion here is confined to the Christian and Western context.<sup>2</sup>

Even when the field has been delimited in this way, it remains a large one. In something like their modern form, sects have been a commonplace of Christian history since the Reformation. A wide variety of dissentient movements existed earlier, of course, from the first centuries of the Christian era, but we must suppose that typically they lacked both a fully-articulated organizational form and complete doctrinal consistency and rigour. Many of these movements were small and confined to particular localities. The traditional stereotype of the sect, as it came to be formulated by early socio-theological studies, drew on just such characteristics.<sup>3</sup> Those sects were usually also of relatively brief endurance (with very few exceptions), and only one or two of them survived into post-Reformation times. The sects that have emerged since the Reformation display different characteristics. Together these movements have embraced, and still embrace, many millions of people, and some of them have themselves each several million adherents. Such are the Mormons, the Seventh-day Adventists, and the congeries of movements generically designated as Pentecostals.

Such, indeed, is the profusion of sects, and so many are those who are committed to one or another of them, that it may confidently be said that today sects constitute a field of greater significance than that traditionally explored by the discipline of anthropology. There are probably more people leading lives as self-conscious and active sectarians than there are people now living as active tribesmen for whom the tribe is a primary focus of allegiance: and, indeed, the number of actual operative sects may be greater than the number of extant and functioning tribes. These circumstances notwithstanding, the study of tribes is well-institutionalized in university departments of anthropology, while sectarian studies have no such institutional presence, nor have those who study sects any distinctive disciplinary designation. Studies of sects have been pursued randomly by sociolo-

<sup>2</sup> For some discussion of these issues, see B.R. Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 31-4.

<sup>3</sup> The work of Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. O. Wyon (New York: Macmillan, 1931), although he still laboured under theological influence, provides the departure point for a more sociological understanding of sects. In contrast to his friend, Max Weber, Troeltsch drew on mediaeval rather than recent or contemporary sectarianism in the construction of the sect as an 'ideal type',

gists, historians, and, as their own traditional field has dried up, even by some anthropologists who recognize in these relatively well-bounded groups entities in some ways analogous to tribes.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the obvious social importance of movements that not only affect but actually encompass the lives of so many people throughout the world (for, today, perhaps no societies are sect-less), sectarian studies remain at the fringe of academic disciplines. The study of sects had, of course, no real place in its own right within the (once dominant) schools of theology, except as object-lessons for the faithful, and as objects attracting only anathema and derision: there was little attempt to treat them as phenomena worthy of serious, sustained, objective and disinterested enquiry. The reasons why that was so are obvious. Yet, paradoxically, despised as were sects by the theologians, the marginalization within academic institutions of that discipline, as secularizing societies divested themselves of theological concerns, made religious minorities appear even more inconsequential. If religion was perceived as less relevant to social reality, then sectarian religion was clearly a trivial and perhaps bizarre subject of study. Only the shift from theology to 'religious studies', from normative and confessional approaches to the positivist and *verstehende* perspective of sociology, offered a prospect for the emergence of unprejudiced understanding of sects.

Modern studies of sectarianism stand predominantly in this tradition. Sects are seen as phenomena which, in the best scientific approach, call for no explicit value-judgements about what they regard to be the truth or what they take as warranty for their practices. Despite this measure of objectivity, sectarian studies – compared, say, to anthropology – have received neither encouragement nor endorsement: the subject matter is regarded as academically inconsequential, and the subject area is, within the sociology of religion, something of a pariah, whilst the sociology of religion itself has been called a Cinderella within sociology.

The reputation of the sociology of sects stands in sharp contrast to the esteem in which historical studies of sects are held. For historians, sects have exercised a persistent fascination, from the writings of Josephus and Eusebius to the numerous accounts of Donatists and Bogomils, Cathars and Lollards, Hussites and Fifth Monarchy Men. Such studies have acquired respectability perhaps because the influence of religion, and even of religious dissent, is readily – and perhaps rightly – assumed to have been so much greater in past times. The closer one approaches modern times, however, to the period influ-

<sup>4</sup> For example, Malcolm J.C. Calley, *God's People: West Indian Pentecostal Sects in England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Weston La Barre, *They Shall Take Up Serpents: Psychology of the Southern Snake-Handling Cult* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962); D.J. Davies, *Mormon Spirituality: Latter Day Saints in Wales and Zion* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 1987).

