

# Sects

## **Sects-Are they Good, Faulty or Neutral?**

A **sect** is a group with distinctive religious, political or philosophical beliefs. Although in past it was mostly used to refer to religious groups, it has since expanded and in modern culture can refer to any organization that breaks away from a larger one to follow a different set of rules and principles. The term is occasionally used in a malicious way to suggest the broken-off group follows a more negative path than the original. The historical usage of the term **sect** in Christendom has had pejorative connotations, referring to a group or movement with heretical beliefs or practices that deviate from those of groups considered orthodox. See the article, "The Great Commission".

## **Etymology**

The word *sect* comes from the Latin noun *secta* (a feminine form of a variant past participle of the verb *sequi*, to follow<sup>[2]</sup>), meaning "(beaten) path", and figuratively a (prescribed) way, mode, or manner, and hence metonymously, a discipline or school of thought as defined by a set of methods and doctrines. The present gamut of meanings of *sect* has been influenced by confusion with the homonymous (but etymologically unrelated) Latin word *secta* (the feminine form of the past participle of the verb *secare*, to cut), as sects were scissions cut away from the mainstream religion.<sup>[3]</sup> Note that speakers of some other languages use the same word for both the meaning *sect* and the meaning *cult*, for example in Italian: *setta*.

## **Sociological definitions and descriptions**

There are several different sociological definitions and descriptions for the term.<sup>[4]</sup> Among the first to define them were Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch (1931).<sup>[4]</sup> In the church-sect typology they are described as newly formed religious groups that form to protest elements of their parent religion (generally a denomination). Their motivation tends to be situated in accusations of apostasy or heresy in the parent denomination; they are often decrying liberal trends in denominational development and advocating a return to true religion. The American sociologists Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge assert that "sects claim to be authentic purged, refurbished version of the faith from which they split".<sup>[5]</sup> They further assert that sects have, in contrast to churches, a high degree of tension with the surrounding society.<sup>[6]</sup> Other sociologists of religion such as Fred Kniss have asserted that sectarianism is best described with regard to what a sect is in tension with. Some religious groups exist in tension only with co-religious groups of different ethnicities, or exist in tension with the whole of society rather than the church which the sect originated from.<sup>[7]</sup>

Sectarianism is sometimes defined in the sociology of religion as a worldview that emphasizes the unique legitimacy of believers' creed and practices and that heightens tension with the larger society by engaging in boundary-maintaining practices.<sup>[8]</sup>

A religious or political cult, by contrast, also has a high degree of tension with the surrounding society, but its beliefs are, within the context of that society, new and innovative. Whereas the cult is able to enforce its norms and ideas against members, a sect normally doesn't strictly have "members" with definite obligations, only followers, sympathisers, supporters or believers. A sect may also have members which choose to

leave later, which is allowed whereas a cult uses any means necessary to keep its members (including coercion).

Mass-based socialist, social-democratic, labor and communist parties often had their historical origin in utopian sects, and also subsequently produced many sects, which split off from the mass party. In particular, the communist parties from 1919 experienced numerous splits; some of them, it is argued, were sects from their foundation.

One of the main factors that seems to produce political sects is the rigid continued adherence to a doctrine or idea after its time has passed, or after it has ceased to have clear applicability to a changing reality.

The English sociologist Roy Wallis<sup>[9]</sup> argues that a sect is characterized by "epistemological authoritarianism": sects possess some authoritative focus for the legitimate attribution of heresy. According to Wallis, "sects lay a claim to possess unique and privileged access to the truth or salvation and "their committed adherents typically regard all those outside the confines of the collectivity as 'in error'". He contrasts this with a cult that he described as characterized by "epistemological individualism" by which he means that "the cult has no clear locus of final authority beyond the individual member."<sup>[10][11]</sup>

## References

1. ^ Wilson, Bryan *Religion in Sociological Perspective* 1982, ISBN 0-19-826664-2 Oxford University Press page 89  
"In English, it is a term that designates a religiously separated group, but in its historical usage in Christendom it carried a distinctly pejorative connotation. A sect was a movement committed to heretical beliefs and often to ritual acts and practices like isolation that departed from orthodox religious procedures."
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3. ^ Entry *sect* – Online Etymology Dictionary.
4. ^ a b McCormick Maaga, Mary excerpt from her book *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998) available online
5. ^ Stark, Rodney, and Williams Sims Bainbridge (1979) *Of Churches, Sects, and Cults: Preliminary Concepts for a Theory of Religious Movements* *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 18, no 2: 117-33
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7. ^ Kniss, Fred, and Numrich, Paul (2007) *Sacred Assemblies and Civic Engagement* Rutgers University Press
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9. ^ Barker, E. *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (1990), Bernal Press, ISBN 0-11-340927-3
10. ^ Wallis, Roy *The Road to Total Freedom A Sociological analysis of Scientology* (1976) available online (bad scan)
11. ^ Wallis, Roy *Scientology: Therapeutic Cult to Religious Sect* abstract only (1975)