

RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

A Sociological Study of Their Origin and Development in Christianity

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Introduction

Social movements (in which religious movements are a special category) have been the subject of wide interest for social sciences, particularly sociology, political science and history because movements provide life and energy for change in social life; and 'change has been the unchanging law in the society', as philosopher Heraclitus remarked long ago. Social movements can be defined as different types of group actions by usually large informal groupings of individuals and/or organizations focused on specific political or social issues, in other words, on carrying out, resisting or undoing a social change. Since religious movements are special types of social movements, as I noted above, the former also aim at socio-religious change. The planned change takes place in the structures and/or functions of the religious group in which the religious movement emerges. Thus, there have been religious movements within Christianity itself for bringing about changes in the authority structure, teachings, practices and rules etc. Such movements have

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either effected the desired changes or become groups separated from the mother Church having failed to create any change in the existing system.

But the religious movements which are examined in this issue of *Asian Horizon* are not of such type; they are religious movements or organizations which, though often started by individuals or groups, are operating now within the Church and with the blessing of Church authorities for the renewal of a section of the Church, and indirectly even of the whole Church. They do not seem to challenge any existing structure or function of the Church, but rather try to go beyond them and reinforce the religious and spiritual life of the members or followers with the help of some additional activities that are believed to intensify their Christian life. In doing so, they also seem to give a message that the existing functions within the existing structures of the Church are not sufficient enough to attain fully the goals of the Church. In that sense, they are reform or renewal movements. The chief difference between them and the other types of movements which are generally studied in social sciences is that the movements examined here originate, grow and remain within the structures. Hence, many of them behave like spiritual or devotional organizations or associations rather than real movements in the conventional sociological sense of the term.

1. Social Movements

In this paper, however, we shall discuss religious movements in general and later try to situate the spiritual movements (organizations) within the category as fittingly as we can. First, let us place the religious movements within the larger framework of social movements. The term 'social movements' was introduced in 1850 by the German Sociologist Lorenz von Stein in his book, *History of the French Social Movement from 1789 to the Present* (1850). Sidney Tarrow¹ defines social movement as a collective challenge (to elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes) by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interactions with elites, opponents and authorities. Charles Tilly defines social movements as a series of contentious performances, displays and campaigns by which ordinary people make collective claims on others.² Tilly is defining movements in the context of politics. Hence, for Tilly, social

¹Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Collective Action, Social Movements and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

²Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768–2004*, Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2004, 3.

movements are a major vehicle for ordinary people's participation in public politics.³

Education, mobility of people due to industrialization and urbanization, modern freedom and technologically advanced means of expression etc. are considered to be some of the important factors that have helped the emergence of modern social movements. Urbanization has led to larger settlements, where people of similar goals could find each other, gather and organize. This has facilitated social interaction among scores of people, and it was in urban areas that the early modern social movements first appeared. Similarly, the process of industrialization which gathered large masses of workers in the same region explains why many of those early social movements addressed matters such as economic wellbeing, important to the worker class. Some other social movements have been created at universities, where the process of mass education has brought many people together. With the development of communication technologies, the creation and activities of social movements have become easier in modern times. Finally, the spread of democracy and political rights like the freedom of speech have also made the creation and functioning of social movements much easier in our times. But one who studies history can easily see that movements have emerged throughout history, calling for social change. What was noted above are some of the additional factors of modern times, that have accelerated the emergence of social movements.

2. Types of Social Movements

Since social movements are essentially oriented to social change, they rise as expressions of dissent about the existing social structure and thirst for innovation. (1) Based on two considerations, viz. how much change is envisaged by the movements and who are the targets of change, social movements are categorized by David F. Aberle⁴ into four different types: a) Alternative social movements (limited change in some). b) Reformative social movements (limited change in all). c) Redemptive social movements (radical change in some). d) Revolutionary social movements (radical change in all).

There are also other categorizations of social movements: (2) On the basis of scope: a) Reform movements such as movements advocating change in some norms or laws. b) Radical movements, i.e.,

³Ibid., 3 ff.

⁴David F. Aberle, *The Peyote Religion among the Navaho*, Chicago: Aldine, 1966.

movements dedicated to change in value systems in a fundamental way.

(3) On the basis of direction of change the movement aims at: a) Innovation movements which want to introduce or change particular norms, values, etc. b) Conservative movements which want to preserve existing norms, values, etc.

