

## **Adventists: Cult, Sect or Denomination?**

Ronald Lawson, Ph.D.

Presentation developed for a service of the Metro New York Adventist Forum

### **Definitions of Different Usage**

#### *Common Usage*

- vague
- emphasis more on practices than beliefs

*Cult*: A very strange religious group, with peculiar and possibly dangerous practices and beliefs; likely to brainwash people. e.g. Jim Jones People's Temple, Moonies. i.e., the word has a very negative connotation.

*Sect*: A small religious group with odd, often old-fashioned practices and some unusual beliefs, but not nearly as dangerous or strange as a cult. e.g., the Amish, Primitive Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, - Pentecostal storefronts. i.e., a rather negative connotation.

*Denomination*: a "regular" church. e.g., Episcopal, Presbyterian, and, these days, Catholic. i.e., in many communities, these have a positive connotation.

#### *Within Christian Circles*

e.g. Walter Martin's *Kingdom of the Cults* – emphasis on orthodoxy of beliefs

*Cult*: A separated religious group that is skewed so far from orthodox Christian beliefs on the basic Christian doctrines as to be considered heretical and non-Christian. i.e., a very negative connotation. (Given this definition, we can understand why the General Conference leaders did so much in the late 1950s to avoid being labeled as a cult by Martin.)

*Sect*: A separated group with unorthodox beliefs, but not so way out as to be seen beyond the pale of Christianity. i.e., a somewhat negative connotation.

*Denomination*: A mainstream Christian church – within the bounds of orthodoxy.

#### *Sociological*

– stress on social dynamics and relations with society. (My chief focus.) N.B. the sociological approach is, by definition, non-judgmental. The terms are here descriptive and technical, without either positive or negative connotations.

*Sects*: Deviant religious movements that remain within a non-deviant religious tradition; they reject the social environment, and therefore have a high tension with society. Sects break away from denominations because they see them as too compromised with the world, and so having wrong beliefs and practices.

Their members are typically first-generation converts, with a resultant fervor and rigidity. They see their sect as being the sole possessor of truth, and give highest priority to evangelism. The sect demands total allegiance from its members, and controls a great deal of their lives (e.g. Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God). Sects reject society, and receive or at least expect persecution. Members are separated from the rest of society in lifestyle, friendship networks, and often in education and jobs; they do not participate in communal or national affairs. Members tend to be poor and poorly educated, and participate broadly in many church activities.

*Denominations:* Accept the social environment in which they exist, so that there is usually low tension with society (although increasingly some are taking "prophetic" positions against what they see as injustice). Membership is usually determined by birth – churches are broadly accepting, so that membership may e.g. follow national or ethnic boundaries, and because they accept most of the standards and values of society, members do not feel greatly separate. They see themselves as one movement among many that is accepted by God. They are institutionalized, with a formal hierarchy, professional clergy, and considerable wealth. They engage in little evangelism – priority is placed on ministering to their own people. They draw their members from a broader array of social classes than sects, but segregate them in congregations to the socially compatible.

*Cults:* Like sects, Cults have a high tension with society, but differ by not being schismatic. Instead, they represent a deviant religious tradition, with origins either in innovation or migration. (i.e., Christianity is a cult in India.) They may grow to become the dominant tradition in a country, or may split into sects.

### **Process of Change**

With time, sects and cults almost inevitably gain inherited members, who tend to have a different mindset from those who converted as adults; they prosper—both collectively (erecting increasingly better buildings, creating institutions such as schools, colleges, hospitals, and investing surplus capital) and individually (as the younger generations achieve higher levels of education, and, especially in America, as they have felt the impact of the widespread upward mobility which was fed by the waves of immigrants during the last two centuries). Higher education exposes members to ideas from which they were previously protected; greater prosperity gives them a stake in society – their only pie is no longer the one they hope to receive in the by and by. Meanwhile, these sects and cults often go through a process of institutionalization, developing hierarchical government and seminaries, increasing their influence, and coming to feel less alienated and separate from society. As their hostility to society diminishes, they come to feel less special, less holier-than-thou towards other religious groups, their evangelistic zeal declines, as does their fear of persecution.

That is, over time many sects and cults change in the direction of becoming denominations. Indeed, every large religion or denomination began as a sect or cult – early Christianity, for example, was a sect within Judaism. When the more conservative members realize that their groups are becoming more denomination-like, discontent is likely to emerge and new schisms create new sects.

However, the process of transformation into a denomination does not occur to all sects and cults. Many, of course, die out. But others become what have been called "established sects" or cults as the result of going through one of two processes. Some withdraw almost totally from society – the Amish, Hutterites, and Jewish Hassidics are the best known of these in North America. (Note that the Mormon withdrawal to Utah did not prevent the process of transformation because of their growing involvement in the life of society, especially the business life.) Others remain in society but retain their separation by their

antagonism to it. The best example of this process is the Jehovah's Witnesses, who have bolstered their sectarianism by remaining basically a first generation church despite the passage of over a century since their founding: they have lost a large proportion of their second-generation members with the failure of each date they have set for the end of the world but have continued to attract a large influx of adult converts. They have also kept their members relatively poor and focused on the reward to come in the kingdom by their antagonism towards education, and have been bold in stressing doctrines, such as their refusal to salute the flag, do military service, or take blood transfusions, which have resulted in frequent government sanctions against them and thus helped to fulfill their expectations of persecution from society.

