



## **A Triangle of Affections: The Shaping of Commitment in Contemporary Religious Experience**

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The emergence and growth of the contemporary religious movements in recent decades have created an interesting link between the religious pluralism that has gained public visibility and recognition since the second world war and the mainline denominations. The linkage has produced a relationship between these three phenomena in which none can remain unaffected by the others. The point at which the mutual effect is most telling is the area of commitment. Together, contemporary religious movements, religious pluralism, and mainline denominations form a triangle of affections, an interlocking structure in which matters of faith and life shape an allegiance that, in each phenomenon, is both a promise of fulfillment for those within and a challenge of change for good or ill for those without.

This essay is a statement about the impact of the contemporary religious movements, the new religions, on American religious life and an assessment of the influence these movements will have upon the shaping of religious commitment in the future.

Although some of the new religions trace their beginnings to earlier decades in this century—the Unification Church and The Way International, for example—the mid 1960s is the time sociologists generally designate as the advent of the new religions and their widening influence on American life. The summer of 1967 witnessed a surge of religious revival on the west coast that some predict will be called the start of the fourth “great awakening” in America by future historians. The Jesus Movement came into being then and, although it spawned only certain new religious groups itself, it was the catalyst that stirred up much of the religious enthusiasm that quickly became the broad spectrum of contemporary religious movements. The new religions came to expression in a context that held the promise of pluralism and included the parameter of the church.

### **I. THE PROMISE OF PLURALISM**

A religious pluralism has developed in American life in the past thirty years that

has encouraged not only a growing number of new religious movements but also an attitude of openness toward religious experience that has helped give rise to those movements and has provided the matrix for new questions about the meaning of religious experience. That attitude of openness finds expression significantly in a quest for truth both inside and outside the perimeters of previous experience and commitment. The pluralism of the last few decades has provided new religious options and new questions for the old options along with the freedom to explore both.

This freedom has led to new attachments and allegiances, new commitments that become the foundation for different ways of expressing the life of faith.

The freedom to search for truth invariably raises the suspicion that the beliefs and way of life to which one has been committed are no longer adequate to sustain the life of the believer. The binding center of religious experience that is at the heart of commitment, and that has been nurtured by education in the congregation and home, somehow gets lost or distanced in the ever-growing peripheral concerns of congregational life or in the preoccupation with the outward forms of religion in the ongoing operation of the congregation. In the face of this realization, the search for new foundations goes on either within the formal structures of denominational life or outside of those structures in what the new religions have to offer. The search in both directions brings to light the crisis of commitment and the promise of finding new allegiances and attachments to replace the old. It is this crisis that some clergy believe is the root cause for the rise and present strength of the new religious movements.

One might argue that discovering the crisis of commitment is in the long run a healthier state than floundering in spiritual dullness. But a crisis of commitment carries with it its own risks. It requires people to go beneath the religious options, whatever they might be, and begin to construct new commitments. That process involves building a new frame of reference, a new system of beliefs and values, out of new choices in such a way that new commitments can arise.

William G. Perry, Jr. describes the process by which a person responds to new choices in a pluralistic society and the challenges one encounters along the way.<sup>1</sup> The structure of his argument provides a paradigm for understanding the development of new commitments in religious life. Perry says that after people get beyond viewing the world in polar terms—right answers and wrong answers—they go through a period of recognizing diversity and realizing the legitimacy of different beliefs and finally move toward formulating their own commitments in the presence of other commitments.

The crucial matter in Perry's study for this essay is how the process of development can be impeded. There are three ways this happens. Each can lead to less than satisfying experiences in a new religious movement. People may intentionally *delay* the development by holding on to a position beyond which they should go. The result may be that people attach themselves uncritically to a new belief system. Second, people may choose to *escape* in the freedom of choice offered by the process and deny responsibility for any but themselves. The result

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<sup>1</sup>William G. Perry, Jr., *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

may be a passive or opportunistic alienation from others who adhere to the new belief system. Third, people may *retreat* to a basic duality, viewing the world again in polar terms and entrenching themselves in a system that is “right” in the face of others that are “wrong.” The result may be a dogmatism that easily turns into bigotry and worse.