(4) On the basis of the targets: a) Group-focused movements for affecting groups or society in general, for example, advocating the change of a political system. b) Individual-focused movements for affecting individuals. Most religious movements would fall under this category.

(5) On the basis of the methods the movements adopt: a) Peaceful movements which use non-violent means to attain the goals. b) Violent movements which include armed struggles and which in extreme cases can take the form of paramilitary or even terrorist organizations.

(6) On the basis of the range or domain: a) Global movements, i.e., social movements with global (transnational) objectives and goals. b) Local movements focused on local or regional objectives.

3. Origin of Social Movements

Social movements including religious movements seem to evolve in the time and place which are friendly to the social movements. For example, many of the modern social movements arose out of a symbiosis with the nineteenth century proliferation of ideas like individual rights, freedom of speech and civil disobedience. There must always be polarizing or at least significantly distinguishing differences between groups of people for a movement to emerge; in the case of several social movements in the past, the chief polarization was on the basis of poverty or wealth gaps. In case of the modern movements, they are more likely to be the differences in customs, ethics and values. The birth of a social movement also needs what sociologist Neil Smelser called an *initiating event*: a particular, individual event that will begin a chain reaction of events in the given society, leading to the creation of a social movement.⁵ For example, American Civil Rights movement grew on the reaction to the black woman, Rosa Parks, riding in the whites-only section of a bus. Such an event is also described as a *volcanic model*; a social movement is often created after a large number of people realize that there are

⁵Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior*, New York: Free Press, 1962, 42.

others sharing the same value and desire for a particular social change.

But it is not enough that the context is ripe for the emergence of a movement. It needs the leadership or authority of a person with exceptional quality which will attract prospective members and glue them together. So, most social movements are created around some charismatic leader. We shall discuss the role of such a leader more when we analyze the dynamics of the religious movements below. Thus both context and leadership work together in initiating a movement. Louis Fisher, the famous biographer of Mahatma Gandhi, is said to have remarked that if Gandhi had reached India from South Africa a bit earlier or a little later than when he actually arrived, he would not probably have been instrumental in shaping the movement and the Congress party for India's independence; the movement would have adopted a different style. The remark points toward the equal importance of context or timing on the one side and of the leadership on the other side for the success of a movement.

4. Some Theories Focusing on Context

Deprivation Theory argues that social movements have their foundations among people who feel deprived of some good(s) or resource(s). According to this approach, individuals who are lacking some good, service or comfort are more likely to organize a social movement to improve (or defend) their conditions.⁶

Marxist Theory arises from an analysis of movements shaped by conflicts between industrial workers and their capitalist employers in the 19th century.

Mass Society Theory argues that social movements are made up of individuals in large societies who feel insignificant or socially detached. Social movements, according to this theory, provide a sense of empowerment and belonging that the movement members would otherwise not have.⁷ Very little support has been found for this theory among serious social thinkers.

Structural Strain Theory proposes six factors that encourage social movement development: structural conduciveness, i.e., a state in which the people come to believe that their society has problems; structural strain, i.e., the people experience deprivation; growth and

⁶Denton E. Morrison, "Some Notes toward Theory on Relative Deprivation, Social Movements and Social Change", in Louis E. Genevie, ed., *Collective Behavior and Social Movements*, Itasca, Ill., Peacock, 202–209.

⁷William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society*, New York: Free Press, 1959.

spread of a solution, viz., a solution to the problems people are experiencing is proposed and is spread among them; precipitating factors, i.e., some event which operates like a catalyst for transforming the discontent into a social movement; lack of rigid social control, i.e., the entity that is to be changed must be at least somewhat open to the change; if the social movement is quickly and powerfully repressed, say, by an authoritarian regime which has rigid social and political control over the society, it may never realize its goals; mobilization, which is the actual organizing and active component of the movement; people do what needs to be done. It is obvious from the brief description above that this theory incorporates, at least in part, deprivation theory and relies upon it.⁸

Resource Mobilization Theory emphasizes the importance of resources in social movement development and its success. Resources are understood here to include knowledge, money, media, labour, solidarity, legitimacy and internal and external support from power elite. The theory argues that social movements develop when individuals with grievances are able to mobilize sufficient resources to take action. The emphasis on resources offers an explanation why some discontented/deprived individuals are able to organize while others are not.

Political Process Theory is similar to resource mobilization in many regards, but tends to emphasize a different component of social structure that is important for social movement development, i.e., political opportunities. One of the advantages of the political process theory is that it addresses the issue of timing of emergence of social movements. Some groups may have the insurgent consciousness and resources to mobilize, but because political opportunities are closed, they will not have any success.

