



MYSTICS
AND
MESSIAHS

CULTS AND NEW RELIGIONS
IN AMERICAN HISTORY

PHILIP JENKINS

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PHILIP JENKINS

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*A genuine first-hand religious experience like this
is bound to be a heterodoxy to its witnesses,
the prophet appearing as a mere lonely madman.
If his doctrine prove contagious enough to spread to any others,
it becomes a definite and labeled heresy.
But if it then still prove contagious enough to triumph over persecution,
it becomes itself an orthodoxy;
and when a religion has become an orthodoxy,
its day of inwardness is over: the spring is dry;
the faithful live at second hand exclusively
and stone the prophets in their turn.
The new church, in spite of whatever human goodness it may foster,
can be henceforth counted on as a staunch ally
in every attempt to stifle the spontaneous religious spirit,
and to stop all later babblings of the fountain from which,
in purer days, it drew its own supply of inspiration.*

WILLIAM JAMES, *Varieties of Religious Experience*

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MYSTICS AND MESSIAHS

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ONE

Overrun with Messiahs

It should be obvious to any man who is not one himself that the land is overrun with messiahs.

Charles W. Ferguson, *The Confusion of Tongues*

In the 1920s, like today, the American media relished a scandal that mixed religion with sexual depravity and crime, and the newspapers found rich pickings in the story of Benjamin Purnell, the head of an odd messianic sect. In 1905, "King Ben" opened a colony for his House of David at Benton Harbor in Michigan. At its peak, the settlement grew to nine hundred believers, over which Purnell reigned as a patriarch, resplendent in his white robes and magnificent beard. But the sect repeatedly attracted bad publicity, all the more hazardous because of the proximity to Chicago, Detroit, and other major media centers: the site was also exposed to the gaze of curious tourists. Purnell demanded total control over his followers' property, allowing him to live in palatial splendor while his subjects starved, and he maintained order with threats of death or exile. The sect became a multimillion dollar operation, with impressive real-estate holdings. He treated the younger female members of the group as his personal harem, and his secret Inner Circle initiation rituals sometimes involved rape (notionally, the sect demanded celibacy). In 1923, disgruntled followers sued Purnell for the restitution of their property and compensation for their forced labor. He disappeared for some years and was believed dead, but his hiding place in the settlement was revealed by a woman who was a former member of the Inner Circle and whom the press termed a harem girl. In 1927, Purnell faced multiple charges of statutory rape involving perhaps twenty underage cult members, in what the press touted as the "trial of the century."¹

To a modern audience, the case of King Ben contains few surprises. The House of David neatly fits the image of religious cults familiar since the 1970s. In common parlance, cults are exotic religions that practice spiritual totalitarianism: members owe fanatical obedience to the group and to its charismatic leaders, who enforce their authority through mind-control techniques or brainwashing. According to the stereotype, cult members live separated from the "normal" world, sometimes socially, in the sense of being cut off from previous friends and family, and sometimes also spatially, in a special residence house or a remote compound. Other cult characteristics include financial malpractice and deceit by the group or its leaders, the exploitation of members, and sexual unorthodoxy. An extreme example of such a deviant group would be the People's Temple founded by Jim Jones, who led his followers to mass suicide at Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978.

By all these criteria, the lascivious prophet Benjamin Purnell was a typical cult leader and his followers were model cultists, but what is remarkable here is the chronology. This particular cult scandal erupted not in the 1970s, in the age of Jonestown and national controversies over cult conversions and deprogramming, but half a century before. Though modern observers tend to assume that the idea of cults is relatively modern, in fact it has deep roots in American history. Fringe groups like Purnell's were by no means unusual in the 1920s, and many attracted similar charges of exploitation and sexual misbehavior. In Purnell's case, the charges were probably justified, but in many others, they were not. Already in this era, marginal religious movements were regularly denounced as cults, and like today, the cult phenomenon was a source of public fear. Moreover, both cults and cult scares had become familiar parts of the American scene long before the Purnell trial. The specific terminology might change over time—the language of "cult" only dates from the 1890s—but there is no period, including colonial times, in which we cannot find numerous groups more or less indistinguishable from the most controversial modern movements. As Charles W. Ferguson remarked in 1928, "America has always been the sanctuary of amazing cults."²

