

TANGAZA COLLEGE
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA

The Challenge of New Religious Movements - Cults
for Christianity at Large
and the Catholic Church in Particular

THIS PAPER IS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

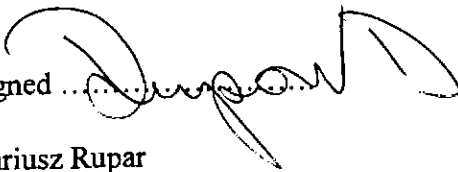
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STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflections. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

Signed

Dariusz Rupa

Date ..5-02-02.....

This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

Signed ..

Aylward Shorter

Date ..5-2-02.....

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACM	The Anti-Cult Movement
AIC	African Instituted Churches
AMECEA	Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa
CCM	Counter-Cult Movement
GS	Gaudium et Spes
HAS-UWC	The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity- (The Unification Church)
LG	Lumen Gentium
MRTCG	The Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, popularly known as the Kanungu Cult
NERM/NRM/NREM	New Religious Movement
RSV	The Revised Standard Version Bible
SCC	Small Christian Community

INTRODUCTION

From time to time the strange activities of cults make the headlines. Public opinion is often drawn to the events in Jonestown, South America, Waco, US, Kanungu, Uganda, with initial shock, curiosity, and suspicion.¹ Frequently the initial interest of the media quickly comes to an end and the group that was once at the center of everyone's attention enters into oblivion. I believe the question of cult s deserves more attention, and some proper scientific research.

My interest in the cults and new religious movements dates back to my missionary work in Uganda. During my pastoral work I had interacted with many members of different churches, which I considered strange. I referred to many fundamentalist of the Protestant Churches or so called African Instituted Churches as sects or cults. As a Christian, and Catholic I was puzzled by their beliefs and practices.

I have cultivated this interest in cults throughout my theological studies in Nairobi. As a part of my pastoral work here in Nairobi I was involved in ecumenism with numerous churches that are based in the city. My interaction with these people gave me valuable insights in the religious worldview.²

Last year like everybody else I was shocked by the news of the mass suicide in

¹These are only some of places where cult members committed suicide or other crimes that shock the world.

² I became particularly acquainted with the Unification Church, popularly known as the Moonies. Many of their members became my friends, especially since I was showing interest in their beliefs and activities, they also treated me as a potential convert.

Kanungu, Uganda.³ I asked myself how is it possible that six hundred people, ex-Catholics, could be burnt to death without arousing any suspicion from either government or church bodies?

This essay “The challenge of New Religious Movements – Cults for the Christianity at Large and the Catholic Church in Particular” draws from my pastoral experience, which has nourished my interests in the phenomena of cults.

Why did I choose this topic? Vatican II challenged the Catholic Church to listen to the signs of the times.⁴ Surely, New Religious Movements are part of this new reality for Christianity. We should go beyond the negative attitudes that are usually formed by Christians of the mainstream churches. We must discover what the Holy Spirit tries to tell us through the activity of these new religious movements. The Catholic Church needs to confirm its position in the face of this new phenomena. I would like to make a contribution to this debate.

We are living in a world surrounded by many religions and denominations. Africa is a continent of people who, in the words of Mbiti are “notoriously religious”. Due to the multitude of churches many ordinary people and also religious leaders and governments are not aware of what these movements are, and what they teach. Where should the modern human society draw a line between religious tolerance, the human right to freedom of belief, and the abuse of religion through secrecy, brainwashing and manipulation?

³ Vision Reporters, “Suicide 250 to 600 ex-Catholics burned in Rukunguri cult”, Sunday Vision (March 19, 2000), 1-2.

⁴ “At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel, if it is to carry out its task.” Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes, 4.

Some of these urgent questions need to be answered. Based on a two case studies this paper wrestles with the issue of relationships between cults and the mainstream Christian churches. I would like to see how these religious groups challenge what we believe as Christians, and Catholics in particular. In a positive way I would like to see what we can learn from those groups, and perhaps in a negative way to throw some light on the modalities of these cults, that can end tragically, like Kanungu. Perhaps we can prevent those tragic events if we take a different stand towards those religious groups by interacting with them instead of isolating them. But first we need to understand them by entering a little into their mentality.

In the first Chapter we will be dealing with a rather difficult task of defining what we mean by the word “cult” and the term “new religious movement”; a substitute word for “cult”? What are the characteristics of a religious group that earns it the label “CULT”. After presenting different opinions and positions, we will try to define what we understand by "cult", as used for the purpose of the essay.

The second chapter will be a presentation of two different religious groups that have been called by religious scholars and media a “cult”. Next, in chapter three we shall be looking at the areas of life, especially in Africa, that are contributing to the growth of cults and where they challenge the Church.

The challenge of cults is a pastoral problem; therefore in the last chapter I will suggest how we as Christians should respond to their presence. Some pastoral suggestions will also be offered.

CHAPTER I

*Beloved, do not believe every spirit,
but test the spirits to see whether they are of God:
for many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 Jn 4:1)*

1 Definitions and Distinctive features of terminologies

There is no unanimous agreement among scholars of religion on the issue of what counts as a 'cult' or 'new religious movement'. There are the opponents of "New Religious Movements", who refer to their cultic or sectarian nature. On the other side are scholars who tend to look for a value-free definition.

1.1 New Religious Movements (NRM)⁵

During the 1970s Europe and America experienced the rise of new sects and cults, as a part of a youth counterculture. In order to desensitize the negative sentiments, especially in the age of religious pluralism and tolerance, many scholars particularly social scientists preferred to substitute the words 'cult or sect' with the concept of new religious movement (NRM). Since, the term "cult" has ambiguous and derogatory meaning NRM is used nowadays in professional literature.⁶ Consequently, academic

⁵ The term "New Religious Movement" is abbreviated by various scholars in different ways; NERM, NREM, NRM. For the sake of easier pronunciation I have opted for NERM.

⁶ John Saliba, New Religious Movements, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 8.

writers have tended to favor the use of NERM, which refers to their time and place of origin. According to Eileen Barker, a British sociologist,

The term new religious movement (NRM) is used to cover a disparate collection of organizations, most of which have emerged in their present form since the 1950s, and most of which offer some kind of answer to questions of a fundamental religious, spiritual and philosophical nature.⁷

While the scholars of religion in Europe or America classify religious groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses, The Unification Church or the Church of Scientology as NERM. The African continent is also experiencing a mushrooming of NERM. New religious movements are a relatively young phenomenon in Africa. In Kenya for instance, NERM started appearing in the 1980s and 1990s.⁸ Even though the term NERM can include a great variety of religious groups that differ in many aspects, there are some general characteristics that they have in common. I will point out some of them in order to make the contrast with the particular groups we are interested in, namely "cults".

New Religious Movements and the mainline Pentecostalism are often taken by an outsider as one and the same Church. The resemblance might be created by the fact that NERM are influenced by the spirituality and practice of Pentecostalism.⁹ Many NERM

⁷ Eileen Barker, New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction, (London: HMSO, 1989), 9.

⁸ Aylward Shorter and Joseph N. Njiru, New Religious Movements in Africa, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001), 19.

⁹ Shorter, New Religious Movements, 21.

are in fact, Neo-Pentecostal putting the emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit as manifested in terms of good health success and prosperity.¹⁰

One features of the NERMs is that they differ from organized traditional churches. They usually become visible during a campaign for a miracle rally when they use all possible means to publicize the coming event. These religious groups do not want to appear like other churches, indeed they seem to make a point of being special and different from mainline churches. According to Shorter the reason for keeping distance is their perception of other churches, especially the Catholic Church as “compromised in their purity of doctrine and their fidelity to the Bible.”¹¹ The way the NERM are organized also distinguishes them from the mainline churches with the absence of priesthood or sacraments. In the external organization, there is no hierarchy or proper structure except for administrative staff and good organizers of big crusades.¹²

The fertile ground for the rise and operation of NERM seems to be most developed in cities and towns. The reason for this is that urban areas are very densely populated with the majority of people living in poor conditions. Acute poverty and desperation of the majority on one side, and the consumer life-style of the minority on the other side is what the NERM need in order to prosper.¹³ Africa is a continent that would match the criteria for the growth of NERMs as listed by Robert Ellwood. According to

¹⁰ A presentation of New Religious Movements, followed by a discussion was organized in Tangaza College on 27.10. 2000 (Mission Day). Many of the characteristics regarding NERM have their source from that event and studies carried out by Shorter and Njiru.

¹¹ Shorter, New Religious Movements, 89.

¹² Shorter, New Religious Movements, 23.

¹³ Shorter, New Religious Movements, 13.

him “new religious movements often originate in periods of great social stress, frustration, or transition”.¹⁴

Enthusiasm stirred by young people and accompanied by lively amplified music is a characteristic of services or worships in NERMs. There is no boredom, or the danger that the audience may fall asleep. The participants are moved by the high atmosphere created by the “power of the spirit”. There is a lot of dancing singing and clapping.¹⁵

A powerful charismatic leader is above the rest of the congregation. Indeed he or she is seen as a mediator of healing and a channel through whom divine grace is mediated to the people.¹⁶ Supporting the leader financially is recognized as a safe investment. The gifts, whether money or things like domestic equipment, offered to the leader are offerings to God himself. “Give and it shall be given. I have sown my seed and God will give us according to our faith.”¹⁷ Among the many characteristics of NERMs, leadership poses a real danger for the members. As Shorter puts it;

Finally, and most dangerous of all, there is mystique of leadership, of accepting the unquestioned authority of an evangelist-prophet, who possesses special gifts and who is the vehicle for the divine message.¹⁸

¹⁴ Robert S. Ellwood and Harry B. Partin, Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1988), 10.

¹⁵ The colorful and enthusiastic worships of NERM are what make them appear like some of The African Instituted Churches (AIC). Though in some aspects they may show similarities, they are not the same. The main difference is that AIC are of African origin. The second difference is the content of their preaching. While NERM stress the preaching of personal salvation, prosperity and health, the AIC proclaimed freedom from sin and colonial oppression. Cf. Shorter, New Religious Movements, 21.

¹⁶ Shorter, New Religious Movements, 23.

¹⁷ Seneiya Kamotho, “Charismatic Sects”, in The Daily Nation, (March 10. 2001), 12.

¹⁸ Shorter, New Religious Movements, 13.

A word from the Bible is used to add credence and substantiate the teaching of the prophet-like leader. They seem to know the Bible by heart. This “knowledge” is very impressive for the congregation. They quote verses rather freely adding the numbers of the chapter and verse, from which “book” they come.¹⁹ The meaning of the Biblical texts refer to the present moment and situation. The NERMs are not interested in the original meaning of the texts they quote.²⁰

1.2 Cult - Definitions

No religious group would call itself a “cult”, and no one would describe him/herself as a member of a cult. This is a label given to a group by an outsider. At the mention of “cult” people immediately react in a manner that betrays their understanding of the word. They associate cults with strange, often dangerous groups that trap their members and subject them to “brainwashing.” Having presented the meaning and main features of NERMs, we shall examine more closely the term “Cult”.