Culture theory understands social movements through their cultures - collectively shared beliefs, ideologies, values and other meanings about the world. These include explorations into the "collective identities" and "collective action frames" of movements and movement organizations. Culture theory builds upon both the political process and resource-mobilization theories but extends them by emphasizing also the importance of movement culture. Both resource-mobilization theory and political process theory include a sense of injustice in their approaches. Culture theory brings this sense of injustice to the forefront of movement creation by arguing that, in

⁸Smelser, *op. cit.*; Also, Herbert Blumer, "Collective Behavior," in A. M. Lee, ed., *Principles of Sociology*, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1951, 67-121.

order for social movements to successfully mobilize individuals, they must develop an *injustice frame*. An injustice frame is a collection of ideas and symbols that illustrate both how significant the problem is as well as what the movement can do to alleviate it. In emphasizing the injustice frame, culture theory also addresses the free-rider problem. The free-rider problem refers to the idea that people will not be motivated to participate in a social movement that will use up their personal resources (e.g., time, money, etc.) if they can still receive the benefits without participating.

5. Religious Movements

As already noted, religious movements are a specific type of social movements, which aim at changes in the religious beliefs, practices or structures of a religion. They are regarded social movements because their aim is also change(s) in the group (as well as individual) life of human beings. Religion, as we know, is concerned about human beings' relationship with God and with fellow human beings, the latter being determined by the perception regarding the former. Thus religion entails vertical and horizontal dimensions. From this twin dimensions arise the three constituents of religion: (i) faith and its articulation in creeds and dogmas, which define human beings' relationship with God, usually founded on some kind of God-experience (religious experience) – expression of the vertical dimension; (ii) codes of conduct and morality which prescribe the rights and duties of the individuals and groups within the religious organization towards the other members and also towards the outsiders – mostly the expression of the horizontal dimension, even though the vertical dimension is not precluded; (iii) rules and customs regarding cult which expresses and celebrates faith, and motivates as well as draws man to righteous conduct.

Most religions which are practiced today have grown out of religious movements; several kinds of movements have also emerged from these religions, especially when the religions fail to help the members attain one or more of their goals, for drawing them to a more intense religious experience in one or more dimensions of the religion. Occasionally, religions have also given birth to movements from within for non-religious goals; movements initiated by religions for non-religious goals, particularly political and economic goals, give rise to communalism.

6. Origin and Dynamics of Religious Movements

Almost all religious associations are charismatic in origin; they are formed as bands of a few loyal disciples devoted to some charismatic

leader(s) or founder(s) who preaches a new religious message. Charisma, from a sociological point of view, is the endowment of supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional qualities in a person that attract and appeal to the interests of people who come into contact with the person.⁹ The people who are attracted to the person become devoted to him and later join him as his disciples or followers. At this stage, the personal charisma of the leader alone is the binding force that keeps the group together; such a control is accepted as legitimate by the devoted followers. Thence begins a religious movement under a charismatic leader with a band of disciples. The exceptional quality of the leader or charisma that was mentioned above, so to say, enables the leader to transmit effectively and attractively a new religious vision and/or experience, which the disciples begin to accept. First, the small band of disciples begins to live according to the new vision or experience, and later on they start sharing the same with others in order to attract them to their group and enlarge the same. So, generally speaking, religious movements appear as reform or innovative movements that call for change in the existing religious creeds and practices. But,

Charisma is by nature not a continuous institution, but in its pure type the very opposite... Genuine charismatic domination knows no abstract laws and regulations and no forma adjudication. Its 'objective' law flows from the highly personal experience of divine grace and godlike heroic strength and rejects all external order solely for the sake of glorifying genuine prophetic and heroic ethos. Hence, in a revolutionary and sovereign manner, charismatic domination transforms all values and breaks all traditional and rational norms: 'It has been written...., but I say unto you...'¹⁰

After the disappearance of the original charisma, there arises the need for a continued authority to keep the religious association united. It is then what is known as the routinization of charisma takes place. According to Max Weber, the social context which necessitates the routinization is the threat of disintegration, the charismatic domination faces as soon as it is exposed to the everyday demands of the normal times after the disappearance of the original charismatic leader. There arises a feeling of insecurity among the followers about the unstable nature of the charismatic domination. Besides, as the group grows in size, the functions of the group become differentiated both qualitatively and quantitatively, and as the original charisma has disappeared, it becomes difficult to exercise control personally

⁹Weber, *Economy and Society*, op. cit., 218-220, 241-242.