Cults in American History

A historical perspective is crucial for understanding contemporary debates over fringe movements, over modern "destructive cults" or "doomsday cults." Over the last three decades, the word "cult" has

featured regularly in the news, and it has acquired ever more frightening connotations. Images of robotlike obedience were frightening enough, but that already grim picture was aggravated by incidents of extreme violence, such as the Manson Family murders and Jonestown. Notorious cult outbreaks during the 1990s included the confrontation at Waco, the violent deaths of the Heaven's Gate and Solar Temple groups, and the nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway by the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo organization. For the media, each of these events spoke eloquently of blind fanaticism, megalomaniacal leaders, and the following of incomprehensible dogma. Even if we do not focus on the most aberrant groups, the existence of so many unorthodox fringe religions can be seen as a symptom of social malaise or fragmentation. In response, many commentators have inquired what has gone so badly wrong with the religious consciousness of their nation as to permit the emergence of such suspect movements.

All these lines of inquiry imply that the contemporary American situation is a frightening novelty, with few or no historical parallels: the unspoken assumption is that the religious landscape of fifty or a hundred years ago must have been a fairly tranquil, monochrome affair, a straightforward matter of "Protestant, Catholic, and Jew." In 1980, for instance, James and Marcia Rudin claimed that "there has never in recorded history been such a proliferation of cults. . . . Never before have religious cults been so geographically widespread. . . . Today's religious cults are unique also because of their great wealth."³ But as cases like Ben Purnell's illustrate, this view of modern exceptionalism is misleading. If such groups had only appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, then they would have to be explained in terms of circumstances prevailing at that particular time; but far from being a novelty, cults and cultlike movements have a very long history on American soil.

Extreme and bizarre religious ideas are so commonplace in American history that it is difficult to speak of them as fringe at all. To speak of a fringe implies a mainstream, but in terms of numbers, perhaps the largest component of the religious spectrum in contemporary America remains what it has been since colonial times: a fundamentalist evangelicalism with powerful millenarian strands. The doomsday theme has never been far from the center of American religious thought. The nation has always had believers who responded to this threat by a determination to flee from the wrath to come, to separate themselves from the City of Destruction, even if that meant putting themselves at

odds with the law and with their communities or families. In its earliest days, colonial New England was a refuge for those seeking to live godly lives uncontaminated by the sinful world, very much the same motivation that today drives believers into remote enclaves. We can throughout American history find select and separatist groups who looked to a prophetic individual claiming divine revelation, in a setting that repudiated conventional assumptions about property, family life, and sexuality. They were marginal groups, peculiar people, people set apart from the world: the Shakers and the Ephrata community, the communes of Oneida and Amana, the followers of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. And most were at some point charged, fairly or otherwise, with excesses very similar to those alleged against modern cults. Ben Purnell did not exist in a social vacuum; he and others like him have always been able to attract followers, sometimes in their thousands.

Most early radical sects were avowedly Christian, but some held occult or mystical doctrines of the sort that we would today term "New Age." This occult tradition includes alchemy and astrology, together with forms of spiritual healing, all of which were already deeply rooted in colonial America. As early as the 1690s, some sects in German Pennsylvania were deeply imbued with rosicrucian and Hermetic thought, and demonstrated the same fascination with mystic numbers that would characterize fringe movements up to the present day. Though more visible in some decades than others, these esoteric traditions have never died out entirely.⁴

Magi and prophets are American productions just as characteristic as bishops and revivalists. Martin Marty has written that William Dudley Pelley, a religious activist of the 1930s, dabbled with "so many movements that [he] seemed a fictional creation: Christian Science, atheism, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, New Thought, Spiritualism, Darwinism, the occult, the Great Pyramid, telepathy, sexology, metaphysics, Emersonianism, more of conventional Christianity than he or his enemies recognized, and science of the sort later associated with extrasensory perception."⁵ Though the list of creeds is intended to make Pelley sound absurdly eclectic, the resulting picture is less that of a fictional creation than of a familiar American type. The combination of occult, mystical, Masonic, and pseudoscientific views with esoteric Christianity would have been instantly comprehensible to Americans of the 1830s, 1880s, and 1970s, while as far back as 1730, there were regions where a synthesis of this sort would have been

regarded as perfectly familiar, if not already old hat. Such a package of esoteric beliefs is so persistent a theme of American religion that it constitutes a separate tradition running parallel to better known and much larger schools like liberal Protestantism, evangelical enthusiasm, or the Catholic heritage.