The inevitable risk of growth involved in Perry's description of development toward new commitments and the risk of pitfalls are precisely the things that characterize the vulnerability of people in this first part of the triangle of affections.

Vulnerability is one of the main products of pluralism that influences the shaping of commitment in the contemporary religious movements. On the positive side, vulnerability is the

experience of a searching faith, a determination in trust to come to one's own beliefs and give them mature expression in life. This positive view of vulnerability has led to the role theory or seekerhood conception of conversion and commitment. Such a theory argues that affiliation with a new religious group is a normal social process in which the seeker finds needs met in the group. That satisfaction of needs results in changes in a person's social status or role in accordance with the dynamics of the new religious community. The role theory is an interpretation of experience offered by those who support the right of individuals to seek and find a reorientation of values and beliefs in the new religions and to counter the charge of "brainwashing" or "mind control" often leveled at some of the contemporary religious movements by their opponents. On the negative side, vulnerability leaves people open to attack, deception, and allegiances that could turn out to be ill-placed. People find themselves making decisions about their lives without a well developed and internalized system of values and beliefs. They become prey to manipulation and, instead of finding the mature faith they seek, become devotees of personal and communal powers beyond their control. Thus, the opponents of the new religions argue for the legitimate use of deprogramming techniques.

## II. THE PRESENCE AND ATTRACTION OF THE NEW RELIGIONS

It is difficult to get a comprehensive view of the many new religious groups in America today. Estimates by those who study the movements place their number at 1000-2000 and more. Some groups are widely known through their recruitment practices, solicitation of funds in public areas, advertising, and the media coverage. Others are little known and come to one's attention through journals and periodicals devoted strictly to the study of the new religions. Some groups claim large memberships approaching those of the mainline denominations with well organized institutional structures and procedures. Others are very small with memberships and organizations resembling extended families. Some are looked upon as curiosity items that promise paradise to any who join. Others pose alleged threats to the physical and psychological well-being of their members. There is a great variety among the groups, and exact information about the individual groups is not readily available. One needs to rely chiefly upon three sources for that information: propaganda coming from the groups

themselves, media stories about the activities of these groups, and reports from ex-members of groups.

Obviously that information is not all of the same kind and needs to be evaluated for use in describing the groups in terms of its source. Most ex-members, for example, are out of their groups because of unpleasant experiences, or because they have become disenchanted with the group, or because they have been removed from the groups by parents and friends who convince them that the teachings and lifestyle of the group are wrong. What one learns from ex-members is one kind of information but with obvious biases. Similarly, the propaganda from the groups themselves is intended to attract potential members and is designed to give the best image possible of the groups. Media stories are subject to the accuracy of information received and the interpretation of the one who makes the report.

Because information about them is fluid, the new religions can be studied only as living phenomena. This means that documentation in historical records is scarce or non-existent and

that the researcher must use living history methods for investigation, namely, developing a data base about individual groups from current public information and constructing a view of the groups on the basis of that information.

Certain general characteristics emerge from this kind of study, but these must always be qualified by the data from the specific group. For example, each group has leadership with peculiar charismatic qualities usually demanding strict obedience. But the character of the charisma and the specific demands placed upon devotees varies from one group to the next. Most of the new religions claim to have special revelation given to the leader to be passed on and interpreted to the followers. But, again, the nature of the revelation and the way it functions in the life of the group is not the same in all groups. Some groups use the Bible in their teaching, but the importance of the Bible as a guide for life or a source of teaching varies among the groups. In every group one can find limitations placed on individual decisions and lifestyle and restricted communication with the world outside the group. But these limitations and restrictions do not always result in the complete control of the devotees' environment. For some groups allegiance is expressed in tightly structured communal living. In other groups devotees are less inhibited in the exercise of their commitments. There is evidence of drastic personality changes in those who have joined some groups. But not all members of such groups experience these changes, and not all groups can be cited for bringing about such changes in their members.