¹⁰Ibid., 1115.

and spontaneously over the enlarged and differentiated group. So the group feels the need for the habitual manifestation of charisma for the continued activation of the community, even when charisma is not spontaneously forthcoming. The only way this need can be securely fulfilled is to let the charisma manifest and be distributed according to some fixed procedures.¹¹ One who goes through certain established procedures and takes over the office is considered to have received charisma. Thus the spontaneous appearance of charisma is replaced by a systematic manifestation of routinized charisma. The institutionalized procedures are at first accepted on the strength of tradition. Later on, rationally systematized rules are legally laid down; a rationally oriented officialdom is also organized. Thus finally a rationally and legally legitimized bureaucratic authority comes into existence in the association.

7. Role of Interests

But, the process of routinization is not as harmonious as it appears to be. Group interests play a significant role in shaping the emerging structure. Max Weber has found that economic and status interests are the most prominent among them, even though non-material or spiritual interests may also exercise influence.¹² Both collective goals and group interests manage to coexist in the structure in the beginning; but, slowly the latter begin to replace or at least overtake the common interests. The emergence of interest groups within or together with the positions of power reinforces and concentrates power in a few positions, enhancing the vertical stratification of the organization and increasing the marginalization of those who have no power. Naturally this awakens and fosters the interest of the 'have-nots' to gain power. These interests are given expression to in the form of new values and norms. The emergence of such interests and values causes conflict and tension between the power-holders and the subordinates. Consequently, the legitimacy of the existing order is challenged; polarisation and even confrontation between those who hold old values and those who advocate new values take place. The divisions within religious organizations and the formation of new sects or groups (movements) that follow such divisions can be explained in terms of the twin process of routinization and stratification. The tension finally gets resolved through the emergence

¹¹Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, N.Y.: Anchor, 1962, 305.

¹²Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 254. Also see S.M. Eisenstadt, ed., *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968, ix-lvi.

of new patterns of authority which represent or accommodate the interests of those who challenged the existing authority. If the organization is highly bureaucratic, the tension and conflict may give rise to new charisma. As A. Etzioni remarks, "after long periods of routinization, especially of centralization and deterioration, an organization like a society needs a charismatic leader to revitalize it by introducing major innovations."¹³ And this charisma is viewed as the effect of 'the discontent-producing constellation of the organization.'¹⁴

From this perspective, the conflicts and the consequent divisions in a religious organization are not accidental but the gradual outcome of a social process. They are not completely destructive either; but are productive of vitality since the conflict and the consequent emergence of new charisma and movement prevent the ossification of the social system by exerting pressure for innovation and creativity.¹⁵

Regarding the importance of the context in the emergence of the charisma, Durkheim who situates charisma within the 'effervescence' that triggers the change in the society, has the following to say:

When individual minds are not isolated but enter into close relation with and work upon each other, from their synthesis arises a new kind of psychic life... It is, in fact, at such moments of collective ferment that are born the great ideals upon which civilizations rest. The periods of creation or renewal occur when men for various reasons are led into a closer relationship with each other, when reunions and assemblies are most frequent, relationships better maintained and the exchange of ideas most active... At such times, the ideal tends to become one with the real, and for this reason men have the impression that the time is close when the ideal will in fact be realized and the Kingdom of God established on earth.¹⁶

The process that we described above is the evolution of a sect into a church, viz. of a religious movement into a religious institution, and the dynamics of the repetition of the cycle, viz., how a movement originates again from within an institution. This sect-church typology has its origins in the work of Max Weber. The basic premise is that

¹³A. Etzioni, *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations*, New York: Free Press, 1961, 228.

¹⁴W. Stark, *The Sociology of Religion: A Study of Christendom*, New York: Fordham University, 1967, 46.

¹⁵L. Coser, 'Social Conflict and the Theory of Social Change', *Social Change*, ed. by A. Etzioni, and E. Etzioni-Halevy, New York: Basic Books, 1973, 114.

¹⁶Emile Durkheim, *Sociology and Philosophy*, London: Cohen and West, 1965, 92.

there is a continuum along which religions fall, ranging from the movement-like orientation of sects to the institutionalized churches.