First of all, let us look at the different meanings of “cult.” All standard dictionaries agree that the word “cult” has several meanings. Derived from Latin *cultus* it means veneration, devotion, and worship. Cult as worship in a neutral sense is used to refer to sacred objects. We speak for instance of “the cult of the Sacred Heart” in the Catholic Church. Today “Cult” refers not only to religious groups or religious sense.

¹⁹ During a workshop organized by the Unification Church, I noticed how swiftly the teacher was moving through the Bible. Later in a casual manner I asked him if he knew how the bible came to be and who wrote the Old Testament. After a moment of hesitation he added, “Perhaps you could tell me this.”

²⁰ Shorter, New Religious Movements, 44.

The use of this word is often extended to secular objects, or even people. In these sense it implies unbalanced devotion to, for instance, “Congolese music” or a rock star. The Dictionary of cults, sects, religions and occults”, defines cult as;

A relatively small, often transitory religious group that commonly follows a radical leader. A cult, unlike sect, espouses radically new religious beliefs and practices that are frequently seen as threatening the basic values and cultural norms of society at large.²¹

Many authors use the terms ‘cult’ and ‘sect’ interchangeably. Often NERM is preferred as a substitute. For Shorter,

A cult is a sect or religious movement that is a total institution, one that deprives its members of their freedom. It does this by making them dependent, through taking away their material means of existence, in some cases depriving them of physical liberty and especially by exercising undue influence on their capacity to think and choose for themselves.²²

However, one may find grounds for making a distinction among these three terms.²³ There seems to be a “battle” among different scholars about the use of “cult”. On the one side are those who defend their rights to existence, and say there is no cult problem. On

²¹ George A. Mather and Larry A. Nichols, Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions and the Occults (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 253..

²² Shorter, New Religious Movements, 101-102.

²³ “SECT” is often seen as a break away group from an established, larger religious organization, the sect’s members see as having become too worldly by compromising traditional religious beliefs and practices. SECT unlike CULT seeks to restore traditional beliefs and practices. It rejects many of society’s values, but not in a threatening manner. Cf. Mather, Dictionary, 253.

the other side are those who oppose “cults”, maintaining that they are dangerous groups.²⁴ A sample of the latter may be given by Dave Breese.

A cult is a religious perversion. It is a belief and practice in the world of religion which calls for devotion to a religious view or leader centered in false doctrine. It is an organized heresy.²⁵

As we have seen the concept of cult carries a heavy burden of cultural prejudice. The news media reporters use the word within its negative significance. Many writers, especially of an evangelical background, attack cults with slogans such as deviant, dangerous, pseudo-religious and so on. In spite of the “stigmas” that hang above the term “cult”, I want to use it to refer to groups that have some common characteristics and do not fit the descriptions of NERMs. Moreover, the word “cult” seems to have a fairly precise meaning and tells us a lot about the origins, development and likely features of religious groups.²⁶

²⁴ Those who oppose cults are motivated by different reasons. There is the “counter-cult movement” and the “anti-cult movement”. These two groups share a common belief that “cults” pose a threat to their respective ideologies. The former focuses on doctrinal differences between cults and established religions while the latter, sees cults as dangerous in their influence (techniques of manipulation) on those who come in contact with them. Cf. Cult Group Controversies: Conceptualizing “anti-cult” and “counter-cult”, <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/cultsect/anticounter.htm>

²⁵ Dave Breese, Know the Marks of Cults, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 16.

²⁶ It is important to notice that in spite of popular negative use of the word “cult”, it would be a mistake to abandon it or substitute it for NERM. Arson Shupe the co-author of the “The Handbook of Cults and Sects in America” is one of those who try to take up the hard task of “educating” the mass media and public regarding the non-pejorative meaning of the word. In the article “Cult Group Controversies: Conceptualizing ‘cult’ and ‘sect’” Shupe gives the reasons for a scholarly non-pejorative use of “cult” and why the concept “new religious movement” is questionable when it comes be a surrogate for “cult”. Cf. “Cult Controversies: Conceptualizing: ‘Cult’ and ‘Sect’”.

<http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/cultsect/concult.htm>

While researching the subject of cults I have found that there are different ways of approaching the phenomena e.g. theological, sociological, psychological etc. My interest in studying cults is more pastorally oriented. We will benefit from saying something about the above positions since a pastor or a Christian leader should know that the three components are important while dealing with cults.

The theological approach and definition of cults is concerned with their relation to Christianity. Every religious group that deviates from Christianity with regards to cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith (particularly the fact that God became man in Jesus Christ, denying the deity of Jesus Christ) and, misinterprets the Bible, is a cult.²⁷ From this approach cults are seen as unchristian, and unbiblical organizations. Being perceived as spiritually corrupt the response to them has been one of theological repudiation. The theological understanding or analysis of the word “cult” has appealing features. It is simple and direct. Even an average person, who is committed to the traditional Christian Church, will be able to recognize cult-like groups. Of course this definition is in many aspects inadequate. First of all, it is more concerned with the cult’s teaching while neglecting the factors that contribute to their rise and success.²⁸

The second objection to this definition lies in what is understood as “orthodox Christianity”. If we include only the Catholics and Protestants, then how should we see so many other well-established Christian churches?²⁹

²⁷ Martin, Rise of the Cults, 12.

²⁸ John A. Saliba, New Religious Movements, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 4.

²⁹ Saliba, New Religious Movements, 3.

The psychological approach is based on the way cults recruit and how they affect those who join them. Many psychologists and psychiatrists are of the opinion, that cults are “dangerous institutions that cause severe mental and emotional harm to those who commit themselves to their ‘creed’ and ‘lifestyles.’”³⁰ A powerful leader has a strong influence on the group and dominates the lifestyles of his or her followers, offering false solutions to their problems. However, there are those psychiatrists who argue that cult membership had many positive effects on their members. A psychiatric approach tends to neglect the social aspects and the spiritual dimensions of involvement in cults.³¹

From the sociological approach, “cult” is seen as a religious group that is sociologically marginal and often deviant. Cults are composed of converts of different traditional backgrounds who gather around a charismatic leader.³² Since trained sociologists are supposed to be objective and open minded in their studies of religion they are not interested in judging what is true or false (theological approach). Nor are they interested in the effects on individual members involved in cults (psychological approach). What they want to know is how and why their new values, and lifestyles came into being.³³

Looking at the many definitions and understandings of the word “cult” Robert Ellwood has tried to take yet another angle towards the term “cult”. He gave a definition that would be most useful in pointing to a significant set of phenomena. The question posed is what distinguishes certain religious groups from the church, the denomination,

³⁰ Saliba, New Religious Movements, 5.

³¹ Saliba, New Religious Movements, 7.

³² Saliba, New Religious Movements, 8.

³³ Saliba, New Religious Movements, 106.

and the monastery. He approaches the task phenomenologically, attempting to point out special features of groups that already exist and have been referred to as cults.³⁴ This type of approach aims at finding a definition of “cult” that would be cleared of its negative connotations. This is the approach that I wish to adopt in my studies. Let us now consider some general characteristics, which the cults have in common.

A strong authoritative and charismatic leader: The founder of a cult has a position of authority over his/hers followers. The authority is based on receiving a special revelation he or she has been granted from God. This revelation comes together with a supernatural knowledge, which gives the leader the only authority to interpret and pass on to the followers. Obedience of the disciples is grounded on the ‘divinely inspired mission, his or her heroic deeds and extraordinary endowments’.³⁵ The claim of having the saving knowledge or as Shorter calls “a hotline to heaven” is “a major component in the make up of a cult”³⁶

The cult is separatist: Strict discipline and unquestionable loyalty is demanded from the members. There is a boundary that separates the cult from the world “outside”. Strict discipline takes the form of controlling most of the aspects of one’s life. In some cases the control over the group goes to an extreme. The daily routine of life of the members is regulated, often including the types of clothes to wear, to when a married couple may have sexual intercourse.³⁷ Commitment and a high degree of conformity, especially from the ‘inner core’ is expected in a cult.

³⁴ Robert S. Ellwood, Religious and Spiritual Groups, 23.

³⁵ Maurice C. Burrell, The challenge of the Cults, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 11.

³⁶ Shorter, New Religious Movements, 101.

³⁷ Burrell, The Challenge of Cults, 17.

Stress on subjective experience and meeting personal needs: These offers are strong and attractive enough for some to counteract the family, ethnic, or community pressure coming from the conventional religion, like that of one's family.³⁸ Besides offering solutions to personal problems, whether of an economic or emotional nature, cults offer a new spiritual experience.

Group superiority: This belief is of course manifested in the teaching and attitudes of the cult members. They perceive themselves as the chosen ones, the holders of the true knowledge. Members of cults claim that they have found answers to all religious questions and daily problems. The biggest claim is that they have the key to salvation.³⁹

Doctrinal ambiguity:⁴⁰ From a Christian perspective cults reject many of the beliefs that are fundamental for mainstream Christianity (The Divinity of Jesus Christ, the Trinity). Even though cults differ from one another, they share in some of the deviations. Cults possess some authoritative scripture that usually surpass the Bible as God's word.⁴¹ There is belief that, the new revelation addressed to the leader, can supersede God's first revelation in the Bible. Moreover, the only legitimate interpretation of the Bible comes from the leader.

³⁸ Ellwood, Religious and Spiritual Groups, 24.

³⁹ There are many fundamentalist churches and religious groups in Africa that have similar claims on the monopoly of "salvation". These groups are often very aggressive in relating to other churches. Perhaps they may pose a greater challenge than "cults". Fundamentalists may exhibit some similarities with the cults. However, fundamentalism should not be considered a cult. Cf. LeBar, Cults, Sects and the New Age, 48.

⁴⁰ Dave Breese, Know the Marks of Cults, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 55.

⁴¹ The Unification Church believes that the "Divine Principle" by Sun Myung Moon is today's "Bible". However, they may not say it openly to a Christian.

In summary we can say that a “cult” is a religious group that has its origin in an accepted religion, in our case Christianity. However, the group differs in beliefs, practices and approaches to the Bible. The group has a strong authoritative and charismatic leader. At the outset, it appears separatist and often secretive. The members are drawn towards it because of the offer of some strong spiritual experience or the fulfillment of personal needs.⁴²

⁴² I wish to add that the characteristics of “cult” we have selected for our definition are by no means exhausted. Many different authors point out other important, according to them, “marks of the cults”. I have heard that cults hate children and the family (In a television program “The Turning Point” KTN 22.07.01), and many more descriptions, which are very subjective and clearly showed the position of the one who spoke or wrote about this subject.

2 Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter I said that there is no unanimity as to the use of the word “cult”. It is not easy to come up with a definition of “cult” that would satisfy those who defend and those who criticize the subject under discussion. What is important, however, is that we know what types of religious groups we mean by “cults”. Writing as an outsider I have decided to adopt this word, without meaning to offend the members of these groups. Perhaps it is good for us to remember that Christianity at the time of the Roman persecution was seen (by outsiders) as a dangerous cult. If we were to apply the above-mentioned characteristics one could find many similarities between “cult” and the Church of two thousand years ago.⁴³ With this in mind, in the following chapter we shall proceed to give two instances of a cult in order not to remain only on the level of definitions but to also substantiate them with facts taken from life.