enced by the Enlightenment and the gradual diffusion to all disciplines of the methodological principles of rational empirical enquiry, so the less reputable sectarianism appears to be as an object of academic research. An irony lies in the contrast which might be made between historical scholarship and sociological research, and one of its sources is in the gross disparity in the amount of material and the quality of material available for the study of contemporary sects compared to those of more distant historical times. The sources for the sects studied by the historian are often both fragmentary and, in large part, derived from the sect's opponents or persecutors. Augustine, as a source on the Donatists, was scarcely concerned to present a full, objective and detached view of that sect, any more than was Irenaeus of the Gnostics, or the inquisitors of Montailou of the local Albigensians. The sociologist of contemporary sectarianism needs rely neither on fragments nor on biased witnesses. Indeed, with good reason, sociologists generally treat the evidence of a sect's theological opponents, of the aggrieved relatives of sectarians, and of the disaffected and apostate with some circumspection. The same principle should apply, were there any choice in the matter, to evidence about historical sects, but the historian's dilemma, at least in the case of pre-Reformation sects, is that he often has no choice, and even for sects in later periods he may face the same problem. Such is the paucity of material in some cases, that distinguished scholars have even disagreed about whether a particular sect really existed or whether, for their own purposes, some commentators did not 'create' a fact out of what was purely fictional.<sup>5</sup>

While doubts and disagreements exist about some aspects of contemporary sectarianism in sociological studies, they do not attain the magnitude of the controversy about the Ranters. Yet, better sources, more abundant and more reliable evidences do not appear to reduce, much less reverse, the disparity of esteem accorded to historical and sociological studies. In part, this anomaly may be attributable to the fact that the historian's sources are often not only ancient but may also be intrinsically precious – manuscripts, old books, scarce tracts – rare items all. In contrast, the materials available to the sociologist, partly because so abundant, are often also seen as intrinsically worthless, the bulk-published ephemera which, in some cases, university libraries disdain to house. But even this does not wholly explain the disparity. It has to do also with the fact that it is easier to adopt a detached attitude to material which is 'dead', which deals with controversies and disputes long-since stilled. It is more difficult to appreciate the contemporary expression of opinions that

<sup>5</sup> Thus the case of the Ranters, whose purported history is documented by A.L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters: Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), but whose existence is vigorously challenged by J.C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

seem incongruous in a secular world, and which are easily branded as outlandish, outmoded, or simply absurd. It is the very fact that, with living material, with material that resonates still in the arena of public life, detachment is so very much more difficult to achieve and maintain. And the fact that every second person (by virtue of the mass media) 'knows about' modern sects and movements makes sociological studies of sectarianism appear tangential to serious academic enterprise.

The sociologist is not, of course, solely, and perhaps not even mainly, dependent on published or written sources. But since modern sects and movements usually (but not invariably) produce a considerable literature, and since some of them make its production a central concern, even taking into account published material alone, the sociologist has copious sources. The value of that literature is highly variable and dependent on the more specific purposes of the research. Much sect literature is directed at outsiders, at potential recruits; if the research is concerned with recruitment, with a movement's appeal, and its projected self-image, this type of literature, even if it is mass-produced (and little as it may tell of the dynamics of sect organization, strategies for coping with change, or financial structure), will be an indispensable resource. If these other issues are the focus of the investigator's interest, then access will be needed to other sources and, if access can be obtained, to written material intended for purely internal consumption.

It will be apparent that various aspects of sectarian studies are strongly affected by the methodologies, i.e., by the techniques and perspectives of enquiry which the social sciences have made available. The field of investigation is wider, and sociological research into sects and new movements is not devoted, as historical studies often were, merely to the presentation of descriptive accounts. They may take up one specific facet of a sect's operation<sup>6</sup>; they may exploit the advantages of comparative analysis<sup>7</sup>; or they may utilize general sociological theories (on such matters as sociation, socialization, goal displacement, structures of authority, to name a few). Just how wide the field of enquiry will be will depend, in large measure, on the extent to which leaders and/or members of a movement are willing to facilitate research and to co-operate with the researcher. The lack or limitation of co-operation does not entirely prevent research, but it influences *what* can be discovered and *how* what is discovered is understood. None the less, important work has been produced without, or with