Boom Years on the Religious Frontier

Some eras were particularly fertile for religious innovation and, hence, for the formation of groups a modern observer might describe as cults. The 1830s and 1840s were marked by ideas of millenarianism, perfectionism, and communitarianism, and some of the emerging movements experimented with innovative sexual relationships. From 1850 to 1880, spiritualism exercised a powerful attraction for all social classes and disseminated its technical vocabulary into everyday speech, much as consciousness-raising movements would do in the 1970s. Spiritualism also prepared the ground for the Theosophical and Asian-oriented religious ideas that have flourished since the end of the nineteenth century: Asian sects and gurus made their first impact in American life not during the presidencies of Nixon or Ford, but during those of McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. Not only are New Age ideas long established, but the term itself has had more or less its present meaning for most of the past century. By 1900, the most active of the new sects included apocalyptic movements like the Watch Tower Society (later the Jehovah's Witnesses) and the Adventists, and metaphysical healing sects like Christian Science and the various schools of New Thought.

Though historical accounts often draw parallels between the religious excitement of the pre-Civil War years and that of the 1960s, it is less often noted that the years between about 1910 and 1935 marked another explosive era for new movements and sects, some of which were communal and authoritarian. Though some scholars dismiss the decade after 1925 as the "American religious depression," that was only true from the point of view of mainline Christian churches, and certainly not for the mystical and apocalyptic groups.⁶ By the late 1920s, the country was "overrun with messiahs. . . . Each of these has seriously made himself the center of a new theophany, has surrounded himself with a band of zealous apostles, has hired a hall for a shrine, and has set about busily to rescue Truth from the scaffold, and put it on the throne." Or as one of Sinclair Lewis's characters phrased it in

1935, there were, "Certainly a lot of messiahs pottin' at you from the bushes these days."⁷

The most celebrated new movements were concentrated in California, which had already staked its irrevocable claim to an image of eccentricity, but no region of the country was immune from sensational groups. By the 1920s, swamis and occult temples could be found in most major cities. New Orleans had its old established voodoo practices, and related religious forms were found in many northern areas. Detroit had a substantial Black Muslim presence, while Muslim and black Jewish sects were found in most major African-American communities. The most influential of the new trends were Christian Science and New Thought, which acquired mass national followings but were still denounced as cults. It is surprising to find Martin E. Marty writing of American religion between 1919 and 1941, "It was not a fertile period of new eruptions of intense religious groups of the sort later called cults."⁸ I would argue that it was such a fertile period, and the word "cult" had been used in this precise sense since the turn of the century.

Eccentric-seeming religious ideas became part of the common intellectual currency during the 1920s, which possessed what later scholars have termed a "cult milieu." This phrase was coined in the 1970s during the boom in marginal religions; a time when the act of joining a fringe religion became something that was in the air, was part of the culture, when ideas and influences freely circulated between movements of very different ideological colors. The concept of a cult milieu can be applied to the 1840s and also to the 1920s. In this last period, a Protestant evangelist like Aimee Semple McPherson imitated the rhetoric and pageantry of a Theosophist commune, while notionally Muslim sects like the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam both borrowed from New Age and Theosophical ideas. Meanwhile, a number of enterprising individuals concocted whole new synthetic religions out of the detritus of a dozen esoteric movements: Guy and Edna Ballard created their hugely successful I AM movement by plundering the various occult and New Age traditions of the day, while William Dudley Pelley's Silver Shirts tried to turn a cult movement into a national political party. Repeatedly, marginal movements have formed the basis of popular culture treatments, which in turn inspired authentic new sects, so that the line separating fiction and reality is never too clear.

Upsurges of activism on the religious fringe—what we might call

“cult booms” or “cult waves”—have been so frequent in American religious history that they are intrinsic to it. As Charles W. Ferguson remarked in 1928, “The truth is of course that the land is simply teeming with faith—that marked credulity that accompanies periods of great religious awakening, and seems to be with us a permanent state of mind.”⁹

Degrees of Commitment

It would be very useful to give hard numbers for this kind of activity at any particular historical moment—to say, for example, that *X* million people were members of apocalyptic or esoteric movements in 1900 or 1940. Sadly, this precision is impossible. The problem is that such ideas can be widely shared without formal participation in an organized community, and individuals have varying degrees of active involvement in such groups. Sociologists often distinguish between degrees of involvement in cult activity.¹⁰ At the lowest level of participation, we find the *audience cults*, which have little formal structure and may not even have actual meetings; instead, they service consumers through books, magazines, mail-order courses, or videos. An individual can have connections with dozens or even hundreds of such movements, grazing among the various ideas and picking and choosing those that appeal, even if they are drawn from quite distinct subcultures. Rather more commitment is involved in *client cults*, in which consumers interact with the cult rather as a patient does with a therapist. The highest degree of involvement is found in *cult movements*, which have formal membership and meetings. In this last case, followers might even relocate to distinct, cult-owned properties.