8. Cult

In this connection, it is also useful to know the characteristics of a cult to distinguish it from sect and the types of religious movements that will be examined here, because cults like these movements may function from within the religious institution and share several of their features. Like any religious movements, cults are also new religious groups, may function without breaking off from another religious group and may not advocate a return to pure religion but rather the embracement of something new or something that has been lost or forgotten or weakened. But like sects, cults are more often led by charismatic leaders than the other religious groups.

9. New Religious Movements

We saw above that both sects and cults are religious movements which step out of the structures or functions of the existing institutionalised religion. But, unlike sects and cults, there may arise also new religious groups within an established religion, which while accepting all important tenets of the religion may begin to function like a movement which wants to energize the followers of religion by their example and also lead a more intense version of the same religion. Such movements can develop into groups of people sufficiently separated from the others and lead an exclusively intense religious life, like the religious communities in the Catholic Church, or groups of people who, though do not form a separately living community, manifest their distinctness and commitment to the intense form of religion through various exercises, external symbols and forms of organization, like Jesus Youth, Charismatic Groups etc. The latter may be regarded as socio-spiritual organizations within the Catholic Church imparting renewed vigour for the members of the group. The 'movements' which are described in this Journal seem to be of this category. For the sake of this study, they may be classified under what is now known as 'New Religious Movements' (NRM).

A new religious movement (NRM) is a religious community or ethical, spiritual or philosophical group of modern origin. NRMs may be novel in origin or they may be part of a wider religion, such as Christianity, Hinduism or Buddhism, in which case they will be distinct from but not separate from pre-existing denominations. Scholars studying the sociology of religion have almost unanimously adopted this term as a neutral alternative to the word 'cult.' The term,

'cult' had emerged in the 1890s, but by the 1970s it had acquired a pejorative connotation.

An NRM may be one of a wide range of movements ranging from those with loose affiliations based on novel approaches to spirituality or religion to communitarian enterprises that demand a considerable amount of group conformity and a social identity that separates their adherents from mainstream society.¹⁷ The use of the term, NRM, is not universally accepted among the groups to which it is applied. NRMs do not necessarily share a set of particular attributes, but have been "assigned to the fringe of the dominant religious culture," and "exist in a relatively contested space within society as a whole."¹⁸

10. Origin of Christianity as a Movement

After having analyzed the characteristics and styles of different types of movements, let us now narrow down our examination to Christianity. The origin of Christianity, from a sociological view, is almost like a sect within Judaism. It originated when Jesus of Nazareth, a person endowed with exceptional charisma (from the point of view of Christian faith, this charisma is attributed to the fact that he is the Son of God, or Word incarnate), began to preach the imminent establishment of the kingdom of God and the need for conversion or a different inner vision in order to experience the kingdom of God. It was a good news for the hearers, who were suffering from religious, social and political oppression. The cornerstone of the good news of the kingdom of God was the new vision of God that Jesus presented before his followers.

Unlike the Old Testament which emphasises the election of the Israelites as the people of God and His special covenantal love with them, Jesus presented a different picture of God. The picture of God that Jesus presented before his followers is of a Father of all human beings (Lk 15:11-31; Mt.20:1-16; Lk 15:1-7) – of a God who loves all (not only the Israelites) and never wishes the destruction of some for the sake of others (Mt 18:14). The gospel message of the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus was a call for unity as children of God without the limitations of the borders, religious or secular. In the light

¹⁷Regarding the separation of the adherents from the society and the nature of the movements, see Roy Wallis, *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, 10-39; Björkqvist. K., "World-rejection, World-affirmation, and Goal Displacement: Some Aspects of Change in Three New Religions Movements of Hindu Origin", *N. Holm (ed.), Encounter with India: Studies in Neo-Hinduism*. Turku, Finland: Åbo Akademi University Press, 1990, 79–99.

¹⁸*The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, Oxford University Press, 2008, 17.

of Jesus' message, the uniqueness of Christianity does not consist in its exclusiveness as a religious system and the claim for superiority over other religions, rather in its capacity to transcend the categories of historically determined religious traditions and in its broad-based approach to all other religions through which it can teach the universal Fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of the humankind, where there is no kind of discrimination.

Hence the first disciples of Jesus called themselves as followers of the 'Way' and did not try for some time to become even a distinct association, leave alone a separate institution. The implied assumption was that the new 'way' can be developed in any institutions or beyond all institutions. Christianity is presented in the *Acts of the Apostles* as the 'Way' (Acts 18:25), namely, as a way of life rather than a system like Judaism. The decision regarding the abolition of circumcision (Acts 11:1ff) and the Cornelius story (10:9ff) show the universal or transcendent nature of the new way of life. Here we see a paradigm of emerging religious movement from within a religion without affecting the structure of the religion but intensifying or reinterpreting the existing spirituality. Though later it would take the form of a sect and still of a church, at this stage it is just a movement within a 'church', i.e., institutionalized religion.