<sup>6</sup> For instance, see the study of the relationship of therapy to conversion in Scientology: Harriet Whitehead, *Renunciation and Reformulation: A Study of Conversion in an American Sect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Comparative studies are not yet so common: see, for examples, Bryan R. Wilson, *Sects and Society: The Sociology of three Religious Groups in Britain* (London: Heinemann, 1961); and Gary Schwartz, *Sect Ideologies and Social Status* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

only very limited, co-operation from the sectarians themselves.<sup>8</sup> When a movement accords co-operation, the armoury of enquiry may extend to perhaps the full range of sociological techniques. Recorded life-histories, specifically focused interviews with leaders or officials, the administration of questionnaires, the use of informants, all become possibilities.<sup>9</sup> A sect may even open up its own records.<sup>10</sup> A standard technique is participant observation: the sociologist participates in the activities of the sect as a revealed outsider, seeking by observation and association to understand its members, who accept him in their midst and submit to being observed. Perhaps the furthest reach of co-operation is when sectarians agree to log their activities over a limited period, revealing exactly how they distribute their time among such activities as prayer, collective worship, study, witnessing, work, personal maintenance, etc. This technique, sometimes known as a 'time-budget', is of most value in the study of communitarian sects in which members are virtually full-time religious.<sup>11</sup>

Sociological studies of sectarianism have been as many-sided as the foregoing indication of the abundance of sources and methods suggests. They have varied between attempts to provide a total documentation, analysis, and interpretation of a movement in all its social dimensions, to more narrowly-focused studies in which one specific facet of sectarian life has been the primary concern. To study the sect as a total social entity involves providing an account of, among other items, its teachings and their provenance, the movement's origins as a separated body, the course of its development, the character and transmission of leadership, the source of its appeal, its methods of recruitment, the nature of 'conversion', the social composition of its constituency, the maintenance of social control, its economic structure, the extent to which children are retained in the movement, its capacity to motivate and mobilize its members, the relationship of ideology to organization, the movement's social ethos,

<sup>8</sup> An outstanding instance of a study completed without the co-operation of a movement's authorities and, indeed, despite some attempts at hindrance, is Roy Wallis, *The Road to Total Freedom: A Sociological Analysis of Scientology* (London: Heinemann, 1976). A similar, but unsociological, instance is provided by Doug and Helen Parker, *The Secret Sect* (Pendle Hill, NSW: D. and H. Parker, 1982), a study of the Cooneyites. In an early phase of my own work, I was privileged to have the vigorous co-operation of local congregations of the Elim Church, but I was refused access to archival material at Elim Headquarters: not surprisingly, the Church did not like what they subsequently saw as a one-sided account of its protracted and embittered process of schism: Wilson, *Sects and Society*, 39–56. The subject still rankles with Elim officials: see Desmond Cartwright, *The Great Evangelists* (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1986), 138.

<sup>9</sup> For an example of the result of such co-operation by sectarians, see various studies of Jehovah's Witnesses, particularly James A. Beckford, *The Trumpet of Prophecy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), and the entire issue of *Social Compass*, xxiv: 1 (1977).

<sup>10</sup> The Unification Church made some such materials available for the excellent study by Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> This measure of co-operation was accorded by Belgian Moonies: see K. Dobbelaere and B. Wilson, 'Het sektarisch antwoord op het begrip vrije tijd: het Tijdsbudget van Belgische Moonies: een Gevallen Studie', *Vrijetijd en Samenleving*, iv (1986), 133–65.

and its relation to the wider society and to other movements.<sup>12</sup>

The attempt to depict the sect as a total community has attracted sociologists particularly in the case of communitarian sects, in which members create a real living community, often on the principle of holding all things in common. Such a sect offers itself virtually as an alternative pattern of social organization to that of the wider society. Such sects constitute a society in microcosm, and they have attracted not only social theorists but also social reformers who have looked at such movements as utopian experiments. Essentially, sects of this kind have sought to replace the major differentiated institutional framework of the complex social system with what might be called the communal alternative. This is a (usually quite small) persisting social group in which the dominant divisions of the economy, the polity, conflict resolution, custom, education and socialization are dissolved and relocated in a primal network of relationships. The sect, in this instance, becomes virtually a reconstituted and ethicized tribe. The Reformation sects of the Hutterian Brethren and some Mennonite communities represent relatively unself-conscious examples of experimentation with this type of solution.<sup>13</sup> Among many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century experiments, mainly in America, the Rappite community (at its different locations) was a much more self-conscious endeavour in an otherwise not dissimilar genre, and one which inspired Robert Owen and other would-be reformers of the social system.<sup>14</sup> The twentieth-century Bruderhof of Eberhard Arnold (which eventually sought affiliation with the Hutterites) was a totally self-aware movement largely of middle-class intellectuals in search of the honesty and immediacy of a peasant and artisan life-style away from the iniquity of the wider social system.<sup>15</sup>