### **How do Adventists fit in here?**

Initially we broke away from established denominations, and so were formed as a sect, not a cult – clearly within the Christian tradition. We fitted the descriptions of a sect very closely – a group of first generation, highly committed adult converts, willing to somehow observe the Sabbath in the midst of a society where it was then a normal work day, who were nevertheless fairly poor and poorly educated. Adventists saw themselves as so special that they were THE Remnant, and converts spoke of coming into "the Truth." Their purpose was primarily evangelistic – to preach the last warning message to the world and separate out a people who were ready for the return of Christ. They were separated from their neighbors by their observance of the Sabbath, their restrictions on what they ate, drank, and regarded as proper entertainment, by the enormous amount of time they gave to church, and by warnings not to associate with "outsiders" except for purposes of trying to convert them. Their segregation was heightened as they founded their own parochial school system, as many moved to live around isolated church schools and hospitals, and as many found employment with the church or each other. Moreover, since they were expecting persecution (a Sunday law and edicts that would prevent them from buying or selling) and the end of the world very soon, there was no reason to become involved in their societies.

With time, in the U.S., Adventism accumulated more and more inherited members. However, because evangelistic zeal also continued, there was also a continuing influx of converts, and the mix did create some tensions. But with time, second generation Adventists, who became increasingly uncomfortable with the arrogance and separation of the Remnant and less sure of some of the other doctrines, witnessed less and less. Moreover, as a result of the Adventist emphasis on education, they achieved considerable upward mobility and therefore a growing stake in society. The expectation of persecution became less and less a concern except among extremists. Nevertheless, the tradition of non-involvement in local communities or national politics kept participation in such spheres very low. With the coming of the 40-hour week Sabbath observance became less of a problem and, in a society increasingly aware of stress, could even be touted as a good idea. Changing values in society made the Adventist concern with healthful living less separating, even as they followed it less closely. And fewer, especially among the young, took the entertainment prohibitions seriously. While ties among Adventists were still relatively strong, compared to mainstream denominations, they were more often cultural, the product of shared sectarian upbringings, than of fervent commitment to the Adventist belief system.

Meanwhile, the Adventist church was institutionalizing notably, developing an extremely centralized hierarchy, institutional wealth (with large hospital and educational systems and investments in stocks and bonds) and a large stake in keeping the institution going.

That is, although it had not yet become a fully-fledged mainstream denomination by the 1960s, Adventism was showing considerable movement towards this by this time. A major indication of the commitment to winning acceptance was shown in the meetings with Walter Martin, the writer about cults, in the late 1950s, which produced changes in positions that persuaded him that Adventists were not a cult but "fellow evangelicals."

However, today tensions abound. The emphasis on numbers of baptisms, or growth statistics, in the 1980s and 1990s especially, with first the "1000 Days of Reaping" and then "Harvest '90", resulted in huge growth in the Developing World. The church there is a first-generation church, legalistic in tone, and preaching traditional doctrines that inherited members in the U.S. have largely forgotten. That is, Adventism in the Developing World is a very sectarian church.

The extensive growth in the "Global South" has caused the relative strength of the North American church to drop, so that it is now only 6% of total membership and falling quite rapidly. Demographics here are also suggesting a turn towards sectarianism, for we are showing huge losses among third generation youth, many of whom leave as they graduate from their last parochial school because they do not see the relevance of Adventism to them. Those who stay are likely to be cultural Adventists, so that most of those now entering the ministry are new converts. Growth in North America is in fact occurring mostly among new immigrants from the Developing World – Latin Americans who are often illegal immigrants, West Indians, and most recently Orientals – who tend to be poorer and less educated than ever in the American past and thus very different from the third generation inherited members who are products of the Adventist thrust towards education. The so-called "Revelation Seminars", which emerged as a major means of evangelism, are extraordinarily sectarian in tone, with, e.g., the nineteenth century anti-Catholic themes. Many pastors have told me that they do not believe them but that they are expected to use them nevertheless.

That is, after following the frequently-travelled path from sectarianism towards denominationalism for many decades, Adventism during the 1970s and especially the 1980s, began to veer back towards sectarianism, and therefore towards a greater rigidity – it is, sociologically speaking, starting to look more like the Jehovah's Witnesses. One overt sign of this has been the attempts to reshape the Seminary in a much more conservative vein. Another is likely to come with the appointment of the next President of the General Conference, who could be from the Developing World – and therefore a product of the type of Adventism that exists there.

However, this drift back to sectarianism is not happening easily, for there are contrary forces at work among Adventist diversity:

- For example, when the retreat of the old colonial powers left a power vacuum in Third World countries, many Adventists stepped into leadership roles in politics and government – the Adventist educational system had prepared them well. It is my guess that this participation in power, which is so foreign to Adventists in the First World, will change the Third World churches in dramatic ways.
- Our large hospital system in the U.S. is forcing the Adventist Church to participate in society in all sorts of new ways – lobbying, labor relations (especially since most employees are now non-Adventists), community relations, etc. If the church cannot adjust to these changes, it will lose its hospitals – indeed, there have already been votes that should the workers at any particular hospital form a union, the church will dispose of the hospital! For many conservative Adventists,

who see the hospital system as having wandered far from the nineteenth century "blueprint", its loss would be seen as a blessing.