Undergoing the routinization process that we explained above, those who responded to the call to the new 'way' later began to develop clear boundaries for their group and make it a clearly marked organization with distinct creed, cult and code. Ignoring the teachings of Jesus, his followers began to theologize on the Judaic claims and treat other religions negatively. It began with St. Paul, though he himself was an important instrument in helping the new movement transcend the Jewish boundaries. Paul spoke about the Gentiles as "offering sacrifices to demons and not God" (1 Cor 10:20-21) and branded the entire Gentile world as immersed in idolatry and immorality (Rom 1:18-32). Paul characterized his parent religion as one displeasing to God and hostile to all humankind, filling up their quota of sins and bringing down the wrath of God upon it (1 Thes 2:14-16). By negatively assessing Judaism as well as the then existing Roman religions and positively shaping a distinct theological and institutional identity for Christianity, Paul laid the foundations for institutional Christianity. Many Fathers followed Paul and on the one hand treated other religions negatively and on the other completed the institutionalization of Christianity. Once fully institutionalized like Judaism, the claim of universality and exclusiveness became a source of division due to the Church's close association with the

powerful Roman political system. The history of Christianity is a paradigm case of the influence of material as well as non-material institutional interests routinizing the original charisma and transforming the 'Way' into a Church.¹⁹

11. Origin of Christianity in India: A Movement?

As a corollary to the above reflections, I would like to add here a few thoughts on the origin of Christianity in India, though this may not be directly relevant to the topic. We must assume that Thomas the apostle bequeathed to the first Christian community that he founded in India the original apostolic perception regarding Christianity. The Christians in India used to call themselves as 'those following the way' (*Mārgavāsikal*), and joining the Christian community was termed '*mārgam koodal*', meaning 'joining the way'. The term which had a very rich, Christian meaning and denoted the original apostolic way of life later degenerated into one that was used only for those who were received into the church from lower castes – a tragedy in the theological development in the Indian Church.

The Gospel references about the Christ-experience of Thomas the apostle seem to support our assumption that Thomas must have taught Christianity as 'the way'. Three instances of the Christ-experience of Thomas are noted in the Gospels – his readiness to go and die with Jesus (Jn 11:16), his longing to know from Jesus the way to the Father (Jn 14:5), and his exclamation of faith in the risen Lord (Jn 20:28). When one reflects on these three incidents from the Indian religious context, Thomas who is believed to have journeyed later to India and preached Christ in this country seems to have experienced Christ almost in a typical oriental/Indian style, i.e., according to the *mārga* (way) experience of the apostles as well as the seekers of God in this land of ancient religions. (It may just be a coincidence, but quite interesting to reflect on). As we know, the Hindu religion points out three different *mārgas* to seek God and experience Him – *Karma*, *Jnāna* and *Bhakti*. Thomas who was ready to go and even die with Jesus appears as the personification of total commitment for *Nishkāmakarma* (action without self-interest). Thomas who sought the way to the Father is a *Jnānayogi* looking for the enlightening knowledge leading to God-realization. And Thomas who forgot himself and threw himself at the feet of the risen Lord with an ecstatic

¹⁹The concepts of election and exclusive revelation of God that the people of Israel claimed may have been the original source of many a conflict with other religions in the Judeo-Christian tradition. These concepts, as they were practiced, appear to have been influenced by the usual ethnocentric attitude that is found in most tribal societies.

cry of 'My Lord and my God' is a true *Bhakta*. In the personality of Thomas the apostle, the traits of those who seek God through the three *mārgas* in this ancient land of religions seem to converge.

Due to this typical oriental/Indian nature of his Christ-experience, Thomas the apostle must have nurtured here a community of believers who also could easily adapt themselves to the religious culture of this land. That they did and they began to live in a living dialogue with their Hindu brethren; this can be seen from their history. Like the early church, they did not conceive their faith primarily in an institutional framework, which could be placed in opposition to other religious institutions. Of course, Christ-experience was unique for them and they bore witness to that through their life. But they did not conceive it in opposition to other religions and claim that one could be saved only if one joined the external organization of the believers in Christ, because the organizational framework itself was rather secondary to them. First and foremost, Christianity was for them a 'way of life.'