Expectedly, examples such as these are extreme cases. Whilst all sects maintain a level of tension with the world, few can so completely adopt the techniques of insulation and isolation that were available in

<sup>12</sup> For examples of sociological work dealing with many, but perhaps rarely with all, of these issues, see, *inter alia*, Wilson, *Sects and Society*; Beckford, *The Trumpet of Prophecy*; Thomas O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); and, on Seventh-day Adventists, Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockwood, *The Quiet Americans* (New York: Harper and Row, forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> On Hutterites and Mennonites there is now a considerable literature, but see especially, John W. Bennett, *Hutterian Brethren: The Agricultural Economy and Social Organization of a Communal People* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967); John A. Hostetler, *Hutterite Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963); Harry L. Sawatsky, *They Sought A Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971); and Jean Séguy, *Les Assemblées Anabaptistes-Mennonites de France* (Paris: Mouton, 1970).

<sup>14</sup> On the Rappites, see Karl J.R. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society, 1785-1847* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965). On Robert Owen's connections with Rapp, see John F.C. Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World: Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America* (New York: Scribners, 1969), and Anne Taylor, *Visions of Harmony: A Study in Nineteenth Century Millenarianism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> For an account, see Benjamin Zablocki, *The Joyful Community: An Account of the Bruderhof* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971).



the unsettled areas of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century United States, and few seek so directly to organize a way of life which so completely rejects the institutional framework of the wider society. The communal alternative is radical, but many sects that do not espouse communitarianism, and which see it neither as ideologically mandatory nor socially expedient, nonetheless tend to evolve alternative systems, often eschewing the facilities of the wider society. They dissociate themselves entirely from the political system, neither standing for office nor voting. They seek to settle their own disputes and resort to law often only to protect their right to a separate way of life. They keep their children out of state education as much as they can, either because they reject intellectual values, or because they have evolved an uncorrupted system of their own. And some sects even seek to sustain alternative therapeutic facilities, which may be in separate but conventional medicine, or may challenge medical science with the offer of spiritual, mental or faith healing. Practically all sects reject secular recreation and entertainment and organize the leisure-time of their own members, often in specifically religious concerns.

These characteristic sectarian tendencies towards the creation of an alternative society have been a source of hostility towards sects in the general population. Whilst reformers have sometimes extolled and even imitated sectarian life patterns, in general separatist organization has been regarded as parasitic rather than as experimentally instructive, the very differences instituted by sects being seen as an affront. Yet such sects have sometimes served as virtual if unintentional social laboratories in which certain rudimentary aspects of social organization can be more readily observed than in the general population. Communitarian groups of long persistence display distinctive patterns of fertility; they have been observed to perpetuate certain genetic traits; and, in matters of speech-patterns, customs, and even in musical styles, they have unwittingly preserved from the process of change their distinctive forms of congregational practice.<sup>16</sup> Paradoxically, such segregated communities have not only been unconscious conservators but they have also at times shown a remarkable capacity for innovation and a practical ingenuity stimulated by the isolation that they have imposed upon themselves and the need to work out their own techniques for social management.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> An early study of fertility of the Hutterites was J. Eaton and A. Mayer, *Man's Capacity to Reproduce: The Demography of a Unique Population* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1954), and of the incidence of genetically-inherited mental disorders, J. Eaton and R. J. Weil, *Culture and Mental Disorders* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1955). A recent study relating to manic depressive disorders is by J.A. Egeland et al., 'Bipolar Affective Disorders linked to DNA Markers on Chromosome 11', *Nature*, cccxxv (26 February 1987). Researchers into Tourette's syndrome, an inherited condition causing a nervous tic, common among the Amish, have used the community as a research laboratory: *The Economist*, 25 July 1987. On music, see, for the two communities, Hostetler, *Amish Society*, 123-9; and Hostetler, *Hutterite Society*, 169-72.