Unorthodox ideas can be very widespread through audience cults, though without much measurable participation or affiliation. To illustrate this, we might consider the parcel of New Age ideas, which includes belief in astrology, channeling, reincarnation, neopaganism, and goddess spirituality. A general impression based on the mass media suggests that New Age believers are very numerous, and someone is presumably buying the vast numbers of books, magazines, and videotapes produced each year. Nevertheless, this community is barely visible, even to sophisticated survey techniques. One of the best analyses recorded only fifty thousand New Age believers in the whole nation in the early 1990s, and this startlingly low number was reached only by including followers of the movements Wicca and ECKANKAR

in addition to respondents explicitly describing themselves as “New Age.”¹¹ While this low figure seems counterintuitive, it is readily explained. The vast majority of people holding New Age beliefs do not identify themselves as representing a distinct denomination, but describe themselves as Unitarians or Jews, Methodists or Catholics. This is a classic audience cult. If contemporary New Agers are so difficult to locate with certainty, it is even harder to quantify the influence, as opposed to the formal membership, of spiritualism in the 1860s or Theosophy in the 1920s. Though the U.S. Census in 1926 found fewer than seven thousand declared Theosophists in the entire nation, that movement had already succeeded in making its views a familiar component of religious thought.

The fact that fringe religious ideas are not expressed in formal organizations or churches does not necessarily mean that they are unimportant. If, for instance, we find that the proportion of Americans believing in reincarnation grew enormously over the course of the twentieth century, that would be an immensely significant statement about the national religious consciousness, whether or not the change has been reflected in the membership rolls of reincarnationist sects. Over the past century, many ideas originally associated with fringe or occult sects have enjoyed such a wide dissemination, most dramatically in the 1920s and 1970s.

The Anticult Heritage

Just as no era lacks its controversial fringe groups, so no era fails to produce opponents to denounce them: anticult movements are also a long-established historical phenomenon. Anticult rhetoric is strikingly constant, or is at least built upon a common core of allegations and complaints. When an emerging group today is denounced as a cult, its critics are employing, consciously or not, a prefabricated script some centuries in the making, incorporating charges that might originally have been developed long ago against a wide variety of movements. Allegations can even originate in popular culture or as urban legend, yet are soberly incorporated into the anticult indictment as matters of fact.

The concept of the deviant cult—authoritarian, deceptive, exploitative, violent—can be traced deep into the past. Few groups have epitomized the cult image better than the Christians of the first two centuries. Christians held self-evidently extreme and nonsensical views,

which had been imported into the Roman world from the fanatical Orient. The sect broke up existing families, it was dominated by charismatic religious leaders, and its ritual practices were believed to include incest, orgies, child murder, and cannibalism. How else would one explain their "love feasts" for brothers and sisters who ate the flesh of the Son of God? Since that time, countless other groups have attracted a similarly florid range of accusations, usually exaggerated and sometimes wholly fictitious. None of the charges levied against the cults of the 1970s would have been unfamiliar to critics of the Methodists in the eighteenth century or of the Freemasons, Roman Catholics, and Latter-Day Saints in the nineteenth. At any given point over the last century, some peripheral religions were being denounced for driving their adherents to bankruptcy or insanity, and prophetic leaders were attacked as molesters or confidence tricksters. In each era, a few well-authenticated cases appeared to substantiate the wider validity of such charges.

In some periods, the convergence of separate scandals led to a general denunciation of cults as a distinctive social problem or threat, very much as in the 1970s. A wave of scandals in the late 1920s led to an intensification of the volume and vigor of anticult writings. This was the time of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Elmer Gantry* and Dashiell Hammett's *The Dain Curse*, of exposés of mediums and cults by Houdini and his followers, and of Morris Fishbein's denunciation of cult quackery in *The New Medical Follies*. There were also sober surveys like Charles W. Ferguson's *The Confusion of Tongues* and Hugo Hume's sardonic overview of *The Superior American Religions*. Shortly afterwards, we hear of southern California as the "proving ground" for the nationwide "cult racket." In 1933, Louis Binder's *Modern Religious Cults and Society* affected to be an objective scholarly analysis, but began from the standpoint that "at best, the cults are a dreadful reality in modern religious life." In 1936, sociologist Read Bain offered a comprehensive definition of pathological "religious cults" that sounds remarkably modern: "[A cult] has a revered, almost sacred, leader-symbol; it contains mystical elements which provide escape-mechanisms for many of its followers; its proponents and adherents often show delusions of persecution and grandeur; its opponents indulge in heresy-hunting and vitriolic condemnation; there are numerous bitter feuds and fanatic factions within the fold; symbolism, ritualism and logical confusion abound; it flourishes upon dogmatic denial of the ordinary postulates and methods of natural science."¹²