12. Modern Religious/Spiritual Movements within the Catholic Church: Out of a Tension between Collective and Individual Meanings?

Above, we tried to situate the modern religious movements within the various types of social and religious movements and also distinguished them from sects and cults. The following analysis investigates the possible factors behind the growth of such movements in modern times.

Sociologically speaking, religion is an important meaning system within the complex network of several social systems in the human society; for, religion provides significant elements of meaning, vision or perspective about world and life to groups of people or even to the whole society. Thus in religious systems like Christianity, Hinduism or Islam, a large number of people share a common vision about world and life (*Weltanschauung*).

A life-vision (also world vision) and its elements, when shared by a group or community, tend to become general or universal (of course, within the group) so as to be acceptable to all members. In order to be universalized, it is de-contextualized and de-personalized as needed; a sort of abstraction occurs in universalizing the meaning. For example, the Catholic doctrines on any aspect of life are so universal that it can be equally accepted by members in Asia or America. If at all there is scope for contextualization and personalization in some aspects of the vision, it is rather marginal and mostly limited to practical applications rather than in theoretical points. So, each

member needs and is often required to find personal application within the permitted parameters of the general vision or meaning. Thus, it is hoped, the needs for applying the meaning to personal sphere on the one hand as well as maintaining the universal character of the system on the other will be protected. In this balancing act by the society, the emphasis is always more on protecting the system; otherwise the survival of the group itself will be in danger.

As we know, the life and message of Jesus is the core or foundation of the Christian vision of world and life. When this life and message is translated into dogmas and cultic practices for a global community over centuries, they become very generalized; they lose the concreteness and flexibility for particular application according to the needs of the individuals and local groups. The new religious movements under our discussion can be seen as attempts to give more importance to the need for applying the meaning to the person or persons in their actual life-situation and less to the protection of the continuity of the general meaning system. Here, if satisfactory meanings for personal life can be found within the broad universal system, the personal interpretation and application remain within permissible parameters. But, if it is difficult to find such personal meanings within the system, the new interpreters may even dare to go out of the system occasionally. There arises the danger or risk of some movements deviating from the permissible limits of the parent system. The formation of some groups separated from the Charismatic movement and developing new interpretations to the Christian teachings and initiating new and unacceptable practices is a good example of the danger of deviation in such religious movements.

Tensions between collective and personal fulfilment of religious needs have existed in all religions including Christianity throughout history. They have played crucial roles in most of the splits and subsequent formation of sects or denominations within religious groups. Tensions arise from the so called 'value interests' or 'meaning interests' of individuals or subgroups, which are different from those of the general organization. These value interests, of course, coalesce with several 'material interests' and generate sufficient emotional power for causing the splits (Consider the history of important splits in Christianity like Great Schism, Protestant Revolution, etc.).

Today in the modern society, however, some additional factors, it seems, have made the development of such tensions easier. The first among them is the fast pace of life, due to which the nature of people's needs, emotional and social, material and spiritual, undergo rapid change; the universal or the general system does not keep pace

with them and hence cannot easily adapt, and provide adequate and satisfactory solutions to such needs. The systems of the Catholic Church, we know, are slower than any others. In such situations, people move forward with whatever they think would provide them quick solutions to their needs. Secondly, in a culture of democracy, heightened sense of freedom of individuals, liberalization and fast disappearance of conservative rural style, people feel the freedom to step aside or even transcend the official teachings. Thirdly, there is also a gradual decline in the sense of belonging to the institutional (aspect of) religion; instead, people tend to consider themselves as belonging to religion in a non-institutional or spiritual sense. In the west, there is a popular way of describing this development as “shopping around” in religion – taking whatever religious elements one wants to satisfy his/her needs from whichever available source. Sociology speaks of two kinds of solidarity, mechanical and organic. It is noted that mechanical solidarity of rural society is replaced by organic solidarity in urbanized cultures. Collective authority is stronger in mechanical solidarity than in the organic; similarly, collective or common interest has precedence in the former while individual interest takes upper hand in the latter. Hence, there exists in the latter a comparatively weaker bond among individuals in societies and organizations; the people may ignore organizations and institutions if they feel that their interests are not sufficiently taken care of by them and may begin to create new groups or organizations which they hope would provide them more solidarity.²⁰

13. Sociological Features of NRMs

In the light of what we have been discussing above, the salient sociological features of the religious movements under consideration can be summarized as follows:

1. These religious movements are neither sects nor cults in the conventional sense of the term, even though some of them may manifest a certain degree of zeal and spontaneity like sects. They are movements within an institutionalized religion, not opposed to it.