<sup>17</sup> The Shakers exemplify this capacity: see Edward D. Andrews, *The People Called Shakers* (New York: Dover, 1963), 113-29.

These last-mentioned phenomena, of course, have drawn the attention of social scientists other than sociologists – demographers, psychiatrists, and musicologists among them. There are other specific issues that have brought sects to the attention of the public and of sociologists. The economics of sectarianism, like the economics of religion generally, has yet to be developed, but where unique patterns have been perceived, sectarian financial management has received some attention. Among the cases examined have been the extraordinary cycle of capital accumulation, land purchase and sub-division of communitarian settlements among the Hutterians;<sup>18</sup> the attempts, first at communitarianism, and later at the development of sophisticated corporate financial control, among the Mormons;<sup>19</sup> and the mobilization of resources, and the techniques of both street fundraising and business enterprise in the Unification Church.<sup>20</sup>

When sects, exceptionally, have engaged in political activism, or have sought to attain sectarian goals by political means, they have attracted both public and academic attention, most conspicuously in recent times in Northern Ireland, although older and more militant examples are to be found in the general history of millenarianism.<sup>21</sup> Without actual political action, however, sects have more commonly found themselves in confrontation with the state, and have sought redress less by legislation than by litigation. They have sought to get protection for their right to lead a different way of life from the majority, and to be exempted from normal obligations such as military service, compulsory membership of trades unions, or laws about saluting the flag.<sup>22</sup> On the affirmative side, they have fought for their right to be recognized as charities and to benefit from the fiscal provisions attached, in many countries, to that particular status.<sup>23</sup>

This brief review of the range, from very general to quite specific,

<sup>18</sup> See Bennett, *Hutterian Brethren*.

<sup>19</sup> On early communitarianism among Mormons, see the brief account in Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1963), 105–9; see also, Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958). For the corporate activities of modern Mormonism, see John Heinerman and Anson Shupe, *The Mormon Corporate Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

<sup>20</sup> For a short account of the financial affairs of the Unification Church, see David G. Bromley, 'Financing the Millennium: The Economic Structure of the Unificationist Movement', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, xxiv (1985), 253–74.

<sup>21</sup> A recent conspicuous example is the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, and more particularly of its leader, the Revd Ian Paisley. See Steve Bruce, *God Save Ulster: The Religion and Politics of Paisleyism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> The struggle of Jehovah's Witnesses to establish, *inter alia*, their rights not to salute national flags, is documented in David R. Manwaring, *Render Unto Caesar: The Flag-Salute Controversy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); see also, M. James Penton, *Jehovah's Witnesses in Canada: Champions of Freedom of Speech and Worship* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976). On various other legal issues relating to religious minorities as these have developed in various countries, see James A. Beckford, *Cult Controversies* (London: Tavistock, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> See, for various related issues, Johannes Neumann and Michael W. Fischer (ed.), *Toleranz und Repression: Zur Lage religiöser Minderheiten in modernen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1987).

of the issues that sects present for investigation in itself indicates the appropriateness of research strategies. The more narrowly focused concerns may not appear to demand the same intimate acquaintance with sect life that general studies certainly do, and yet, even for the former, a measure of empathic understanding is important, perhaps no less so than a commanding knowledge of factual events or of the authority-relations that prevail. That empathy is acquired only by participant observation, which is perhaps the core method of enquiry into sects and the key to understanding them. Whilst a great deal can be learned by the use of questionnaires, and even more by interviews, shared participation provides the emotional context alone within which sectarian values and attitudes can be adequately plumbed and appraised. Whilst in other areas of social life, a questionnaire may suffice to yield all that is needed by way of factual information (and provide some, albeit much less reliable, indication of opinions and values), religion, in its emotional, evaluative and cognitive dimensions, is a more profoundly serious concern than any other, and sectarian religion represents an intensification of this characteristic. The bald questionnaire, without a previous apprehension of the emotional tone, the implicit values, and the assumed facticities of life for sectarians, would produce only a travesty of reality, if, indeed, it met with any sort of response at all. To understand, in more than a formal and notional way, why, to take specific examples from two different sects, Jehovah's Witnesses object to the demand that they should salute a national flag, or should accept a blood transfusion, or why Exclusive Brethren do not eat at the same table with non-Brethren and object to the registration of their names in association with those of outsiders, would be impossible without participation in these movements. A simple questionnaire enquiry without preparatory participation would fail to discover, and so would distort, the nature of these sectarian dispositions and would thus be worse than useless. If this is the case for the understanding of such specific issues, it is clearly much more so when the general ethos and life activities are the focus of enquiry.