A renewed assault on “crackpot religions” followed in the 1940s: in 1944, as in 1929, cults were a major topic of media concern, and the issue now entered the political arena, creating a situation with many parallels to the modern era. The main problem cults were those suspected for their Far Right or antiwar sentiments, including I AM and Mankind United, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Nation of Islam. Other movements providing steady media copy included the snake-handling Holiness sects concentrated in Appalachia, the surviving sects of Mormon polygamists, and some dubious groups offering the wisdom of the ancients through the mail. The established churches debated how they could respond to the pressing problem, and this decade was marked by intense legal activism to control the religious fringe. The cult controversies of the 1940s did much to define the constitutional limits of religious freedom and toleration, with implications reaching far beyond the immediate limits of sects like I AM and the Witnesses.

Cult and Anticult: The Cycle

The resemblances between the successive waves of anticult reaction are sufficiently similar to suggest that they follow broadly similar internal dynamics. We can chart in the form of a table some of the obvious parallels between two successive eras (Table 1.1).

This model should not be pressed too far because the most intense phase of official concern and intervention occurred at a different stage of the cycle in the earlier wave than it did in the later. Still, the similarities are suggestive, notably in what I call the phase of *Speculation*, in which fairly well-grounded criticisms of marginal religions escalate into wild fantasies: recall the nightmarish events of the 1980s, when so many innocent people had their lives ruined by absurd charges that they were clandestine Satanists who abused and murdered children. What is less well-known is that similar rumors about bloodthirsty devil cults had also run rampant fifty years previously, and in many ways this first panic served as a foundation for the more recent one. We find in this earlier era the beginnings of the modern mythology about homicidal satanic networks being embedded in American neighborhoods, schools, and churches.

Defining Cults

The long and often troubled history of America’s marginal religions raises important implications for the vexed question of defining cults.

Table 1.1
Cults and Anticult Reactions: A Cycle

Emergence	1910-1935 Surging interest in fringe religions and occult; creation of many new marginal groups and sects.	1960-1980 Surging interest in fringe religions and occult; creation of many new marginal groups and sects.
Reaction	1925-1930 Wave of scandals involving fringe religions and leaders. Popular recognition of cult phenomenon; framing of "cult problem" in exposés and in popular culture.	1976-1981 Wave of scandals involving fringe religions and leaders. Popular recognition of cult phenomenon; framing of "cult problem" in exposés and in popular culture. Intense activism by law enforcement agencies and pressures for restrictive legislation.
Speculation	1932-1940 Sensational media-led speculations about supposed outer reaches of cult problem: voodoo, witchcraft, human sacrifice.	1984-1992 Sensational media-led speculations about supposed outer reaches of cult problem: Satanism, ritual abuse, human sacrifice.
Second Peak	early 1940s New wave of cult-related scandals; activism by law enforcement agencies and pressures for restrictive legislation.	mid-1990s New wave of cult-related scandals leads to resurgence of popular concern.

When public opinion is aroused by a particularly disturbing scandal or a mass suicide, legislatures sometimes attempt to regulate cult activities, hoping to control unpopular groups like the Unification Church (the "Moonies"), the Hare Krishna movement, the followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, or the International Churches of Christ. Any such measures are bound to fail, however, and not just on the obvious constitutional grounds of freedom of religion. It is all but impossible to define cults in a way that does not describe a large share of American religious bodies, including some of the most respectable. The distinction between cults and religions or denominations is not self-evident, nor

is it obvious which groups can be graced with the title "mainstream." (Frank Zappa once observed that the only difference between a church and a cult is the amount of real estate each owns.) Sporadic efforts to pass anticult legislation therefore provoke resistance from across the religious spectrum, even from groups that have a powerful vested interest in fighting what they see as cult seduction of young people.¹³ As definitions vary so widely, it is not surprising to find enormous variations in the estimates offered for the number of cult groups at any given time. Are there a few dozen? Five hundred? Or five thousand?