⁴³ A good, though simple description of Christianity seen as a cult, was made by Hubert Beck, How to respond to the Cults, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), 37-39.

CHAPTER II

1 Case Study

In this chapter I will present two contrasting groups the Unification Church and the Kanungu cult. My analysis takes into consideration valuable advice, which I received from a professor of religious studies Mr. Jean-Francois Mayer.⁴⁴ He stressed the need to be honest and avoid spreading lies or attempting to ridicule these groups. I have chosen two very different types of cults. The first reason for my choice is the fact that both are found in Africa and, though different, these groups share common features.⁴⁵ The second reason is to illustrate the contrasting elements in these groups. This will become clear as we shall present each cult in turn, but with the same approach, starting with an introduction, giving a short history (development of the cult) and finally describing their belief system.

⁴⁴ As a part of my research I contacted professor Mayer, at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, who was also interested in the Kanungu cult. He suggested to me some good source material regarding the subject of "cults" and NERMs.

⁴⁵ One of the presented cults "The Kanungu cult" does not exist any more after the 17 March, 2000 tragedy. The Unification Church is present in many African countries. It is difficult, however, to know the statistics in how many countries and what is the membership since the Unification church is reluctant to disclose the statistical information about membership figures.

2 The Unification Church

2.1 Introduction

In recent months nearly everyone has read or heard something about the Unification Church. This Church has received free worldwide publicity and attention, through the marriage of an African Roman Catholic Archbishop, Emmanuel Milingo with Maria Sung, a Korean woman.⁴⁶ The group is known around the world for its spectacular mass weddings, the largest in the world.⁴⁷

2.2 History

The founder and leader of the Unification Church Sun Myung Moon (shining sun and moon) was born in 1920 in North Korea into a Presbyterian family. He claims that at the age of fifteen Jesus appeared to him on Easter morning, while he was deep in prayer on a Korean mountainside, and asked him to continue his mission and complete the task of establishing God's Kingdom on earth.⁴⁸ He accepted the call, but he needed to discover its deeper meaning; "What was it that Jesus had left undone on earth?"

⁴⁶ The marriage took place on Sunday 27 of May 2001. The ceremony, which was in the form of a mass wedding typical of the Unification Church, was presided by the founder of the church Rev. Sun Myung Moon. See APPENDIX I for some photos from the wedding ceremony. Three months later Archbishop Milingo came back to the Catholic Church in a surprising and controversial way, which provoked another wave of interest by the media.

⁴⁷ Some of those involved in the blessing ceremonies are already married and recommit themselves to their wedding vows. Others, however, marry a spouse chosen (matched) for them by Rev. Mr. and Mrs. Moon. The Blessing ceremony, may look like yet another way of getting married, there is, however, much more meaning and significance to the celebration that makes it different from marriages taken in other faiths. We will elaborate more on this point in the section on the beliefs.

⁴⁸ From the official literature of the Unification Church. Cf. <http://unification.org>.

Was Jesus' mission incomplete?"⁴⁹ In order to find the answer Moon studied the Bible and other religious teachings; gradually he came to understand God's own suffering and his longing to be reunited with his children. By 1945 Moon organized his teaching, into what came to be known as the Divine Principle, which constitutes the fundamental doctrine of Unification Church.

During World War II Moon studied electrical engineering in Japan. While at the university he was imprisoned as a member of the Korean independence movement. After finishing his studies, he traveled to the communist North Korea, where he was again imprisoned and tortured in 1946. Moon linked his sufferings at the hands of the communists to the sufferings of Christ. Between 1946 and 1950 Moon was imprisoned multiple times for political reasons. The prison camp was liberated by American troops the day Moon was scheduled for execution. In 1954 together with some of his followers, who were attracted to his teaching, Moon traveled to South Korea where he founded the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (popularly called Unification Church).

The membership of the Church was growing and spreading throughout South Korea. In the late fifties its first missionaries went to Japan and in 1959 to America. It is claimed by Moonies that the "family of disciples" was the foundation for the marriage of Rev. Moon and Hak Ja Han in 1960.⁵⁰ This event marked the beginning of the

⁴⁹ Official literature of the Unification Church. "Who is Reverend Moon?"
http://unification.org/rev_mrs_moon.html

⁵⁰ In the Unification Church their wedding is known as "the Marriage of the Lamb" foretold in the Book of Revelation 21:9.

restoration of humankind back into God's lineage. By the power of God's sacrificial love Moon and his wife established the position of True Parents.⁵¹

2.3 Teaching and beliefs

The followers of Rev. Moon claim that "With the fullness of time, God has sent His messenger to resolve the fundamental questions of life and the universe. His name is Sun Myung Moon."⁵² God's revelations to Moon are disclosed in the Divine Principle, which is said to be the authoritative interpretation of the Bible.⁵³ This does not mean that the Unification Church neglects the Bible. On the contrary, it is noted that the members quote the Bible at length and claim that their beliefs are based upon it. However, it cannot be denied that their central beliefs have their source in the revelations claimed by Moon.

Unification theology or teaching may be based on three events in history:
Creation, 2) The Fall, and 3) Restoration.

Nature of God and Creation

God is the origin of everything, but He is invisible. How then can we know His nature? Looking at the world around us we can observe that all created things have dual

⁵¹ "They are the first couple to have the complete blessing of God, and are able to bring forth children with no original sin". Official literature of the Unification Church. "Who is Reverend Moon?" http://unification.org/rev_mrs_moon.html

⁵² Sun Myung Moon, *Divine Principle*, (New York: The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, 1977), 16.

⁵³ In the course of my studies about the Unification Church I followed a four-day workshop (1-4 Aug 2001) on the Divine Principle. I was encouraged by some members of the Church, to attend this workshop in order to "understand the purpose of life". The small group of participants (we were ten) consisted mainly of young people from different Christian denominations, the majority from the Catholic Church.

characteristics.⁵⁴ Some examples of this duality include the masculine and feminine parts that can be seen in humans, animals, and plants. Thus when God created man and woman (Gen 1:27) in His own image, the Unification Church believes that each of these dual characteristics observed in creation are results of the dual nature of God himself. God is believed to be the perfect Father. But, there is also a feminine - motherly part in Him. "There must be a True Mother with the True Father, in order to give rebirth to fallen children as children of goodness. She is the Holy Spirit."⁵⁵ God is the original Parent of humankind and we humans are His children. God is the source of all the values we cherish: love, truth, beauty and goodness. God loves each one of us individually and rejoices when we return His love and multiply it by loving others. However, we separated ourselves from God's selfless and sacrificial love by our selfish love. This separation and His longing for reunion with each of us causes God great pain. We can recognize the suffering heart of God through prayer and reflection.

The Purpose of Life

In his original idea, God wanted everyone to be perfectly in love and be able to give true and unconditional love to every human being and all of creation. He created the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, without sin. God wanted them to establish a perfect family on earth, since humanity must reflect God's nature and character. In order to fulfill this task of reflecting God's creative nature, Adam and Eve were given a guide, popularly known as "Three Blessings" (Gen 1:28).

⁵⁴ Rom 1:20 serves as a biblical clue that points to the dual nature of the Creator.

⁵⁵ Divine Principle, 215.

"Be fruitful": The first blessing is that of becoming perfect. A fruitful individual is someone who is spiritually, intellectually and emotionally mature and bears fruit of love, wisdom and goodness. This blessing and call to perfection, will be repeated later by Jesus, "You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (cf. Mt 5:48). Only Jesus succeeded in reaching this level of perfection.

"Multiply": God desired to see a true man and true woman marry and together raise sinless children, who in turn would also become true men and true women. The children would grow up experiencing the masculine love of God through their father and feminine love of God through their mother. After reaching this stage the family would be exemplary. By multiplying, the perfect children will fill the earth leading to a God centered society – Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Unfortunately, the first human ancestors failed to achieve an ideal family. As a result we have never seen *"true parents."*

"Have dominion": The third and final blessing was that human beings should have dominion over all of creation. Our interaction with creation should be based on love and appreciation not on selfishness and exploitation.

God wanted the first human ancestors to fulfill the three blessings and establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

The Fall of Man and the Root of Evil

The root cause of evil according to Moon is based on the biblical story of Adam and Eve, who committed the first sin. Adam and Eve disobeyed God's commandment, which forbade them to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. According to Unification theology, while Adam and Eve were still going through the growth stages leading to the

first blessing of perfection, Eve was sexually seduced by Lucifer.⁵⁶ This is seen as the *spiritual fall*, and the result is the spiritual corruption of humanity.⁵⁷ Feeling guilty and shameful, Eve went to Adam and consummated their marriage, before they had perfected themselves. Through this act human beings became physically corrupt - (*physical fall*). By engaging in a premature sexual relationship, Adam and Eve let the selfish love centered on their physical bodies, take place of selfless love they received from God.⁵⁸ Since the fall, all human beings are born with a selfish fallen nature in addition to their good original nature. ⁵⁹

The Restoration of Humankind

After the fall God wanted to save his children and bring restoration, since God's purposes stands forever. Before the Messiah could come the people had to prepare the environment of faith. The Messiah, born sinless, comes to reveal the full and perfect love

⁵⁶ Before the creation of the first people Lucifer received all the love of God. But this love now was directed to Adam and Eve. Out of jealousy and selfishness Lucifer wanted to destroy the loving relationship between people and God.

⁵⁷ How is it possible that an angel, a spiritual being, could have sexual relationship with a human being? According to Moon the Bible gives examples where contact between a spirit and a human being actually took place e.g. Angel wrestling with Jacob as a result Jacob's thigh was dislocated. (Cf. Gen 32:25). Also Abraham was visited by angels with whom he shared food. (Cf. Gen 18:7-8)

⁵⁸ According to Moon original sin was a premature illicit engagement in the sexual act of the first people. After Adam and Eve sinned, they suddenly covered the sexual parts of their bodies. Why? It is human nature to hide what we are ashamed of. If Adam and Eve had sinned with their mouths by literally eating a fruit, they would have covered their mouths, instead they covered their genital areas. This implies that the "eating of the fruit" was a sexual act. The book of Job is also quoted to support this way of understanding original sin. "I have concealed my transgressions from men (*like Adam*), by hiding my iniquity in my bosom." (Job 31:33) RSV. Text in italics is used by The Unification teaching.

⁵⁹ The result of the fall was the domination of Satan over the world and human beings. (Cf. Jn 12:31)

of God, and establish God's Kingdom of Heaven on earth. This restoration can only occur through someone accomplishing the purposes originally set forth for Adam and Eve. The Messiah and his bride will become the "true parents", the first ideal family. This ideal family will become the basis for an ideal society, nation and world until the Kingdom of Heaven is established on Earth.

Jesus was the second Adam but not the true Messiah because he failed to fulfill his mission by not establishing the perfect family.⁶⁰ Jesus' mission was to redeem humanity both in spirit and body.⁶¹ However, his life and death were not completely in vain, they are testimony to the power of true, unconditional love. As a result, people can inherit, through faith, Jesus' spiritual victory (sacrificial love) and receive spiritual salvation, enabling them to grow to a higher spiritual level.⁶² After Jesus' death and resurrection, God began preparing, through Christians, for the second coming of the Messiah; a preparation that was completed in the Twentieth Century.