As a research technique, participant observation is not unproblematic. It is more of an intuitive art than a learned skill, and not everyone can readily adopt the role, which requires a capacity to develop a measure of sympathy with sectarians whilst retaining a certain detachment. What is learned by this technique may not be wholly replicable in the way that is expected of scientific results. They are in some degree dependent on the personal capacities of the researcher and on the balance that he can strike between simultaneous identification with his subjects and distancing from them. At its best it yields more than is forthcoming from informants, since the participant observer has an implicit comparative perspective and engages in interpretative but self-conscious reconstruction of what he learns from the vantage point of a being with a foot in two worlds. He must be

patient, sensitive, alert, and responsive to the situation, but his responsiveness must be subject to certain self-imposed constraints.

The role makes considerable demands on emotional and social stamina, which can induce a real strain. This is most acute when he has concealed his identity and purpose from his subjects by pretending to be a prospective convert or neophyte. The dual role is likely, in such circumstances, to become almost unsustainable. The investigator is pretending to espouse values that are radically different from those which his scholarly purpose prescribes for him. He is likely to have difficulty in maintaining the deceit, and he may – in my view, should – experience anxiety about the dubious ethical implications of the strategy that he has adopted.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, one might suppose that the successful, assured, and untroubled concealed participant observer would produce results the integrity of which and the sensitivity of which would be open to doubt.

Normally, participant observers reveal their purposes to the sects with which they seek to work, and indeed certain areas of enquiry would be closed off were they not to do so. The ‘revealed’ participant observer has less difficulty in retaining his primary commitment to the values of his discipline; he is less likely to ‘go native’, to adopt the world-view and the values of his subjects. The middle point between sympathy and detachment is not, even so, easily struck: excessive sympathy, whilst it may not lead to conversion, might result in a work unduly sentimental; too much detachment will yield only a distorted caricature of the subjects.

Participant observation is a time-consuming procedure. It cannot in itself be precisely ‘programmed’, and it cannot be accelerated. The investigator has to find his group, gain admission, become accepted at meetings, learn to mix easily, devote himself to learning the argot and apprehending the emotional range of his subjects, and he must learn in matters of dress and comportment how to ‘fit in’ to group-expectations. He has to learn a repertoire of sensitivities which may be far from being native to him; he must know what subjects to avoid and the terms in which other matters can be taken up. Ideally, he will achieve near total immersion, but this can occur only slowly, and there is no easy point at which he can safely decide that he has learned all he can. Even determining whether what he has observed is normal or incidental takes some time.

Diminishing marginal returns set in sooner or later; yet, sometimes, what can be learned at the margin may turn out to be of great importance. Sociology, however, is a distilling discipline, tending to

<sup>24</sup> For an account of role strain whilst a concealed participant observer, see D.E. van Zandt, ‘Ideology and Structure in the Children of God: A study of a New Sect’ (University of London Ph.D. thesis, 1985). See also the perceptive and informative discussion of ‘the moral career of a research project’ by Roy Wallis, *Salvation and Protest: Studies in Social and Religious Movements* (London: Frances Pinter, 1979), 193–216.

reduce the mass of observations into analytical propositions that can be summarily stated (in this differing from the phenomenological approach). In the end-product, extensive participant observation may be apparent only in the sense of authenticity that comes through the published accounts of the work that has been undertaken.

The research sociologist cannot become, and does not seek to become, a sectarian, but he can get closer by participant observation than has ever been possible for historians. Although, at one level, sect members will always know more about sectarian life than will the investigator, participant observation opens the way for empathic understanding, for acting with, worshipping with, feeling with, and perhaps even living within a sect, and this adds a dimension of social knowledge precluded to the historian. Conversely, just as it would be a betrayal of academic commitment to become a sectarian, in certain respects the sociologist, at a different level, can know much more about a sect than its members are ever likely to know. He has the advantages of comparative analysis, by which he can interpret various aspects of sect-life in the light of what he knows of other sects and the probabilities of sect dynamics.