The word "cult" has acquired over the last century or so such horrible connotations that it can scarcely be used as an objective social scientific description. It is now a pejorative word only used by enemies or critics of the movement concerned: did anyone ever announce, straight-faced, that he or she had joined a cult? Some writers try to avoid this problem by offering what seem to be objective or nonjudgmental definitions, but they face an insuperable task. One major study notes that "[c]ults tend to be totalistic or all-encompassing in controlling their members' behavior and also ideologically totalistic, exhibiting zealotry and extremism in their world-view."¹⁴ But few movements are as totalistic as the Amish, who are respected and idealized by the wider society; they would never be described as cultlike, nor would Hasidic Jews. Furthermore, the difference between zeal (laudable) and zealotry (undesirable) is entirely subjective. If we argue that cults hold extreme or eccentric beliefs diverging radically from those of the mainstream, we must then ask, which mainstream? Some opinion polls suggest that about half of Americans accept Creationism, a belief system that effectively rejects most of the bases of modern science, while many millions expect the imminent Second Coming of Christ. These beliefs could be described as eccentric or extreme from some points of view, but no belief held by so large a proportion of the people can properly be relegated to a religious margin. What is normal?

Nor can cults be identified purely in terms of behavior, in the sense that there are some types of conduct (exploitative and psychologically dangerous) that demarcate cults from churches, sects, or denominations. One difficulty is that it is far too easy to gather information about the disreputable groups, making it tempting to overemphasize their importance in the overall picture of the religious fringe. Movements marked by scandals, fraud, and violence are and always have been much in the news, and their doings can be easily traced in official

documents. But although overt swindlers and megalomaniacs do operate within the marginal groups, they represent only the most conspicuous aspect of a far larger phenomenon. It is all too easy to visualize a "cult problem" in terms of demonized individuals like Ben Purnell, Charles Manson, and David Koresh. Anticult accounts rarely mention the many small sects, esoteric or otherwise, that continue for decades under responsible leaders and are quite successful, insofar as the success of any religious movement can be evaluated in any objective terms. At least they provide their members with new spiritual insights, help them cope with their lives, and teach them to live in greater harmony with their society and surroundings.

Differences of power and size go far towards explaining what we know, or think we know, about differences in the conduct of small and large religious groups. If we observe that small groups are likely to have scandals involving sexual misconduct, particularly involving children, we might suggest that this type of misbehavior is a cult characteristic, and that would lead us to propose theories about the pernicious nature of leadership in these settings. But numerous recent scandals have taught us that sexual abuse is a common difficulty in all religious groups and denominations, including the largest and most respected, and some of the most outrageous instances of abuse by mainstream clergy occurred in the 1970s and early 1980s, when the cults were drawing such intense fire.¹⁵

As always, the media reacted very differently to the churches and the cults. Stories of sexual deviance meshed precisely with public expectations of cult leaders. But they seemed improbable and atypical for established clergy, so that rumors would be much more likely to be investigated and published in the context of the small groups than the large. Also, while nothing was to be lost by offending the members of a quirky local commune, it took a brave editor to run a story attacking a mainstream denomination, which could respond with an advertising boycott or a venomous letter-writing campaign. Hence, the "pedophile priest" scandals in the mainstream churches were largely kept from public view for decades, until the explosion of public concern in the mid-1980s. And though financial manipulation and tax evasion have attracted less notoriety than sexual issues, the same principles apply to reporting ecclesiastical misdeeds in these other areas: larger and more powerful groups are let off more easily than the small and unpopular.

Cult, Sect, and Church

What is the difference between a church and a cult? Sociologists traditionally classified religious bodies as either churches or sects. According to this model, churches are larger bodies, more formally structured in terms of hierarchy and liturgy, which appeal to better-off members of society; sects, in contrast, are smaller, less structured, and more spontaneous and draw their members from working-class or lower-class people. Members of churches are born into them; sects find their membership by recruitment and conversion. While churches place minimal demands on their members, sects are "greedy" groups, demanding that adherents follow practices that can pose major difficulties for them in everyday life, even to the point of earning social ostracism. Model churches in contemporary America might include the Episcopalians or Methodists, while the Jehovah's Witnesses or Seventh Day Adventists would typify sects. Over time, sects tend to become churches, and then the cycle of sect formation begins anew.¹⁶

