

# sample resources

# Sociology

## Cults: Issues and Debates

### 1) What is the difference between a sect and a cult?

Media tend to conflate the terms sect and cult.

#### A) **Bruce**

'A cult is a loosely knit group organised around some common themes and interests but lacking any sharply defined and exclusive belief system'.

- 1) Individualistic
- 2) Tolerate other belief systems
- 3) Often have customers rather than members

#### B) **Wallis**

- 1) Cults are regarded as deviant
- 2) They do not claim monopoly over truth. They are tolerant.
- 3) Emphasise the inner power of the individual

#### C) **Stark and Bainbridge**

Suggest three types of cults – all of which offer forms of compensation

- 1) **Audience Cults:** least organised, contacts maintained via mass media e.g. Astrology (weak compensation)
- 2) **Client Cults:** more organised and offer services e.g. Scientology (specific compensators)
- 3) **Cult movement:** more involvement of followers e.g. Moonies or Heaven's Gate (general compensators)

## **The Example of Heaven's Gate**

- 1) Domsday Cult that started in mid 1970s
- 2) Required members to refrain from sex, drugs and alcohol
- 3) The leader Marshall Applewhite, referred to as 'do', was castrated
- 4) Believed that the earth was about to become recreated. They needed to leave their earthly bodies to get closer to heaven.

- 1) When the comet Hale-Bopp passed close to earth the cult members committed suicide. They believed that their spirits would ascend to a spacecraft that was following Hale-Bopp.

***NB. The wide range of small religious, spiritual or mystical groups that have sprung up since the 1960s led to the use of Contemporary Classifications = NRM.***

## **2) How can we explain the growth of NRMs?**

NRMs are not a homogenous group. They can be affirming, rejecting or accommodating. Therefore, they have very different origins. Many factors may combine in the formation of a NRM. This suggests the need for a multi-causal explanation.

***Factors explaining the rise of NRMs revolve around three levels of analysis:***

- 1) Wider trends and events in society
- 2) Factors affecting particular groups in society
- 3) The needs of individuals

***The linking concept between all these three factors is UNCERTAINTY.***

## **Factors in general:**

- 1) Breakaway from Established Church and response to Secularisation
- 2) Response to modernity: the breakdown of community; threats to way of life; bureaucracy; decline of extended of family; alienation in capitalism; patriarchy
- 3) Marginality
- 4) Relative Deprivation
- 5) Career Success/Personal Growth/Crisis of Identity

***Basic Idea: NRM provide certainty in period of uncertainty.***

## **Factors explaining the rise of world-rejecting movements**

### **1) Wallis (1984)**

Factors explaining the growth in the 1960s:

- 1) Growth in HE lengthened the transition period between childhood and adulthood. This was a period of freedom.

- 2) Period of radicalism suggesting the possibility of alternative world-views
- 3) Rise of technology would bring an end to poverty
- 4) Secularisation

***Therefore, world-rejecting movements provided 'a more idealistic, spiritual and caring way of life, in the context of more personal and loving social relationships'.***

2) **Bruce:**

- a) Appealed to the young: those disillusioned with the counter culture of the 1960s e.g. Hippie Movement disintegrated

### **Factors explaining the rise of world-accommodating movements:**

**Wallis**

- a) No clear explanation
- b) Those with a substantial stake in society, but who have reasons to be dissatisfied with existing religions

### **Factors explaining the rise of world-affirming movements**

- a) Develop as a *'means of coping with a sense of inadequacy among social groups which are, by the more obvious indicators, among the world's more successful and highly rewarded individuals'*.
- b) Feeling of loss of 'real self'
- c) Offer immediate gratification for those taking part
- d) **Bruce** sees these as a response to the rationalisation of the modern world

*'Modern life is so fragmented that many people find it increasingly difficult to draw on their public roles for a satisfying and fulfilling sense of identity'.*

### **PROBLEM!!!!**

**Gordon Melton**

- 1) Analysed the founding dates of 836 non-conventional religious groups in the US this century
- 2) Rapid growth in numbers occurred in the 1950s. This was a period of stability
- 3) The rapid growth preceded the counter-culture of the 1960s

### **NEED FOR MULTI-CAUSAL EXPLANATION**

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- 4)
- 5)

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