²⁰The most important of other books referred for preparing this article: Robert Wuthnow, “The Cultural Context of Contemporary Religious Movements”, in Thomas Robins et al., ed., *Cults, Culture and the Law*, Atlanta: Scholars’ Press, 1985, 43-58; Leland J. White, *Christ and the Christian Movement*, New York: Alba House, 1985, 4-20; Francesco Alberoni, *Movement and Institution*, NY: Columbia University Press, 1984, 219-260; Richard A. Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement*, New York: Continuum, 1989, 15-29; G. Theissen, *Sociology and Early Palestinian Christianity*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978.

2. Almost all of them arose out of a need to have an intense and renewed religious experience beyond and above the one available through the institutionalized method of Christianity. There has been a feeling of deprivation of such an experience at the root of all movements.

3. They were initiated by one or more charismatic leaders who could attract some followers to the new experience. The original group shares their experience with others and the latter are attracted to the group due to the charismatic nature of their experience.

4. Now most of them have developed organizational structures, which could be a sign of their becoming institutionalized over the years. Charismatic movement, Jesus Youth etc. have already become well established organizations, and it is almost impossible now to be recognized as a charismatic, Jesus Youth, Opus Dei or Focolare member unless one is a member of the organization which has rules and regulations like any other. It may not be necessary to go through a formal initiation ceremony to gain membership in all the discussed organizations, but at least repeated participation in the chief practices of the group is necessary for such a recognition.

5. These religious movements have indirectly posed a challenge to the Church in which they were born. By leading a life of more committed and intense spirituality, their very existence challenges the whole Church to renew itself as they have already done.

6. As noted above, sociologically the term 'church' stands for an institutionalized religion which is very much adapted to the demands of the society. In other words, a 'church' is a more or less secularized religion. Wide and deep secularization waters down the intensity of religious experience in the Church. Religious experience being a constant basic need of all human beings, the 'church' cannot but give rise to some movements to overcome the secularization tendency and help the people to get in touch with the spiritual core of the religious organization. The social cum spiritual effervescence that may periodically arise out of an institutionalised organization and the appearance of some charismatic personalities – both together help the emergence of new movements.

7. The prominent involvement of the lay people in all the religious movements can be looked at from different angles. The bishops, priests and the religious being already part of the organized church and its leadership structure, whose chief function is to protect the status quo, it is easier for such movements to arise from the non-official section of the Church, i.e., from the lay people. Besides, in a widely routinized and highly stratified organization like the Church,

the lay people form the majority of 'have-nots', who do not have easy access to power, recognition, spiritual sources etc. Hence, it is not all surprising that the 'have-nots' have begun to organize themselves and obtain the necessary resources for their spiritual, psychological and social fulfilment without the mediation of the clergy. The freedom in the modern society and the culture of democracy around us have helped the emergence and growth of these organizations in recent years.

8. Even though these movements began as local or regional groups, today most of them have become global or at least trans-national in membership. Still they maintain a number of cultural traits of the original background. However, like any movement, these are also undergoing cultural adaptations when members from new regions and countries join them. Such original traits and the recent changes can be seen in Opus Dei, Charismatic Movement, Jesus Youth, etc.

9. While discussing the origin of social movements above, we noted the Mass Society Theory, which is not seriously considered by many social thinkers with regard to the origin of social movements. However, regarding the religious movements, this theory has some relevance. The movements like Focolare, Charismatics, etc. had their origin from the need to experience intense community life and interpersonal relationship in a liberal and secularized society. These movements gave an anchoring to close community experience in the highly individualistic liberal societies of Western Europe and North America.

10. Above, social movements were categorized on the basis of the direction of the movement into innovative movements and conservative movements. Several religious movements of modern times like Opus Dei and Neo-Catechumenate appear to belong to the second category as they want to go back to the traditional Christian experience and intensify them, even bypassing some of the reforms made in the Church during the post-Vatican II period.

Conclusion

As we noted at the beginning of this study, movements have given, continue to give and will give energy for any system for change. That role is sufficiently well fulfilled by all the current movements in the Catholic Church. However, they cannot and will not remain energizing movements for ever for the simple reason that they are just movements. Sooner or later, they will also get institutionalized; that is the nature of every social creation. But that itself will give rise to new movements fulfilling the saying, *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda*.