Initially, cults did not feature in this scheme, but they were incorporated in the 1960s. According to the new view, cults are like sects in being at odds with the wider society, but they are also more innovative, more conspicuously deviant. Churches are thus defined as "religious bodies in a relatively low state of tension with their environment;" sects are in a high state of tension, but remain within the conventional religious traditions of a society; cults, likewise, exist in a state of tension, but they "represent faiths that are new and unconventional in a society" or have no prior ties to any established body in the wider society. Cults "do not evolve or break away from other religions as do religious sects, but rather offer something new and different." Whether as the result of invention or innovation, cults are unconventional. This definition initially seems reasonable when we think of a group like the Hare Krishnas (properly, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, ISKCON), who deviate radically from the religious and cultural practices of the vast majority of Americans; they certainly seem unconventional.¹⁷

But what is conventional in American religion? To speak of established traditions suggests that the United States was conceived with an approved range of faiths and religious practices, from which no deviation was to be tolerated. By this standard, there are no cults since virtually all bodies so described have grown directly out of quite long-standing traditions in the society. The Branch Davidian group, which

was at the center of the Waco disaster, was formed in the 1920s as an offshoot of the Seventh-Day Adventists, who in turn trace their ancestry to the 1840s: the Davidians themselves had been based at Waco since 1935. Jim Jones's People's Temple grew out of an active evangelical church, which in its early days was unconventional only in its commitment to interracial cooperation. Jones himself was ordained in a well-established and fairly conservative denomination, the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ. His more eccentric ideas derived from Father Divine, who was preaching his own godhood as early as 1915. Another notorious cult figure was Jeffrey Lundgren, whose group undertook several ritualistic slayings in the late 1980s: Lundgren's origins lay in the Reorganized Church of Latter-Day Saints, a reputable and conservative branch of the Mormon tradition.¹⁸

A historical perspective shows that other so-called cults have equally respectable lineages, and even the most unconventional-seeming religions can be traced far back into the American past. If we take the more conspicuously foreign Asian religions, both Buddhism and Hinduism have had some presence among white Americans since the late nineteenth century, and swamis of various kinds were already a familiar part of the spiritual landscape before 1900. Though the Hare Krishna movement itself was only imported in the 1960s, it represents an authentic face of the Hindu tradition. The United States had Buddhists before it had Pentecostals, just as American Rosicrucians and alchemists predate its Methodists. At the other extreme, the conservative churches that have denounced the cults began their own histories as controversial movements attacked for their fanaticism and divisiveness. The torrent of abuse directed against Scientology or the Unification Church in the 1970s is very much like that suffered by the Baptists in the seventeenth century and Methodists in the eighteenth. Even if cults do not have roots in a society, they can develop them quite securely within only a few decades and give the impression that they have been there since time immemorial.

If we exclude the unconventionality theme, then all that remains to distinguish between cults and mainstream bodies is the issue of tension, which means how each is regarded by society at large, not necessarily on any objective or rational grounds. To take an unusual example, it is difficult to think of a religious body more at odds with its society than the Confessing Church founded in Germany in the 1930s in protest against Nazi racial laws. A tiny body utterly convinced of the justice of its position, the church plotted against the government, and

some of its leaders conspired to assassinate the Nazi leadership. In consequence, the group was brutally suppressed, and its leader, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was executed in 1945. Far from being regarded as a violent cult leader, however, Bonhoeffer is venerated as a towering figure in the history of twentieth-century Christianity. In the judgment of history, churches can on occasion be terribly wrong, and cults right.

Explaining Cult Scares

Cults differ from churches in no particular aspect of behavior or belief, and the very term "cult" is a strictly subjective one; it tells us as much about the people applying that label as it does about the group that is so described. Briefly, cults are small, unpopular religious bodies, the implication being that much of their cultish quality comes not from any inherent qualities of the groups themselves, but from the public reaction to them. We might draw a parallel between cults and weeds, the latter being a much-used term that has no botanical meaning, which refers only to plants which have no obvious use for humanity. To speak of acute tension between a religious group and the wider society implies a two-way street: we need to understand both what the cult does to attract disapproval and why mainstream bodies feel the need to apply this damning label to it. It is just this relative quality that makes concern about cults such an important gauge for the state of American religion. Because cults are unpopular and unorthodox, by studying changing perceptions of these movements we can discover what the public thinks religious orthodoxy is, or ought to be: we cannot discuss deviancy without a standard of normality, and normality is a fluid concept.