The True Parents

Through the power of God's sacrificial love and their marriage, Rev. Moon and his wife were established as "true parents". They are the first couple to have the complete blessing of God and capable of bringing forth children without original sin. In

⁶⁰ God's plan of redemption was the accomplishment of His fundamental purpose (see the Three Blessings). Jesus was to fulfill this purpose by marrying and bearing children. Cf. Divine Principle, 152.

⁶¹ Divine Principle, 147.

⁶² Jesus' death on the cross brought only spiritual salvation. However, original sin was not liquidated through his death and resurrection. Cf. Divine Principle, 148.

1992, Reverend Moon declared that he and his wife are the Messiah and “true parents” for all humanity. As the holders of the complete blessing of God, other people can receive the sanctifying blessing through them. The couples, so blessed, accept God's call to establish ideal, God-centered families, which is the starting point for the building of a peaceful world.⁶³

In summary: Beliefs of the Unification Church in contradiction to the Christian faith.

God has dual characteristics: positivity and negativity.⁶⁴ Within the Unification Church there is no place for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.⁶⁵

Jesus is not God, but a perfect man without original sin.⁶⁶ His mission as the Second Adam to save humankind failed, because he died on the cross before establishing the “Perfect Family”.

Salvation: Jesus redeemed humanity only spiritually. There is still a need for physical redemption. This full salvation will be brought about by a second Messiah.⁶⁷

Authority: Rev. Moon claims to be the Messiah through whom new, extra-biblical truths are conveyed from God.⁶⁸

⁶³ Attending prayer services in the Unification Church I found the assembly recite “The Family Pledge”, which could be seen as a version of a “Creed”. See APPENDIX III.

⁶⁴ Outline of The Divine Principle: level 4, (New York: HSA-UWC, 1980), 4-6.

⁶⁵ They use at times the term “trinity”, however, their “trinity” is the ideal family of Adam and Eve centered on God. After the “Fall” the trinity as centered on Satan. The Third Adam, the Lord of Second Coming, and Third Eve are supposed to establish trinity according to God’s original plan. Cf. Outline, 146, 212.

⁶⁶ Divine Principle, 141.

⁶⁷ The Unification Church teaches that since the “Fall”, humanity is in the lineage of Satan. We are in the process of restoration. The Blessing which is given by Rev. Moon is meant to change our belonging from the state of evil to goodness. Through the Blessing, original sin is removed and children born from the blessed couple will be under God’s lineage, thus able to attain perfection.

⁶⁸ Obedience and loyalty to the “True Parents” is seen as a reversal of the disloyalty of the first parents.

3 The Kanungu Cult

3.1 Introduction

In November 1998 the University of Virginia organized a session on “The Apocalyptic Millennialism“. In the introduction to the event it was expressed that with the approach of the year 2000, many groups with apocalyptic, violent, even suicidal designs, were becoming prominent in their preparations for catastrophic millennial events. Referring to the tragedy of Jonestown, Prof. Sathoff, said; “We assume that more such events will occur in the years to come”.⁶⁹ These prophetic words come true on 17 March 2000 in Kanungu, a village in Uganda.

In presenting the Kanungu cult we wish to give yet another example of a religious group with cult-like features. Kanungu is an extreme case of what may happen to a cult if the members blindly put their lives in the hands of an authoritarian leader. What is also of interest for us is to point out the millennial character (prediction of the imminent end of the world) of some cults.⁷⁰ According to Gifford millennial movements affect people in times of social crisis, especially those on the fringe of society, economically and politically.⁷¹

⁶⁹ From a report given by Jean-Francis Mayer, Apocalyptic Milleniarism in the West: The case of the Solar Temple”, (Chrlottesvillle: University of Virginia, 1999), 1.

⁷⁰ Millennialism or Millenarianism is the belief in a future millennium, the second coming of Christ. The source of this belief is the book of Revelation 20. Some fundamentalist groups interpret the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation in explaining their apocalyptic view of the future. Cf. John Bowker, The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 642.

⁷¹ Paul Gifford, Christianity: To Save or Enslave?, (Harare: EDICESA, 1990), 3.

3.2 The History

The beginning of the cult is not very clear. Some trace the origin of the cult to Credonia Mwerinde and Joseph Kibwetere, who claimed to have had a vision of the Virgin Mary and received messages from Her. Others claim that it was Paul Kashaku, (father of Credonia) an elderly, former Catholic catechist.⁷² In a vision he met Jesus, the Virgin Mary and Joseph, they sent him on a mission to call on people to repent. Similar messages were received by his daughter and Kibwetere. According to James Mujuni, Kibwetere announced in 1984 that the Virgin Mary had appeared to him and he was anointed leader, in the quest for the restoration of the Ten Commandments of God. The task was very urgent because the world was about to come to an end.⁷³

The Movement for the Restoration of The Ten Commandments of God (MRTCG) was publicly announced in 1990. The Movement was organized and headed by Credonia Mwerinde, who owned a bar and reportedly lived a morally ambiguous lifestyle, and Joseph Kibwetere, a one-time school supervisor in the diocese. Kibwetere was not only a prophet like figure but also provided administrative leadership for the movement. In the first few years since his vision, Kibwetere preached the “holy message” he had received. During the same period he recruited twelve disciples, who were to spread the message in their home areas.

⁷² Matthias Mugisha, “New Cult Sweeps Rukungiri” in Sunday Vision, (March 19, 2000), 3.

⁷³ James Mujuni, “Who is Joseph Kibwetere?”, The New Vision, (March 22, 2000), 19.

After the official launching of the movement, the Catholic Church became increasingly alarmed about the activities and teachings of the group. The (former) Bishop of Mbarara Diocese, Rt. Rev. John Baptist Kakubi tried to talk to Kibwetere, who was even his friend. However, Kibwetere refused the authority of the Church. He would only accept orders directly from God.⁷⁴ In these circumstances the Bishop was obliged to excommunicate Joseph Kibwetere.⁷⁵

The Movement grows

In time, many believers sold their belongings and joined Kibwetere in his home. This created considerable stress between the members of Kibwetere's family and the newcomers. They decided to move to Kanungu, where Mwerinde's father Paul Kashaku donated land to the movement.⁷⁶ At this time the group received a new member, Fr. Dominic Kataribabo, who later raised himself to the position of bishop.⁷⁷ The ordinary cult members practiced an austere life-style, the leaders, however, lived in more comfortable conditions. The group was not only separated from the rest of the people of Kanungu by the geography of the terrain, but they isolated themselves by building their

⁷⁴ Mujuni, "Who is Joseph Kibwetere?", 22.

⁷⁵ Patrick Mugumya, "Catholic Church had excommunicated Kibwetere." in The New Vision, (March, 21, 2000), 3.

⁷⁶ In the process of gathering material about the Kanungu cult I traveled to South-western Uganda in June 2001 in order to gather first hand information. This "expedition" did not prove to be very informative, since from the beginning I was warned by the Bishop of Kabale diocese Rt. Rev. Mary Robert Gay, that it would be hard to find anybody willing to talk about Kanungu out of fear of being suspected. I managed, however, to visit the infamous Kanungu cult site, and make some interviews.

⁷⁷ Together with Kataribabo were two other priests; Fr. P. Ikazire and J. Kasapurali. All of them were suspended by Bishop Kakubi for being disobedient to him.

own church, school, and cultivated their own fields. It is, therefore not surprising that outsiders did not know what was really going on within the secret group. There were strict rules and regulations to be observed by the members.⁷⁸ The membership grew to over one thousand people from various parts of Uganda. Although the founders and most members were of Catholic origin the cult also welcomed people who belonged to other faiths.⁷⁹

Outsiders seemed to take little interest in the life of this strange group, even though they were spreading the news that the end of the world was near. The government intervened at one time closing the primary school due to poor sanitary and health conditions. The Church made attempts to talk to the leaders but they refused to listen⁸⁰ The date for the end of the world was set for December 31, 1999, however, nothing happened. Demands for a return of property arose among the members. This probably, made the leaders postpone the day, saying it was the Virgin Mary who extended the date for the end of the world. The end came on the 17 March 2000 when hundreds of people lost their lives.⁸¹

⁷⁸ S. Kabazzi-Kisirinya, D. Nkurunziza, and G. Banura, The Kanungu Cult-Saga: Suicide, Murder or Salvation (Kampala: Makerere University, 2000), 26-30.

⁷⁹ Kabazzi-Kisirinya, The Kanungu, 26.

⁸⁰ The Vicar general of Kabale diocese Fr. Narcisio Bagumisiriza, visited the group, and tried to convince them to come back to the Church. Kibwetere would not pay heed to his words.

⁸¹ Following the Kanungu incident, the Uganda Human Rights Commission team made an investigation to assess the causes and implications of the tragedy. Though, at first it looked like a mass suicide, it was later established to be murder. The fact that some days before the tragedy, the cult was selling their property and Kibwetere's farewell note to his wife may suggest a preparation for a group suicide. After the 17 March, when more than 330 people died in flames, other places with buried bodies were found, bringing the total number of deaths to over 1000. Considering that among the victims there were children, who could not conceive the idea of suicide, may also indicate murder. There is not yet a definite answer as to the motives of this crime. The most probable motive is the demands by the members of the cult to have their properties returned, after the prophecy failed to come true. Cf. "Commission investigates Kanungu tragedy" in Your Rights, The Uganda Human rights Commission Magazine, (August 2000), 23-29.

Hence, another doomsday cult made headlines all over the world.⁸²

3.3 *The Teaching and beliefs*

The movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God published a book entitled, “A Timely Message From Heaven: The End of the Present Time”, detailing the beliefs of the movement. Each member was required to read these revelations, (or have it read to them) many times before being allowed to join the group.⁸³ In the introduction it is said that the message is directed to the entire human race, because this order came from Jesus and Mary. The leaders claimed that “Christ Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary say they did not bring a new religion but they came to revive what had been abandoned”.⁸⁴

Initially the message preached by the cult members was not the end of the world but the urgent need to come back to the observance of God’s Ten Commandments. The Movement saw itself as an instrument in rescuing the truth that was being abandoned by the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church was seen as being too liberal in teachings and in the practice of Christian life. Criticism was made in areas where women were given

⁸² As I am writing about Kanungu, East African Standard newspaper has dedicated a special feature (The Big Issue) to dangerous cults: “Doomsday Cults” (Monday, October 15, 2001). They presented the major doomsday cults, including the Kanungu cult. The members of the presented cults either committed suicide or were murdered. The doomsday cults have some particular characteristics in common. I will list them in APPENDIX IV.

⁸³ The book was regarded as more important than the Bible though it was explicitly pronounced. The fact that copies of it were sent to leaders in high position in the church and the government, like Pope John Paul II and the President of Uganda Yoweri K Museveni, shows that it contained urgent messages of great importance.

⁸⁴ A Timely Message From Heaven The End of The Present Times, (Rukungiri: MRTCG, 1996), 17.

too much power, and lay people distributed the Holy Communion, moreover on the hand. All these were seen as evil. People had to turn away from their sinful ways. With time the leaders received new revelations. Most importantly that the end of the world was imminent. People were called to repent, confess their sins and prepare themselves for the end.