The more usual methods of social enquiry – interviews, questionnaires, and the use of informants (as well as recourse to written records and published material) – need little to be specially said of them. In all these procedures, the researcher does not merely collect what happens to have been preserved, but actively stimulates data.<sup>25</sup> What he obtains is not unsolicited and random, but the result of systematic, strategic probing. He needs not to speculate about possible motivations and intentions: he can enquire directly about them, and he can cross-check the responses to his questions. There are hazards in the use of questionnaires. The total reliability of respondents can never be assumed or ensured, but, by and large, sectarians constitute a public that is almost certainly more honest than the general population. Indeed, the participant observer who undertakes interviews may often find himself acting almost as a cathartic agent. Sectarians are necessarily deeply preoccupied with their distinctive way of life, and they may find it a relief to talk to the outsider about things that deeply interest them both (even if from different perspectives) without the constraints and conventions that obtain in the group life of the sect. The sympathetic stranger who ‘knows about us’ may have disclosed to him much more than a social investigator can reasonably expect or deliberately elicit.

Sociological enquiry, as we have observed, depends on the co-operation of respondents. Religious bodies generally are disposed to some secrecy in their operation (one needs but think of the

<sup>25</sup> Curiously, at least one historian has objected to this aspect of sociological research: see G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1967), 72–3.

economic and political operation of the Vatican), and this tendency is intensified in many sects, whose leaders and members frequently feel vulnerable to public comment. The sources of this reserve are several. First, they regard religion as a matter of sovereign personal conviction which is no one else's business. Second, many sects have experienced hostility at the hands of journalists and even of judges and public officials. Third, the methods of sociological enquiry ineptly introduced may induce the sense that the investigators see their subjects as deviants or at least as oddities, and sects as a form of social pathology. The purposes of enquiry may remain incomprehensible to sectarians, and, indeed, even the most judicious display of impartiality and objectivity may appear to them as commitment to quite alien, perhaps inimical, values. Finally, there is the threat that the tolerated but inquisitorial stranger, with his divergent value-orientations, may seriously disturb the faith of members.

When sects resist sociological (and, even more emphatically, psychological) enquiry, they do so with the apprehension, even if without full comprehension, that there is a strong tendency within the social sciences towards a certain reductionism: religious commitments are taken at less than their face-value but are seen as epiphenomena to be explained by reference to social, economic, or psychological causes. Since, in most sects, the member seeks to be seen as someone the primacy of whose religious conviction predicates his total social being, his comportment, relationships, and his involvement in, or abstention from, the operation of the wider social system, he must of necessity resist, and probably resent, the suggestion that his religious predilections are influenced or even determined by his social origins and circumstances. The sect has its own self-explanation and justification, and, although the investigator cannot unreservedly accept such accounts just as they stand, he does well to take them fully into account as first data that are due his respect. Since sects often reject conventional scientific wisdom and are often explicitly anti-intellectual, the theoretical formulations of social causation must always appear to sectarians at best as error and at worst as sin. And all of these considerations indicate the delicacy with which the sociologist must proceed if sects are to be studied and explained, and if these radical unconscious experiments in living patterns are to be understood.

Passing mention has been made of data derived from informants. Such sources have been of value with respect to sects no less than to tribes. Carefully used, the material that the informant supplies can become a basis from which to address more pertinent questions to sect leaders. Even if what the informant tells is not in itself wholly accurate, it can be a lever with which to stimulate sect authorities to correct the record. Informants who are merely contacts, and who have no personal motives for what they tell, are to be preferred to those who, for their own purposes, seek to use the investigator. The disaffected and the apostate are, in particular, informants whose

evidence has to be used with circumspection. The apostate is generally in need of self-justification. He seeks to re-construct his own past and to excuse his former affiliations and to blame those who were formerly his closest associates. Not uncommonly, the apostate learns to rehearse an 'atrocious story' to explain how, by manipulation, trickery, coercion, or deceit, he was induced to join or to remain within an organization that he now forswears and condemns.<sup>26</sup> Apostates, sensationalized by the press, have sometimes sought to make a profit from accounts of their experiences in stories sold to newspapers or in books, sometimes written by 'ghost' writers.