In spite of the fluid nature of information about the new religions, attempts made to classify these movements are helpful for our purposes here in studying the attraction of the groups and the way commitment is shaped within them. When the contemporary religious movements are taken together, two main features can be identified. There are those groups that are attractive primarily because they offer some new questions for old religious options or new options that can be explored by any people who want opportunities to rethink the nature and extent of their religious commitments. Such groups intend to respect the questioning mind that searches for truth and the autonomy of the individual in the process of seeking without trying to detach the in-

dividual from family and other social ties that provide a meaningful frame of reference. Such groups, in Perry's analysis, play a role in the individual's development through the options of a religiously pluralistic society toward personal commitment in the context of multiple value and belief systems. That development can be a healthy experience of growth toward a mature faith.

When contemporary religious movements function within society in this way, it is proper to classify them according to their essential teachings because it is the options they present through their teachings that provide the attraction for the inquirer and that help in the reshaping of commitment. Some groups have an orientation in Christian teachings. Others come out of Eastern religions. Others are eclectic and syncretistic, attempting to meet people's needs holistically. Some groups concentrate on psychospiritual problems and offer practical self-improvement opportunities. Still others delve into the psychic, spiritual, and mystical aspects of life. Although some groups that fall within these categories are known to restrict personal autonomy and to deny their members family and friendship ties, such a taxonomy on the basis of the teachings of the groups—rather than just on lifestyle considerations—is a useful tool for exploring the way commitment is shaped by the search for truth.

The second main feature to be identified when contemporary religious movements are taken together is quite unrelated to what the groups teach formally but provides an equal attraction. That feature is a strong, positive, affirming approach in human relationship sometimes called “love-bombing.” This involves the total acceptance of a person by words and gestures that are intended to raise one’s spirits, to affirm one’s worth as an individual, and generally to create a climate of overwhelming security and assurance.

“Love-bombing” is the prelude to another way commitment is shaped. It is associated with the totalistic or destructive religious groups that attract people who are lonely, confused, uncertain about the future, and who generally have been deprived of basic personal need fulfillment. These groups are characterized by the intensity of control they exert over their members. There are differences among the groups in this category. But all of them attempt to control all or part of the environment in which their followers live. Control of the environment is the process by which new commitments are shaped in such groups.

These groups are labelled destructive because they place tremendous pressures upon their members to conform to the lifestyle of the group. Those pressures often include isolating individuals from their past by depriving them of contacts with family or the outside world in general and by stripping them of their names and private possessions with the result that drastic lifestyle changes take place. Although the evidence gathered about such groups comes largely from ex-members, the psychological studies done by Dr. Margaret Singer of the University of California at Berkeley and Dr. John Clark of Harvard Medical School have clearly demonstrated the pathologies resulting from experiences such people have had while in those movements.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>John G. Clark, Jr. et al., *Destructive Cult Conversion: Theory, Research, and Treatment* (Weston: American Family Foundation, 1981), and Margaret Thaler Singer, “Coming Out of the Cults,” *Psychology Today* 12 (January 1979) 72-82.

In recent years arguments have been mounted in defense of these groups, generally labelled destructive or totalistic, claiming that the evidence describing them as harmful to personal and psychological well-being is one-sided at best and distorted at worst precisely because it comes from ex-members of these groups. A theory used in support of these arguments is the role theory mentioned above. According to this theory membership in the new religions is explained on the basis of a “match” between a person’s needs and the group’s beliefs and lifestyle. That “match” is understood as resulting from a genuine questing for truth in the context of pluralism.<sup>3</sup>

### III. THE PARAMETER OF THE CHURCH

The church’s presence in a religiously pluralistic society that has witnessed a proliferation of new religious movements is the third affection influencing the shaping of commitment. Basically the church has reacted against the new religions. It has reminded both mainline denominations and the new religious groups that commitment to a belief and away of life is the characteristic mark of religions, not to be thought of as arising uniquely out of or depending upon pluralism and its accompanying religious enthusiasms.