Repentance and Renewal

The instructions received in revelations by the leaders were imposed on the life of the members, who were divided into three categories. The first group, the “novices”; newly recruited members were dressed in black. The next group was those who were “initiated”, and instructed on the Ten Commandments, they wore green. Green and white colors distinguished those who were ready to consecrate their entire lives to the movement. The organization of the community centered around twelve apostles, called *Entumwa* (meaning messenger). They were led by Kibwetere, who held the position of the chief apostle.⁸⁵ What was criticized in the Catholic Church was practiced in an extreme form by the cult. For instance, in order not to break the eighth commandment, the members were demanded to keep silence. Sex, even between married couples was prohibited, this was to avoid the breaking of the sixth commandment. Very long prayers and fasting were supposed to be a help in avoiding any temptations.

⁸⁵ Kabazzi-Kisirinya, *The Kanungu*, 17.

The reading of the Bible was discouraged. The leaders had the understanding and only they could explain the Word of God to the members. In fact the Bible was seen as an important tool in validating the “received” messages, and to support their teachings.⁸⁶

The Apocalyptic end

It was predicted that the world would end at the end of the year 2000 and the year 2001 would not come, therefore the following year would be Year One. The prophetic signs of the last days, given in details in the cult’s book, were already taking place; wars in Rwanda and Congo, famine in Sudan and Ethiopia, floods in Mozambique. But not all would be destroyed, since the redeemed would hid in the Ark.⁸⁷ After three days of great darkness only a quarter of the world’s population would survive. Then new earth would come down from heaven, this new earth would contain only good things. It would be a beautiful place with plenty of light.⁸⁸

In summary: Beliefs of the Kanungu cult in contradiction to the Christian faith.

Salvation: Was seen as a result of one’s effort, and could be only mediated through the “chosen ones”; the members of the movement.

Authority: The leaders claimed to be the sole and legitimate holders of God’s will for humanity and did not respect the Church authority represented by the bishops.

⁸⁶ For instance; to prove that AIDS and other diseases were a divine punishment on sinful people they pointed to Leviticus 26:14 –18.

⁸⁷ The movement was seen as an Ark, corresponding to Noah’s Ark. This new ark was prepared by Jesus and Mary for all people at the end of times. Cf. A Timely Message, 161.

⁸⁸ A Timely Message, 59.

4 Theology of Salvation

4.1 Salvation in Cults

From the presented ceases we can see that cults differ from Christianity on some important doctrinal beliefs; like the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Jesus, source of authority. The cults claim to be the only true church providing the only way of salvation. The concept of salvation in NERMs and cults has some similarities but also differences.⁸⁹

Salvation in NERMs, and cults usually includes deliverance from problems of daily life like; sicknesses, family conflicts, financial problems, and also a secure eternal reality, a hope that goes beyond the grave. Shorter observes that for NERMs, salvation belongs only to those who acknowledge Christ as Savior.⁹⁰

While for the NERMs the basis for salvation lies in accepting Jesus as ones personal Savior, the cults bring still other conditions in order to reach salvation. One of the most popular alternative doctrines of salvation in cults is that of salvation by membership.⁹¹ The only saved people are those who are members of a particular group. It is therefore clear that without “belonging” to a group or accepting Jesus as Savior, there is no salvation.

Another alternative to the way of faith is the doctrine of salvation by works, (giving of money, and services to the group or fulfilling various obligations in order to

⁸⁹ See the distinctions made between the understanding of NERM and cult in chapter I.

⁹⁰ Shorter, *New Religious Movements*, 47.

⁹¹ Breese, *Know the Marks of Cults*, 35.

win salvation). This may also be the reason why cult members are so zealous in their proselytizing activities. In the teachings of the Unification Church, God does most of the work in order to achieve his plan of salvation. However, people have their own part to contribute.⁹²

By denying the deity of Christ some cults do not acknowledge his saving role for all humanity.⁹³

4.2 Catholic Church and Salvation

Salvation means the transition from sin and its effect, separation from God, to the state of grace or union with God.⁹⁴ Salvation is a call to glory through Jesus Christ (2 Thes 2:13-14). It is not possible to attain salvation by our own strength. Only God can accomplish this since salvation comes from him alone.⁹⁵ Salvation is a gift from God.

The whole content of the message of Jesus is one of salvation for humankind. We refer to the gospel as the "Message of Salvation" (Acts 13:26), or the "way of salvation" (Acts 16:17). The New Testament teaches that salvation comes to a believer as a result of faith in Jesus Christ. "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Rom 5:1) Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit proclaimed that "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under

⁹² "The providence of restoration cannot be fulfilled by God's power alone, but it is to be fulfilled by man's joint action with God." and "Five percent is only to say that man's responsibility is extremely small compared to God's." *Divine Principle*, 283, 198.

⁹³ Rev. Moon claims that Jesus did not complete his mission of redemption that is why he accepted this call to deliver all humankind from Satan's domain.

⁹⁴ SECAM, *The Catholic Response to New Christian Movements' Objections and Misunderstandings*, (Roma: Tipografia, 1994), 20.

⁹⁵ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 169.

heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) Jesus’ death on the cross provided complete redemption for our sins, physically and spiritually.⁹⁶ Christ accomplished the entire work of our salvation, he is the only mediator and way of salvation.⁹⁷

We can contribute nothing to our salvation, God’s grace cannot be earned. “For by grace you have been saved through faith: and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not because of works, lest any man should boast.” (Eph 2: 8-9) However, our works should demonstrate the genuineness of our faith in Christ. (James 2:17) The Christian shares already in salvation through the reception of the sacrament of Baptism but the fulfillment will be at the second coming of Christ (Phil 3:20).

The understanding of Salvation in the Catholic Church has gone through different stages of development. There was time when the Church’s attitude towards other non-Christian religions was exclusive, similar to those of today’s NERMs.⁹⁸ However, now we proclaim that God’s salvation is offered to all. The Catholic Church does not claim that salvation can be attained through its membership. ⁹⁹

⁹⁶ In Mt 9:6 Jesus forgave sins and healed a paralytic, thus demonstrating that he had the authority to heal both physically and spiritually. The Unification Church attributes to Jesus only spiritual salvation.

⁹⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, The Lord Jesus, (Declaration *Dominus Jesus* on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus and the Church), 20. (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000)

⁹⁸ Shorter, New Religious Movements, 48. The old axiom “Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus”, “ There is no salvation outside the Church” was coined by Cyprian of Carthage (200-258) was not intended to deny the possibility of salvation for the people belonging to non-Christian religions, but to preserve the unity within the Church.

⁹⁹ Possibility of salvation “outside the Church” has been acknowledged in documents of Vatican II Council. “ In ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please him”. Ad Gentes Divinitus, 7. (Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity Vat II)

With God’s assistance, salvation is available also to the people who, without any fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and strive to lead a good life. Lumen Gentium, 16. (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Vat II)

Belonging to a NERM or a cult gives the member the confidence and certainty in his or her salvation. Catholics believe that they are “saved” through the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As pilgrims, on the way, salvation for us is an ongoing process in hope.

5 Conclusion

The two cults described above are very different in their origin and beliefs. The Unification Church originated from a Protestant background, and is an example of an “imported” cult. The MRTCG on the other hand had its roots in the Catholic Church, and came into existence in Africa. Both these groups attracted Christians and many Catholics joined them in spite of many beliefs and demands that were difficult to accept.

In the next chapter we shall consider the reasons why people would join cults and new religious groups, and how cults pose a challenge for the Church.

CHAPTER III

1 The challenge of cults for the Catholic Church

1.1 Introduction

It is a reality that cults exist. It is now necessary to pose the question: what factors in Africa account for the proliferation and spread of NERMs, and especially cults? What attracts people to join a cult? Obviously something of value must be offered in order to attract new members, otherwise nobody would join. Most people who become involved in a cult make a free decision, at least at the beginning.¹⁰⁰

After the African Synod Pope John Paul II spoke of the challenges facing Africa today. These challenges are also a reality for the Church in general.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ It might be true that some members of cults are held against their will and some are “brainwashed”. However, in most cases, there is no evidence of cults or NERMs that actually kidnap recruits or take them against their will.

¹⁰¹ “A serious deepening of faith is thus urgently needed, because the rapid evolution of the society has given rise to new challenges linked to the phenomena notably of family uprooting, urbanization, unemployment, materialistic seductions of all kinds, a certain secularization and an intellectual upheaval caused by the avalanche of insufficiently critical ideas spread by the media.” John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), No. 76, p. 83.

1.2 Factors for joining

Most sociologists of religion seem to agree that people gravitate towards new religious movements and cults when they are disillusioned with life and search for a new identity or seek answers to life's problems.

Section three of the Vatican Report on NERMs and cults, "Pastoral Challenges and Approaches" lists some of the elements in our society that "leave many people confused, uprooted, insecure and therefore vulnerable."¹⁰² We will now examine the factors, which contribute to the growth of cults in the African context.

1.2.1 Social

Contemporary society is rapidly changing, with improved technology, and rural migration to towns and cities in search of a better life contributing to the development of anonymous cities.¹⁰³ As a result, the close-knit, traditional communities are gradually disappearing. Community living had provided a sense of identity, nourishing religious and traditional social values. However, the consequence of urbanization is that these traditional religious and moral values have been substituted with material values.¹⁰⁴ The disintegration of community living has left many people confused struggling to make sense of an insecure world.

¹⁰² The Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, the Secretariat for Non-Christians, the Secretariat for Non-believers, and the Pontifical Council for Culture (May 7, 1986), Sects or New Religious Movements, Pastoral Challenge, (Nairobi: St. Paul Publications Africa), 14.

¹⁰³ By the year 2025 it is expected that 50% people in Africa will live in towns and cities. Cf. Aylward Shorter and Edwin Onyancha, Secularism in Africa, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997), 32.

¹⁰⁴ Shorter, Secularism, 33.

As in all societies, the African family has always been the primary source of education and socialization. The young person was instilled with the moral values considered important to the community: caring for parents, hospitality, generosity, respect for authority, avoidance of stealing or promiscuous behavior. It was these values, which ensured unity and peace within the society. Today, however, the African family has lost contact with many of these traditional values and the positive aspects of their culture. More and more we are confronted with the reality of family breakdown, single motherhood, spousal violence and lack of commitment.

1.2.2 Economic

Poverty and unemployment are two problems that are experienced by the majority of people in Africa.¹⁰⁵ There is a big gap between the rich people living in affluence and the poor who are surviving from one day to the next. Many parents cannot afford to pay for the education of their children and this is one reason why many young people are forced to drop out of school. Eventually these young desperate people are driven into illegal activities, crime and prostitution. Their frustration finds outlets in sporadic eruptions of violence and general insecurity. Millions of people live in the sub-human conditions of slums in big cities. In addition, health services are very expensive, often beyond the capacity of those in need, added to this the AIDS pandemic is making the situation in the continent even more pessimistic.

¹⁰⁵ For instance, in the city of Nairobi about 75% live in low-income areas and more than 40% live below the official poverty line. Urban poverty is more acute and increases at a faster rate than rural poverty Cf. Shorter, Secularism, 59.