- The Adventist education system in the U.S. is in crisis. A recent study showed that vast numbers of Adventist parents are choosing to send their children elsewhere because they regard the standard of education in Adventist schools as too poor. That is, their chief priority has shifted to ensuring that their children are successful in the world. This is not the outlook of a sectarian.
- And many of the churches which are dominated by educated, inherited members, are diverting their tithe from the church structure to local needs and other, non-Adventist, causes. In increasing numbers, they are feeling no longer impelled to support the numbers game in the Third World. The church is decentralizing, even though the official structure does not yet reflect this.
- North American pastors widely fear that by the time they retire there will be no sustentation (retirement allowance) for them because of the growing disenchantment of those who have - traditionally financed the church and the poverty of the vast majority of new members.

I see the emphasis on growth as an attempt to distract the membership from the huge problems related to trying to govern a very diverse church with a hierarchical, centralized structure that wants all to march in step – that, for example, has declared that North America cannot ordain women pastors until Latin America is ready to do so also. But in fact the stress on growth is intensifying the problems because of the traditional emphasis of the preaching and the impossibility of nurturing so many converts properly.

**How do I feel about the situation I have described? Where does the Forum Chapter in New York City (my home church for 44 years) fit into the picture?**

I am a 2nd generation, educated, aware Adventist. Like many others similar to me, I am uncomfortable with the idea that Adventists have a monopoly of truth. I care greatly about Adventists – they are my people, for we understand each other so well because of our shared sectarian heritage. But I am no longer willing to be separated from society – instead, as a committed Christian, I want to be in the world as "the salt of the earth" – sharing in the good things of our culture and, especially, the confronting the injustices that abound there.

I don't want Adventism to fall into the lethargy of many mainstream churches. On the other hand, an energy that is based on a sectarian belief that we alone have a special relationship with God and which preaches, holier-than-thou, that others are wrong, apostate, and will be rejected by God, is unacceptable. I want to attract others to us because they see that we really love as Christ loved and because they find God in our worship.

But we have a long way to go here – sectarians are so self-conscious about their reputations that they reject the kinds of people whom Jesus most closely identified with. Today they would be the poor, the unmarried mothers, the divorced, the gays, those with criminal records, and other "sinners". Unfortunately, we too often follow the example of the priest rather than the good Samaritan, of the Pharisee rather than the publican. For example, we run the country's third-largest hospital system, and yet did nothing of note to respond to the AIDS crisis in the USA. I am told that this is because our hospitals would be likely to lose money from such patients because their medical insurance tends to run out during their long illness; moreover, those who contract the disease are such unsavory people! This response reminds me of the question asked Jesus: "Who sinned, this man or his father, that he was born blind?" Do

you remember how Jesus responded? "Neither, but that the power of God might be revealed!" As for worship services, sectarians tend to teach doctrine rather than worship God in awe. We have drifted away from the doctrinal sermons because too many pastors, and their seminary professors before them, are uncertain on that front. But we have not captured a close sense of God in most of our services.

I believe that the Adventist church must decentralize – this is the only way to meet the needs of such a diverse membership. Let us not rejoice that all SDAs around the world are studying the same Sabbath School lesson on Sabbath morning, but in those few, but increasing number, of classes that craft lessons for their own needs. As I have traveled I have come to the conclusion that these classes represent some of the greatest interest and growth.

Our church is changing, but far too slowly when we consider the extent of the crisis. It is extremely difficult for a centralized organization to experiment – they would be likely to issue an edict that applied to every church, and if it failed it could cause havoc, so they are extremely cautious.

We here at the Forum are in a unique situation, because we are part of the church yet independent. It is, therefore, possible for us to experiment more freely, find what works, and then pass it on. Over time we have done this in three main areas:

1. How can we be Christians in the world rather than ghettoized from it?
2. How can we care for those the church, because it is holier-than-thou, usually rejects?
  - a. Our special service seven years ago culminating in the dedication of the daughter of an unmarried mother, when all of us stood in a circle, promising to help support the upbringing of the child – and then did so.
  - b. We judge no one, seeking to follow Christ's admonitions to "judge not", to "let the wheat and tares grow together until the harvest", and to care for those most in need.
  - c. Consequently, sometimes there are rumors that we harbor sinners. Given our understanding of the gospel, I believe that we should be proud of such rumors.
3. Now we are setting out to build a stronger spiritual life in all of us, individually and communally. You will notice that our meeting topics this semester are more spiritually oriented; we are also experimenting with our form of worship to try to gain a greater sense of the presence of God – of awe, greater participation from all of us in the service, and an assurance of forgiveness – an assurance that Adventists often lack.

I believe that these issues and experiments can be important not only to us, but eventually to our church, for it can learn from us.