The church stands as the symbol of commitment and insists that commitment always defines boundaries of belief and lifestyle that are fixed and only negotiable within the structures

of a given religious group. This means that as the church is present to both pluralism and the contemporary religious movements, it calls into question commitments growing out of a search for religious identity beyond a denomination's system of belief and lifestyle. The church's presence is characterized by a challenge to any commitment that grows out of truth claims alien to the church's affirmations of faith. That reactive stance by the church has had the effect of making the church a parameter in the overall conversation surrounding religious experience today.

Pluralism and the new religions have made it possible for the churches to isolate themselves in the face of the growing complexities and options in American religious life. No longer can churches avoid or dismiss the new religions as forms of religious pathologies or fanaticisms spawned by the fervor of a few restless would-be messiahs or clever schemes calculated to deceive the gullible with simple answers and promises of a new life that guarantees salvation. The religious context in America has made it inevitable that the church, in its mainline denominations, will not be able to evade the religious issues whatever they might be. The presence of the church is more and more becoming a major factor in the broad scope of religious affections precisely because the

<sup>3</sup>Among the growing literature defending the right of new religious groups to exist and the propriety of their teachings and lifestyles are David G. Bromley and Anson D. Shupe, Jr., *Strange Gods: The Great American Cult Scare* (Boston: Beacon, 1981) and J. Gordon Melton and Robert L. Moore, *The Cult Experience: Responding to the New Religious Pluralism* (New York: Pilgrim, 1982). In addition, there have been numerous journal articles by sociologists who are calling for clearer, more balanced reporting of the data about new religious groups and longitudinal studies that will help correct misinformation and reduce the prejudice of one-time, "snap-shot" views of the life and beliefs of these groups.

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church is being reminded that religious beliefs and practices, if they are to have a shaping influence upon life, must finally be articulated in commitment.

In short, the churches themselves have been challenged to look again at what they believe and why they believe what they do. Even more, the churches have been challenged to assess the meaning and strength of those commitments to which they have traditionally and regularly called their members and the various programs of initiation and education describing the nurture of their communities that ultimately brings about commitment. This self-scrutiny cannot be an internal monologue to strengthen the individual identity of the group and its members. The goal of that undertaking may be such a strengthening. But the method must be dialogical, giving attention to an indigenizing process that will inevitably influence the process of nurture within the group.

That process of nurture involves an ongoing experience of conversion or, better still, a series of conversions through which what has been said by others about God leads naturally to the forming of truths about God for oneself. Only when that happens can faith as a disposition of the heart mature so that one's eyes and ears are opened to what lies beyond our present knowing. The desire for that kind of commitment is at the heart of the yearning of many people who look for new horizons in the claims of the new religions.

Concretely the reactive response of churches to the new religions has taken several forms. The most radical response has come from families of those who have become involved in the new movements. Because such involvement means separation from family and the adoption of

new beliefs and lifestyles, families typically experience a sense of loss or failure and respond with embarrassment, outrage, and anger when a member converts to a new religion. Some ex-members of the new religions have testified that their entry into those groups was really not a conversion in the sense of a new awareness freely accepted. It was more an experience of coercion because of deceptive recruitment practices and techniques for controlling individual thought and behavior once one entered the group. The suspicion that a member has been deceived into joining a new religion and remains a follower through various forms of psychological and physiological manipulation has encouraged the use of deprogramming methods by families.

In deprogramming, the attempt is made to get a person out of a religious group, either voluntarily or by force, and to convince that person by argument of the deception and falsehood represented by the group. Deprogramming has had a variety of responses from the public. In its beginnings there was strong support for it, even though it seemed to violate religious liberty and the right of free choice. Deprogramming was seen as a legitimate way to counter the alleged deception and manipulation of some of the new religions. More recently, however, legal opinion has been less sympathetic toward deprogramming methods precisely because of the question of religious liberty and the uncertainty about the nature of beliefs and practices within the many new religions.