1.2.3 Spiritual

People who join cults often justify their decision by saying that now they “have the opportunity to have strong spiritual experience”. In Quinn’s opinion the “sheep are spiritually hungry” that is why they look for other pastures outside the Catholic Church.¹⁰⁶ The prayers offered in our churches are unattractive and dull. Our faith is hardly noticed in daily life, while in cults, members fully commit their lives to what they believe. It is not easy to satisfy the spiritual needs of people. Some like to cling to the traditional forms of liturgy (e.g. Kanungu), seeking mystical experiences and visions. Others need spontaneity and a lot of music and dancing in order to feel like they have prayed.

1.2.4 The appeal of the cults in this context

We have presented a background, which provides good conditions for NERMs and cults to proliferate. There are many preachers, and prophets who are very sensitive to the plight of the people and are always ready to offer answers to their problems. They are very quick to recognize what people need at a particular moment.

- a) Loneliness, a product of our civilization, is replaced by the warmth and love of a welcoming community of brothers and sisters. Therefore, people from disrupted families find new homes.

¹⁰⁶ Richard J. Quinn, Who Are Stealing Our Sheep?, (Limuru: Kolbe Press, 1997), 13.

b) This new community offers security and provides identity for an individual.¹⁰⁷

c) Young people find inspiration and meaning for their lives, there is also the prospect of becoming a leader in the society and the church. Moreover, young idealistic people are often willing to follow a leader who promises good results.

d) There is a promise of success and a life without financial difficulties. Often the new community supports those who are joining the group.

e) Cults offer a religious experience, unknown before; they play the role of saviors in a world in need of salvation. Belonging to a community of faith enables people to cope better with the difficulties they encounter.

The “offers” of cults listed above are by no means exhaustive. Different groups appeal to different people. Not all people who join cults are poor or uneducated, though it appears that the most susceptible to the influence of cults are young people and women, this is not always a rule since people in their middle age and above also, become members of cults.

1.3 Impact of cults on families

The family is the fundamental unit of society. If we cannot establish the ideal in our homes, there will be no hope of creating an ideal society, nation or ideal world. The family is the school of love and the place where the love of God is seen expressed in human relationships.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ This is a factor, which attracts many women providing them with more recognition in a society where gender equality is minimal. For instance it is easier for a women to become a leader in a religious group (even without proper training) than to achieve a position in other areas of public life. Moreover, women find encouragement, “empowerment”, to better manage their family difficulties.

¹⁰⁸ From the general literature of the Unification Church.

It would seem these words come straight from the teachings of the Catholic Church about the value of family, yet their source is from a “cult”.¹⁰⁹ To say that “cults” are anti-family would be a gross misunderstanding.

The Vatican document on cults and NERMs, however, sees as “the most immediate pastoral problem”, how to deal with a member of a Catholic family who has become involved in a sect.¹¹⁰ This concern is not without foundation. Entering into a cult changes a person’s former values replacing them with the values of the group. As we have seen the leader’s strong influence, and group pressure have a strong impact on the relations one has with those “outside”. Very often old friends are alienated and family ties are usually reduced. In some cases when the parents (or one of them) join a cult the children have no choice but to follow them.¹¹¹ The absolute obedience to the leader often calls for a big sacrifice. If it means giving up friends, girlfriends or even one’s family, for the “Messiah” or for a group’s beliefs then this is of greater value than family.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Indeed the teaching about family love and faithfulness is one of the strong points, which attract many young people to the movement.

¹¹⁰ Sects or New Religious Movements: Pastoral Challenge, (Introduction, 1.3), 6.

¹¹¹ I learned of a young woman (19) who perished in the Kanungu cult because she followed her mother. Since the mother had sold the property the girl, even though she was not a member, was forced to stay with the cult members.

¹¹² To show how demanding the total commitment to the group we can take the example of Archbishop Milingo. A leader of the Unification Church pointed to the risk that Milingo took in order to receive the Blessing. As the speaker put it “ He knew that by betraying the pope he could be assassinated”. (These words also indicate the wrong image he had of the Catholic Church.)

1.4 "Brain washing" myth or reality?

Other terms used to refer to "brainwashing" are: "thought reform", "coercive persuasion", "mind control". The term was used originally in China in the early part of last century.¹¹³

From the beginning of 1970s, when "strange" new religions began to appear in America and Europe the theory of "brainwashing" became the most popular understanding of what happens when a young person becomes a member of a cult.

Proponents of the theory of cult induction, The Anti-cult Movement (ACM), have insisted that members of cults are subjected to a similar process though obviously not identical to prisoners of war. Some psychologists who specialize in the mind-control field also support the ACM's conclusions that the evangelization techniques used by cults are forceful and deceptive.¹¹⁴

113 The idea of brainwashing came out of the misunderstanding of the Chinese indoctrination program directed at American soldiers during the Korean War (1950). Some prisoners of war defected, and proclaimed anti-American statements. These defections resulted from the Chinese utilizing the same methods of "thought reform", as prescribed by Mao Tse Tung on their own citizens, especially in universities in order to effect a change in the individual's political beliefs. Edward Hunter, a British journalist, coined the term "brainwashing" to describe this process of "mind control by Chinese communist.

114 "Deprogramming" is a method, used by ACM; making a cult victim think for him/herself since cult members are seen as stripped of their capacity of autonomous thinking. In order to help this process big amount of information about the tactics and practices of the cult is given.

The comparison between cult recruitment and brainwashing techniques used by communist China has been a disputed issue in relation to the study of cults.¹¹⁵

Melton is of the opinion that it is unrealistic to say that “brainwashing” is at the source of all conversions to cults. Even though, a significant public belief in cult-brainwashing remains, the academic community (including scholars from psychology, sociology, and religious studies), have shared an almost unanimous consensus that the coercive persuasion, brainwashing thesis is without scientific merit.¹¹⁶

Others support him by pointing to the facts that it should not be overlooked that though, the initiative may come from the recruiter, the person who joins a cult is very often an active seeker. Moreover, the majority of young people do not submit to the allegedly irresistible techniques, and many of those who join leave of their own accord, when their continued membership is no longer a positive experience.¹¹⁷

Social scientists who study religious groups do not reject the general position that religious groups are capable of having considerable influence over their members. Indeed,

¹¹⁵ In support of their claims defenders of “brainwashing” present the methods by which “thought reform” is used in cults.

a) Gaining control over the person: This is done by convincing a person to donate major amounts of time and effort to the group. b) Reducing one’s self-esteem: Life outside the group is portrayed as less meaningful. (e.g. We are of the lineage of Satan and we cannot return to God’s lineage without the help of the true “Messiah”, or the Kanungu’s, “Ark of Noah”; this is only for those who are chosen.) c) A closed system of logic that keeps the person from asking questions. The participants do not have much time for themselves to reflect on the teachings.

d) Some information about beliefs or behavior are withheld from a recruit until he/she reaches a certain stage.

e) With time potential recruits conform to the behavioral restrictions and eventually make a permanent commitment to remain in the cult. Kent Burtner, “Outline for a Talk on Cults, Thought Reform and Mind Abuse”, in Cults, Sects and the New Age, James J. LeBar. (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1989), 182.

¹¹⁶ Gordon J. Melton, “Brainwashing and the Cults: The Rise and Fall of a Theory”, <http://www.cesnur.org/testi/melton.htm>

¹¹⁷ John A. Saliba, Perspectives on New Religious Movements, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 87.

most argue that the “influence” is universal in human cultures. Bromley and Shupe are of the opinion that the techniques used in “cults” are not different in kind from those used in every sector of human society.¹¹⁸ The difference may lie in greater intensity, persistence, duration and scope. The concept of “brainwashing will almost certainly remain a central component of the controversy about cults.

Whether one supports the theory of “brainwashing” or not, it cannot be denied that many people have become victims of a persuasive cult leader. With great appeal and dynamism he/she “hypnotizes” his/hers followers to the extent that the members can no longer make a decision on their own and at the end they constantly refer to what the leader says. In extreme cases they are ready to give up their lives for the “truth” proclaimed by the leader. One must also be aware that, those who believe themselves to be above any influence may be even more vulnerable, since if they do not believe that this could happen to them, they may be caught off guard.¹¹⁹

2 The Challenges of cults

The Catholic Church does not see cults or NERMs as a threat or “anathema”, but rather as a pastoral challenge.¹²⁰ Some of the characteristic, which cults have in common (listed in the first chapter), indicate to us the areas where the Church may be challenged by cults.

¹¹⁸“ Cult Group Controversies: Conceptualizing ‘cult’ and ‘sect’”,
<http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/cultsect/concult.htm>

¹¹⁹ Experts of advertising companies know that our minds can be influenced in a subtle ways without us realizing.

¹²⁰ Sects or New Religious Movements, 8.

The first challenge for us is the need to *understand* in which way the NERMs and cults meet the needs of the people in Africa.¹²¹

2.1 Understanding and addressing the reality of Africa

We have said that in the social, economic, and spiritual context of Africa today we should try to understand the development of NERMs and cults. Though, cults do not address the root problems in the society, they take advantage of them for their benefit. In fact social ills are like fuel that contribute to the running of NERMs and cults. The Church therefore, must constantly address those obstacles for the protection of human life.

2.1.1 African religious world.

The Church in Africa has already realized that in order to present Christ to its people it first has to integrate into its teaching the aspects of the religious worldview of Africans. For instance, the problem of evil (causes and remedies), healing, supernatural interventions, all these are skillfully taken up by the prophets of NERMs and cults, unfortunately not sufficiently by the Church.

2.2 Prayer and Worship

The manner of worship in the NERMs and cults is what attracts many people, especially the youth. The services invite the congregation to spontaneous participation. Their

¹²¹ Meeting for African Collaboration (MAC), Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), *New Christian Movements in Africa and Madagascar*, (Nairobi: St. Paul Publications Africa, 1993), 21.

entertaining nature draws young people attracted by amplified music and modern songs.¹²² A lively atmosphere is created where people are united in clapping, dancing, shouting and singing, it is a real celebration, that allows for the expression of feelings and emotions. Also, NERMs offer experiences of prayer in tongues and most importantly, miracles and healings of all sorts.¹²³

2.3 The Place of the Bible

New Religious Movements appear to have only one source of authority, the Bible.¹²⁴ The members are encouraged to bring Bibles to the services and follow when the preacher refers to a particular passage. The easiness with which the leader uses the Bible may be very impressive at first contact. Nobody dares to oppose or imagine that the quotations are taken out of context, but frequently the “knowledge” of the Bible is often limited to a number of memorized texts. This, however, does not change the fact that the Bible has a special place in the lives of the believers.

2.4 The sense of belonging

NERMs, and especially cults, challenge us with their emphasis on the importance of the group. Their strength, motivations, and commitments, come from the sense of belonging to a group, where they find support in a family of brothers and sisters. In fact this is what

¹²² Shorter, *New Religious Movements*, 76.

¹²³ It should be noted that people’s spiritual needs differ. That is why some groups are more attractive to different people. The Kanungu cult was very conservative, with “pre-Vatican II” types of liturgy. However, it offered the possibility of visions of the Virgin Mary, and this appealed to many of the followers.