Much of the foregoing discussion of methodological issues, despite passing allusion to the millions of adherents of the three or four largest sectarian groups, has proceeded to discuss sects as if they were small, almost single congregations. That, indeed, was often assumed in the early sociological work on sects. Such sects still exist, but more typically today sects usually have numerous congregations, often internationally distributed, and some of them control elaborate corporate structures and complex ancillary services. This is most conspicuously the case with the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Unification Church, even if other movements, for example, the Brethren and the Christadelphians, persist with minimal organizational arrangements.

Whilst local sectarian life, in whatever movement, may still be appropriately studied by the methods discussed above, and whilst those studies are still essential for an understanding of what it means to be a sectarian, the large-scale sect has dimensions and facets that are comprehensible only by the use of quite different techniques and with the availability of quite different data. Large modern sects have their internal hierarchies of authority and a bureaucratic career-structure of administrators. Without returning to sacerdotalism, they have, none the less, evolved a type of internal professionalism. Their periodicals have often acquired a public relations role, no longer revealing, as was the case with small nascent sects, the internal tensions and difficulties within a movement. Instead, they put forward a bold but bland face to the world, in which problems, power struggles, financial arrangements and even theological arguments are concealed not only from the outside enquirer but also from the ordinary rank-and-file of the faithful. Sociologists do not always gain ready access to the inner operations of these organizations, but a considerable amount of semi-sociological commentary sometimes emerges from within the

<sup>26</sup> On 'atrocious stories' as a genre, see Anton D. Shupe, Jr. and David G. Bromley, 'Apostates and Atrocious Stories', *The Social Impact of New Religious Movements*, ed. B.R. Wilson (New York: Rose of Sharon Press, 1981), 179-215; and D.G. Bromley, A.D. Shupe, Jr., and J.C. Ventimiglia, 'The Role of Anecdotal Atrocities in the Social Construction of Evil', *The Brainwashing/Deprogramming Controversy: Sociological, Psychological, Legal and Historical Perspectives*, ed. D.G. Bromley and J.T. Richardson (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 139-60.

sect, which, in its complexity, fails to maintain that coherent monolithic character assumed of sects. Some of those within the sect become critical or contentious and may produce a literature which, whilst not directly sociological, and certainly lacking those criteria of ethical neutrality, detachment and scientific method in terms of which sociology makes its claims, none the less provides the sociologist with some primary insights and certain data on which sociological analysis might proceed.

Certain sects, then, have evolved into organizations which, in many respects, are quite unlike the Troeltschean model of sectarianism. In part, this development reflects the much more avowedly pluralistic character of modern society; the old dichotomy of orthodox church and deviant sect ceases to apply. Inevitably, in consequence, the methods by which sects are to be studied undergo adaptation. There is one other important feature of the contemporary situation that should not escape notice. Sects, in time past (and the term was easily assumed to imply this), represented divisions within, and separations from, the dominant form of the Christian church. Today, there are many new religious movements which, in some respects, are much like sects but which in others differ radically from them. They tend to be of exotic provenance, extra-Christian or post-Christian. They do not seek specifically to correct existing Christian ideas as these are presented by the churches, and they may regard Christianity as being not so much erroneous as merely irrelevant. They tend to be less anti-intellectual and often offer rather a superior form of intellectual enlightenment, invoking supposedly scientific, religiously eclectic, or distinctly oriental systems of knowledge. Their appeal has been to a young public less rooted in traditional culture, less disposed to fight against it than to ignore it. Whilst sectarians are likely to be, or of choice to become, socially marginal, yet as society undergoes change, so do its margins and its conceptions of marginality. The new religious movements have recruited the new marginals whose marginality may be more temporary, a function of generational change, affected lifestyle and the new dissolution of coherence in the once firmly clustered criteria of social status. Some of these movements are much more accessible to sociological enquiry than were the old sects. They may accept a great deal of modern culture. The points at which they diverge from the wider society are different, and their distinctiveness is cast in different terms. So it is that the study of these movements, loosely grouped with, and similar to, sects, may call for some variation or augmentations of established assumptions about sectarianism and of the methodologies appropriate to its study, even though we may suppose that the fundamental canons of the social scientific perspective will remain essential to the enterprise.