In addition to what they have done to support families whose members are in new religious groups, the churches have responded with programs of education. Individual congregations, local judicatories, and national denominations have issued statements about these religions challenging their teachings

and lifestyles and warning local congregations. On a broader scale, churches have been active in supporting the cult awareness groups whose purpose is to disseminate information about the activities of the new religions through nationwide networks.

In the main, the churches' response has been a counter challenge to the new religions focusing directly on the issue of commitment. In so doing the churches have reexamined the nature and strength of commitment in their own groups and opposed the faith claims and practices of the new groups through education.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Individually and together, religious pluralism, the contemporary religious movements, and the mainline churches have identified commitment as a central issue in the practice of religious beliefs today. Religious pluralism offers alternatives to the individual faith claims of people and denominations and a climate of freedom to explore those alternatives in one's ongoing search for meaning in life. The contemporary religious movements are intentionally organized to present people with opportunities for finding new allegiances in their teachings and lifestyles. Mainline churches have taken a serious look at themselves and discovered that the character of faith and life that is at the heart of religious integrity has become settled, inactive, and restive. Commitment, though central to the religious life, has often been reduced to a formal acknowledgement of beliefs at best or a jaded experience at worst.

A triangle of affections has come together around the shaping of commitment in the new

religions, each side of the triangle challenging and being challenged by the others. The interaction of the three phenomena is not always even or balanced. Nevertheless, none of them can claim to know the meaning of commitment apart from the others. As long as the interaction remains, the shaping of commitment will be a central issue in contemporary religious experience.

This interaction has several important implications for the future. (1) No longer is it possible to maintain a culturally simplistic religious perspective. The vestiges of such a perspective in American religious life are more apart of the residue of memory or habitual practice than concrete shaping experiences for commitment. Each side of the triangle of affections promises a fulfilling experience for the individual. But each side is also a challenge to the others in that the individual makes choices about faith and life in the context of all three. (2) A person's journey in faith is not so much a continual reaffirmation of commitment as it is a context in which one searches for the meaning of faith. It is an experience in which critical judgments come to bear upon the tradition in which one was nurtured. It is a journey of questioning and growing, of experimentation and risk. Because that is so, the journey is a *way* of knowing even before it becomes the content of commitment. Faith is a disposition of the heart, the perception by which we experience God. It is an awareness of the grace of God that helps a person see and understand the world in a faithful way. "The church's faith affirmation," observes John Westerhoff, "begins with the Latin word *credo* not *opinio*; *opinio* means to believe, to have an opinion, but *credo* is to

set our hearts upon, to hold dear, to pledge allegiance to. The gift of faith is a way of seeing and hearing, a way of perceiving."<sup>4</sup> (3) The perspective on politics and religion, church and world, that results from the interaction is one that must take seriously the need to indigenize religious commitment in the concrete political, social, and economic structures of daily life. The beliefs and lifestyle into which one was initiated and in which the person was nurtured were shaped by historical realities that constantly change. If religious commitment is to make a difference, it must articulate its meaning in the currents of present historical situations, respecting the way those situations will influence the experience of commitment. Clearly, the work of apologetics will become more important, and the educational endeavors of religious groups will need to be more explicit and strategically helpful in matters that have to do with witnessing to one's faith. (4) One dimension of the pastoral-theological task will be an ongoing dialogue about the content and meaning of commitment and how different religious commitments will affect the world in which we live. But dialogue will mean more than an exchange of views or getting to know another person's position. Because of the promise and challenge each side of the triangle offers the others, dialogue will constantly need to risk change. Change will become a crucial element in the nature of dialogue producing a dialogical experience expressed in Rosenstock-Huessy's motto, "*Respondeo etsi mutabor*": I respond, although I will be changed.<sup>5</sup>

The rise of the new religions reflects a context of transition. It is important to realize that the meanings of religious conversion and nurture, as these affect how commitment is shaped, are the issues that will more and more demand attention in contemporary religious experience.

<sup>4</sup>John H. Westerhoff, III, *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1982) 22.

<sup>5</sup>Cited by Harold Stahmer, "Introduction," *Judaism Despite Christianity*, ed. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (University: University of Alabama, 1969) 4.