¹²⁴ Though, a cult has usually a book with “new revelations”, it uses the Bible to give credibility to the “newly revealed truth”.

people are lacking in our big parishes of "anonymous Christians". Besides a sense of belonging, cults invite members to participate in the life of the group. A member feels that he or she plays a significant part in a common mission and this in turn makes him/her feel important and wanted.

2.5 Doctrinal deviations

One of the characteristics of cults is the frequent change in their doctrines. New situations, and updated revelations of the leaders easily alter the doctrines of cults.¹²⁵ There is then the problem that cults often deviate from the Christian doctrine about God, Christ, Salvation, and authority.¹²⁶ There are Christians who are not able to see the obvious deviations.¹²⁷ It is therefore, a priority that they deepen their faith by studying more the teachings of the Church.

2.6 Helping those involved in a cult

The Vatican document on sects and New Religious Movements sees helping a Catholic family whose member has become involved in cult, as a "most immediate pastoral problem".¹²⁸ We have seen that as a result of deeper involvement with a cult, a repression of

¹²⁵ According to Breese we should not talk of doctrine in cults. This term meaning; a systematic presentation and understanding of truth, applies only to organized Christianity. "Doctrine" in the cults is "sub-rational set of disconnected thoughts and practices that only serve to confuse the mind and the emotions as well." Cf. Breese, Know the Marks of Cults, 57.

¹²⁶ Of course, not all of these contradictions to the Christian faith, have to be present in the beliefs of a cult. There might be other areas that are incompatible with the teaching of the Church.

¹²⁷ In my contact with members of the Unification Church I have found that some of the young people (claiming to be Catholics or former Catholics) are comfortable to be followers of Rev. Moon and at the same time go to the church and receive sacraments. At times they justify their behavior simply by saying; "When among Romans do as Romans do". Apparently, Archbishop Milingo did not see anything that would be non-Christian, when joining the Unification Church.

¹²⁸ Sects or New Religious Movements, 6.

individuality and a change of personality can take place. If a member of a Catholic family becomes involved in a cult, the family is usually at a loss as to how to deal with their son or daughter. Though it appears, that in Africa it is common to change one's religion, there are many families for which this is a difficult experience. These families need help and the priest or lay leaders in the parish are not always prepared to handle such problems. (The Knungu cult could serve here as an example of this challenge.)

2.7 Conclusion

Thus, we have presented some of the factors that are responsible for the presence of cults and NERMs in Africa pointing to the "offers" that attract new converts to these groups. Cults and NERMs are not perceived by the Church as a threat but certainly they pose a challenge in many areas. These challenges, if faced and recognized, can be seen as an opportunity and inspiration for the spiritual and ecclesial growth of Christianity in Africa.

In the next chapter we shall attempt to look at some possible responses to these challenges. "The task is not to give African Christianity an African face, but an African soul".¹²⁹

¹²⁹ (SECAM), New Christian Movements, 22.

CHAPTER IV

1 Christian Response to Cults and NERMs

1.1 Introduction

The Catholic Church is open and ready for ecumenical dialogue with other Christian denominations. This dialogue is not based on polemics or apologetical discourses among Christians; instead, the Church is trying to bring grater unity among other Christian Churches. We recognize that God's message of Christ is not limited to the Catholic Church. Being open to other Christian denominations we can share religious experiences and collaboration.¹³⁰ In dialogue the two parties enrich each other. The Church, however, admits that there is little or no possibility of dialogue when it comes to cults, because the latter are closed to dialogue.¹³¹ In fact, they can be seen as posing "a serious obstacle to ecumenical education and effort wherever they are active."¹³² This attitude is not aimed at condemnation, it is clear that the

¹³⁰ Even though theological dialogue with cults may be difficult or impossible to reach, sharing in religious experience and collaboration may be a good starting point for other forms of dialogue like dialogue of religious experience or dialogue of action.

¹³¹ Sects or New Religious Movements, 20.

¹³² Sects or New Religious Movements, 20.

Church recognizes every person's basic right to religious freedom.¹³³

The Catholic Church has an obligation to teach the truth, and this obligation implies that the phenomena of cults or NERMs should not be dismissed lightly. We have to face their challenge and see it as an opportunity for "a greater pastoral efficacy".¹³⁴ The Church has already begun to face up to this challenge in various ways. In this chapter we shall point out the areas, where the Church is responding, and where there is still much to be done.

1.2 Sense of Community

As a member of a cult, people are made to feel special and chosen. Cults seem to be genuinely caring for their members and stretch out a consoling hand to those who are experiencing crisis. They listen, and share their own experience of how their lives have been transformed since they joined the new community. The beginner is offered affection, kindness, special favors, and attention.

In December 1973 the AMECA Bishops, (before the coming of cults and NERMs), emphasized that in order to build a vibrant Church it has to be founded on Small Christian Communities (SCC), in both rural and urban areas.¹³⁵

133 Vatican II, Declaration on Religious Liberty, Dignitatis Humanae, (7 December, 1965), 2.

Article 18 of The United Nation Declaration of Human Rights states that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his/hers religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest his/hers religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." The same right is also acknowledged by the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, Article 8; "Everyone is free to hold his/her own beliefs, and is free to practice his/her own religion, as long as it is with respect for others."

134 Sects or New Religious Movements, 20.

135 "Church life must be based on the communities in which everyday life and work take place: those basic and manageable social groupings whose members can experience real inter-personal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging, both in living and working." AMECEA Plenary Conference, "Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s", AFER 16 (1974): 10.

A Small Christian Community should be the place, within the bigger parish community, where each member cares for the needs of others. It is the experience of belonging to a loving community, which is often desired by people lost in the larger society. SCCs offer help at different levels of life: intimacy, friendship, involvement in social issues (Justice & Peace), and a sense of belonging. Many needs, which cults and NERMs seem to satisfy, can be met by SCC. People come together as a community to pray, share the Word of God, and occasionally celebrate the Eucharist. When one is sick the community visits the person and prays for him/her. Also Christians who are in difficult material situations are supported by their more affluent brothers and sisters.

A big problem arises in universities and secondary schools where many young people are lonely and lost in the midst of large student numbers. They are very ready to join a group that offers warmth and friendship, an ideal opportunity for cults. Though, SCC are usually found in big parishes, there is an urgent need to establish them in those places where young people are facing daily challenges.

Suggestions:

- * In many places SCCs are known or understood as groups only for women. There is a need for educative courses about the role of SCCs in the parish and their inclusive nature.
- * Organizing seminars and instructions on the practical organization and functioning of SCCs.
- * The SCCs in Africa are rather like prayer groups, and their pastoral self-care is often neglected. They need to develop a system of networking with the pastoral team in the parish in order to harmonize their efforts in dealing with issues like eradication of poverty, or counteracting unemployment.

* Already existing youth organizations in high schools and universities may serve as the basis of forming SCCs among the younger generation.

1.3 The importance of Bible studies

The Catholic Church encourages Christians to read the Bible, but in reality, many ordinary Catholics do not have much knowledge of this book. NERMs and cults have a simple explanation in regard to the understanding of the Bible; “The Word of God is for all, and therefore all men and women are able to understand it”. This approach leads to a lot of abuses and misinterpretation of God’s Word. Interpretation of the Bible is of vital importance, since the manner in which biblical texts are interpreted has immediate consequences for the personal and community relationship with God, and also closely connected with the Church’s mission.¹³⁶ Christians need to be helped in the use and interpretation of the Scripture. There is a need for greater understanding of the biblical tradition of inspired writings. This can encourage people to make the Bible more central in their lives.

Suggestions:

- * A greater need for biblical usage during sermons in a catechetical manner.
- * Greater availability of simple literature about the Bible.
- * Weekend or (Sunday) Bible seminars to be organized at the parish level. The leaders should be particularly encouraged to attend them.

¹³⁶ Address of John Paul II and Document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications-Africa, 1994), 8.

1.4 Catechesis

Many Catholics regard the last sacrament of Christian Initiation - Confirmation as the completion of their religious education, instead of the beginning of an active life in the church. Knowledge of their faith remains immature confined to initial catechesis for Confirmation. I was struck by a comment of a leader in the Unification Church; "In our church we do not preach but *teach*." This is something, which needs to be reconsidered in the Catholic Church. He pointed to the lack of well-trained Christians in our Church.

Catechesis is necessary in order to point out the differences, between cults and NERMs, which claim doctrinal or structural similarity with Christianity. According to Breese "The chief single reason for the success of the cults is the spiritual naiveté on the part of many."¹³⁷ We need to discuss difficult topics such as eschatology and salvation founded on fundamental truths. Many of these questions may look simple, but many do not have answers. Our catechesis should make people aware of who they are, the meaning of their lives and also stress the virtues of honesty, fidelity, and responsibility in Christian life.

Suggestions:

- * Utilizing the parish bulletin in order to impart the Church's doctrinal teachings.
- * Weekend instructions on Christian doctrine
- * Adult education programs for parents
- * Preaching needs to stress some burning and relevant questions regarding our faith.
- * Youth and adult retreats are an opportunity for discussing faith issues and the teachings of the Church.

¹³⁷ Breese, Know the Marks of Cults, 115.

* Directed retreats in life, as means of growing in, and knowledge of one's faith.

* Encouraging and strengthening young people (students in colleges and universities)

in their Christian convictions. Questions need to be answered in an educative and formative manner.

1.5 Formation of leaders

The socio-economic and political situation in Africa creates a lot of confusion among the people. The causes of such problems are not clear, and neither are there quick solutions. This is an ideal environment for the rise of a charismatic type of leader.¹³⁸ A leader like this becomes a prophet who perceives the needs of the people and offers solutions to their problems. The apparent "supernatural" abilities of this leader prevent people from seeing some of the hidden agendas of the "prophet", which are often motivated by power, money, and prestige.

In contrast the true attitude of a Christian leader should be one of service not dominion. (Cf. Mk 10:42-44) A cult leader is not seeking to offer service to the community, but wants people to submit to him/her. The Church leaders are not well informed on the nature of cults, and this issue is often absent from their busy agendas. They need to be informed about the positive and negative aspects of the cult-phenomenon. Cult-like attitudes and practices may find their way into some groups and movements in the Church. It is

¹³⁸ The term "charismatic" means that the leader appears to have magic-like qualities: a magnetic presence, an ability to convince, which goes beyond his/her actual words and a capacity for arousing enthusiasm and trust. Cf. Marie-France Perrin Jassy, "Leadership", *Spearhead*, Nos. 153-154, 70.

therefore important that the Church leaders be vigilant in order to notice and correct them from the beginning.

Suggestions:

* Need for involvement of lay people in leadership positions in the Church.¹³⁹

* Training of counselors who are competent in helping young people with their problems, and dealing with family crisis.

* Need for cooperation among Church leaders (on a national and diocesan levels) in order to prepare a common response to the teachings of cults.

* Christians have to be educated about the different aspects of cults, which are often deceptive in their methods. Lack of knowledge on this subject is one of the reasons why some people join cults.¹⁴⁰

2 Christian attitude to cult members

Some critics of cults can be very negative and judgmental in their approaches. They believe that cults often twist the truth of the Gospel, denying the salvific value of Jesus' death; they are called "deceivers" and "antichrist".¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Vatican II recognizes the role of lay people's apostolate in the Church and in the world. Different fields of apostolic action are open to the laity. The Council encourages more involvement of women in various sectors of the Church's apostolate. Vatican II, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (1965), 9.