While the changing shape of the cults themselves tells us much about religious enthusiasms in a particular period, equally informative are the responses of those who choose to denounce the small movements—and who, thereby, lay claim to a mainstream position in American life. This insight raises questions about eras like the 1940s or the 1970s when concern about cults became so intense and generalized as to justify the term "moral panic," when anticult themes permeated popular culture, and stirred legislators to contemplate draconian measures of repression.¹⁹ In these years individual horror stories were viewed as part of a larger social threat, and it became commonplace to speak of a "cult problem" or "cult crisis." This notion escalated the severity of the religious challenge and demanded a public response.

Cult scares might just reflect a period of unusual activity among fringe religious groups. As we have seen, however, no period of American history entirely lacks these movements: in a sense, cults are always with us. The size or vigor of a given movement is not necessarily proportionate to the number of column inches it receives in the press or the number of segments on television news. Intense public interest or fear may be aroused by a tiny sect with a handful of members, as illustrated by the vast alarm stirred by relatively tiny groups like the Hare Krishna movement. Conversely, highly deviant marginal groups can operate for many years without attracting much public attention. Even if some groups are scandal prone, their misdeeds are not necessarily contextualized as part of a general problem or social issue. Much depends on the attitudes of the news media, and the audiences they seek to serve.

Several factors explain the changing construction of the cult menace over time. Visibility is one issue, namely that small movements are now more exposed to the public gaze. Over the last century, the range of potential conflicts between isolated groups and the wider society has grown enormously because of developments like compulsory education, military conscription, social security taxes, and the growth of bureaucracies to investigate child abuse. The Amish, for example, attracted little official notice prior to the First World War; since then, their distinctive practices have repeatedly led to legal confrontations, some of which have been taken as far as the U.S. Supreme Court. Even in what had been the American wilderness, there are no hiding places left. To escape persecution, Mormon polygamists in the 1930s chose to establish a settlement in one of the most remote corners of the nation, on the northern frontier of Arizona, where any police or officials wishing to visit would have to drive the arduous route around the Grand Canyon. Even so, state and federal authorities launched raids in 1944, and again in 1953, in an attempt to stamp out what was sensationally portrayed as a "sex-cult" that exploited children.

Society has become more nationalized and so has the mass media. Stories that a century ago would have been purely local or regional are increasingly brought before a national audience. Presenting issues as of national concern can lead people to believe, incorrectly, that conditions typical of, say, California are spreading to all parts of the country. The growing nationalization of the cult problem during the twentieth century owed much to the changing media technologies that permitted both cult groups and their detractors to transmit their views. In 1959,

for instance, a television exposé on the hitherto obscure Black Muslim movement aroused alarm among white viewers nationwide, while giving an enormous boost to the group's black membership: a national phenomenon was born. Since the end of the nineteenth century, too, standards of media coverage have evolved in ever more sensationalistic directions, so that exposé stories about extreme religious or sexual deviance can appeal to a mass market. Indeed, the development of public concern about cults is in large measure a history of changes in the mass media.

Age, Race, and Gender

The cult issue, like any social problem, is socially constructed. This does not mean that negative stories are false or even exaggerated, and some cult groups may indeed be committing criminal and dangerous acts: multiple murders and mass suicides genuinely were committed by Jim Jones's followers and, more recently, by the Heaven's Gate group. However, the level of public concern about cults at any given time is not necessarily based on a rational or objective assessment of the threat posed by these groups, but rather reflects a diverse range of tensions, prejudices, and fears.

Demographic changes play a role here and help explain the long cycles of concern that we noted above (Table 1.1). Each period of cult proliferation (what I call the phase of *Emergence*) occurred during the latter stages of a baby boom, a period of steep population growth and very high birthrates. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, American birthrates stood at a remarkable 30 or so per 1,000, almost double the modern figure; the national population grew at a faster rate between 1890 and 1915 than in any subsequent era, including the post-Second World War baby boom. In such an environment, new religions can successfully appeal to an unusually young community, who are more open to cultural innovation. Conversely, the dark fantasies of the Speculation phase years, the mid-1930s and mid-1980s, coincide with deep troughs in the national birthrate: at such times, an aging population with smaller families provides a natural audience for frantic warnings about the threat posed to the vulnerable young by homicidal cults.

Though predicting the future is foolhardy, precedent suggests that a renewed upsurge of cults might well occur in another decade or so, beginning around 2010, when the proportion of adolescents in the pop-