¹⁴⁰ The Vatican Document of May 1986, recommends that "it is necessary to inform the faithful, especially the young, to put them on their guard, and even to enlist professional help counseling, legal protection, etc," Sects or New Religious Movements, 19.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Breese, Know the Marks of Cults, 118.

How should we react to such arguments? Cults are usually aware of not being accepted in the society.¹⁴² So, the easiest approach may be to ignore them and avoid talking to them due to fear. There may be a tendency to be rude and impatient, when the cult members are stubborn, and aggressive in their proselytizing mission. Because they are trained in their proselytizing methods, they tend to use deception in their arguments. Young people, who are not confident in their Christian faith, may easily be led astray. Some authors are very definite in their positions. Breese's answers to those who ask about attending meetings organized by cultists, or even reading their religious literature, it is "a thousand times no".¹⁴³ However, hostility should be avoided regarding cult members, they are not enemies to be conquered. If their teaching, despite their claims, is not Christian, then we should treat them as we would treat other non-Christians.

A useful principle is given in the first letter of St. Peter. "Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence;" (1 Pet 3:15) As Christians and Catholics there is a need to be concerned about those who are ensnared by cults, since many of them turned to cults after failing to find what they needed in the Catholic Church. The Church needs to develop within itself, and its communities, the mind of Christ in this regard; trying to understand "where they are", and, reaching out to them in Christian love.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps this *understanding* is the

¹⁴² When approaching cult members we need to keep in mind that when the cults feel persecuted, they are more convinced of their rightness. In fact, the bond they feel is only intensified when the cult is under attack as their perception is; "The forces of evil are trying to overturn the forces of good". Cf. Hubert Beck, The Cults. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), 28.

¹⁴³ Breese, Know the Marks of cults, 116.

¹⁴⁴ Sects or New Religious Movements, 20.

starting point in addressing the question of cults. According to Beck the meeting ground is their own self-understanding.¹⁴⁵

Cults and NERMs give us a real chance to be witnesses to Jesus. In order for the witness to be effective there are some “Don’ts” (things to be avoided): **Don’t** be hostile, be gentle. **Don’t** slam the door in their face, be firm. **Don’t** argue, be respectful. **Don’t** show anxiety, be comfortable with your faith. **Don’t** rely on yourself alone, pray for God’s Spirit.¹⁴⁶

Be loving: True Christian witness is rooted Christ’s commandment of love not in the Canon Law¹⁴⁷. Out of this love should spring a real concern for cult members. Christians should see them as people in need of Christ not just as weird and strange. Christ died for all people there is no exclusion.

2.1 Personal experience and reflections

When I met members of the Unification Church for the first time I thought they belonged to one of the Protestant Churches. I talked with them without any prejudice. After sharing about it with my friends, their reaction was “be careful with this cult”. Our prejudice can be contagious but in spite of the warnings I wanted to know more about these people and their beliefs. Each time I would visit them in their office I met some young people evidently they were also interested in this group. With time I made friends among them and nobody was surprised to see me there. From my experience I realized there were certain points that

¹⁴⁵ Beck, *The Cults*, 36.

¹⁴⁶ Beck, *The Cults*, 55-56.

¹⁴⁷ Fr. Christopher Businge of Makiro parish referred to canon 1374 stating the penalty for the “rebellious” group like the Kanungu cult. Matthias Mugisha, “New Cult Sweeps Rukungiri”, in *Sunday Vision*, (March 19, 2000), 3.

were incompatible with Christian beliefs. I wanted to understand them knowing that I cannot accept their position. My interest in them was taken as a sign that I might be considering joining them, however, I tried to avoid giving them this impression.

My contact with the Moonies was perceived by some as dangerous. When I shared about them with missionary friends they were joking that I may be “brainwashed”, or join them. Some would question my motives for associating with this type of people. After a visit to the Formation House of the Missionaries of Africa my Moonie friends were very impressed by the way they were received. They were not criticized, or condemned, but felt welcomed. I realized that *witness* was more effective than convincing arguments.

I have realized that it is not easy to dialogue with cult members. An important attitude of every dialogue is the willingness to listen to the other party. This is difficult for those who are convinced that they hold the whole “truth”. Very often our discussions would turn into a monologue on their part. I tried to respect their position but made it clear that I did not accept their teaching on many important points. My intention was not to argue with them, or try to convert them, perhaps it was theirs. I have learnt that arguments or attempts to discourage them have just the opposite effect of strengthening and making them even more determined in their convictions, I preferred to build our “dialogue” on human relations and common areas like looking for the solutions to problems in our society.

In March 2000 a beautiful part of Uganda became known to the world not because of its beauty but because of a doomsday-cult, the Kanungu cult. Presently many people are involved in investigating the tragedy, others try to forget what happened. In Kanungu there is a strange, perhaps understandable silence. The place where once lived a group of people, united in hope for a better life is now overgrown with bushes and it would be frightening to

go there alone. We may speculate whether, this tragedy could have been averted. Perhaps our concern now should be more to learn from what happened so that it will not be repeated in the future.

The research for this topic has been in many ways a challenge for me. Even though I would like to encourage Christians to have a more positive attitude towards their “strange” friends who are members of cults or NERMs, I find that deep within me I am puzzled at the beliefs and practices of these groups. Even though, I am convinced that we should show concern towards them, it is not easy to make the step. Perhaps our prejudices can be overcome more easily if we remember that they are people with needs common to all and that Jesus died for all of us.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Gal 5:1)

There are two common attitudes towards new religious movements: fear, or attraction. Both attitudes can be dangerous, exhibiting a weak personal faith. There is obviously a need to develop a mature approach towards them.

Perhaps the anxiety about the cults that we can observe in so many Catholics is a reflection of the immaturity, and shortcomings of their own faith. If we look more deeply into the beliefs and activities of the cults like the Moonies, or the Kanungu cult we will be able to see clearly the areas where we fail as Christians. The people who join cults look for something that they cannot find in the mainstream churches. In my opinion the search is more concerned with spiritual rather than material gain. People look for answers to their existential problems, seeking meaning in their life.

Since the time of Vatican II the Catholic Church has been very much committed to the great causes of the world, i.e. the environment, Justice and Peace, etc. While these are important there is the danger that the message of Christ is forgotten thus forcing people to seek him elsewhere. On the other hand there are many people within the Catholic Church who would like to see the church involved only in heavenly matters, despising any relation to the material sphere. They also fail to deliver Christ to the people. Caught in the false world of their certainties: rules, rites, sacraments, they fail to present Christ in a meaningful way.

If the Catholic Church does not strike this balance between spiritual and material, people will see no other option than joining NERMs and cults.

This paper stresses the need for Christians and the Catholic Church to start developing positive attitudes towards the cults and sects. This is crucial if we are to proclaim effectively the gospel of Christ. We can draw many lessons from the new religious movements. They are our brothers and sisters who challenge us to truly know our faith, and to present Christ in an attractive and meaningful way. Also we need to integrate into our catechetics the issues that are relevant to peoples lives. They teach us how to build a spirit of community among the believers, how to be courageous enough to make a faith commitment and to bear witness to ones faith in public life. There are many Catholics who have been taught in catechetics that their faith is just a personal matter between us and God. These people are most likely to be potential victims of the cults.

At the same time I would like to stress that religion should be liberating, not enslaving. The negative elements in the teachings of cults need to be challenged. Secrecy, psychological manipulation, economic exploitation cannot be tolerated. In extreme cases there is a need for the intervention of the government to prevent the abuse of religious freedom. On our part we can contribute to the observance of this basic human right, by interaction with these new religious movements. Their isolation will not help, but on the contrary will allow the cults to develop their negative elements. We can influence these groups if we relate with them and try to engage in some forms of dialogue. This contact between mainstream churches, NERMs and cults can be of great benefit to all sides.



Archbishop Milingo and Maria S
during the wedding ceremony
performed by Rev. Moon and his
(seated beside the couple)
On Sunday May 27th 2001 in New

Rev. Mr. and Mrs. Moon
Leaders of the Unification Church



The Kanungu Cult Leaders:
Ceredonia Mwerinde, Joseph
Kibwetere and Dominic Katariba

(Photo credit: The New Vision)

APPENDIX III

The Family Pledge

- 1. Our family pledges to seek our original homeland and establish an ideal of creation, the Kingdom of God on Earth and in Heaven, by centering on true Love.**
- 2. Our family pledges to represent and become central to Heaven and Earth by attending to God and the True Parents, we will perfect the dutiful way of filial piety in our family, patriotism in our nation, saints in our world, and divine sons and daughters in Heaven and Earth, by centering on True Love.**
- 3. Our family pledges to perfect the Four Great Realms of Heart, the Three Great Kingships, The realm of Royal Family, by centering on True Love.**
- 4. Our family pledges to build the universal family encompassing Heaven and Earth, which is God's ideal of creation, and perfect the world of freedom, peace, unity and happiness, by centering on True Love.**
- 5. Our family pledges to strive everyday to advance the unification of the spirit world and physical world as subject and object partners, by centering on True Love.**
- 6. Our family pledges to embody God and True Parents; we will perfect a family which moves heavenly fortune and conveys heaven's blessing to our community, by centering on True Love.**
- 7. Our family pledges to perfect a world based on the culture of the heart, which is rooted in the original lineage, through living for the sake of others, by centering on True Love.**
- 8. Our family pledges, as we enter the Complete Testament Age, to achieve the ideal oneness of God and humankind in love through absolute faith, absolute love and absolute obedience, thereby perfecting the realm of liberation of the Kingdom of God on Earth and in Heaven, by centering on True Love.**

APPENDIX IV

Common signs of destructive, doomsday cults¹⁴⁸

There is no objective, precise checklist of danger signs to be aware of in religious groups. However, it is possible to list some of the features basing on the studies of some cults that ended up in suicide or killing. Among the characteristics there are some that are found in legitimate religious groups. It is when the “symptoms” become extreme that one should become concerned.

Apocalyptic beliefs:

The leader’s preaching concentrates heavily on the impending end of the world. The prophecy of an imminent doom that will be preceded by frightening disasters.

The group is presented as those who are to survive the terrible events that are about to befall the rest of the world. The members belong to the chosen ones, the elite. They have a major role to play at the end of time.

Charismatic leadership:

They are led by a strong charismatic leader/s (male or female).

The leader has often an authoritarian power over the followers. The members are manipulated psychologically and emotionally. There might also be physical and sexual abuse.

¹⁴⁸ “Common signs of destructive, doomsday cults” in The East African Standard, (Monday, October 15, 2001), 2, 4.

Social encapsulation:

They are a small religious group, not an established denomination.

The group (or at least the core members) lives a kind of communal life often isolated from the rest of the society.

There is often extreme paranoia within the group. They believe that there is danger and that they are being closely monitored and persecuted by governments, or people outside the group. Those “outside” are perceived as evil, belonging to the devil.

There is strict secrecy about the life and activities in the group. Information and contacts from outside the cult are severely curtailed.

In some cases the group leaders may gather weapons (guns, poison), in the pretext of defending the members from enemies of their faith.

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