HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

MODERN RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND SECTS: A SOCIO-SPIRITUAL ANALYSIS

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doi:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23694859

Annotation. This article analyzes the causes of the emergence of modern religious movements and sects, their socio-psychological characteristics, their impact on social life, and the need to study them from a scientific point of view. The article reveals the different aspects of such concepts as “new religious movement”, “sect”, “cult”, “religious group”, “radical movement”. It also highlights how globalization, the Internet, migration, spiritual vacuum and social instability affect the spread of modern religious movements. The study substantiates the need to distinguish between the principle of religious freedom, legitimate religious activity and destructive movements that threaten the security of society.

Keywords: Modern religious movements, sect, new religious movement, religious freedom, destructive movement, globalization, religious consciousness, spiritual security, religious tolerance, radicalization.

Introduction

In today’s era of globalization, religion remains an important spiritual factor in the lives of individuals and society. Alongside traditional religious institutions, the world is also witnessing the activity of new religious movements, independent religious groups, syncretic currents, and—in some instances—sects of a destructive nature. In academic literature, the term "new religious movement" is often employed as a neutral concept, serving as an alternative to terms with negative connotations such as "cult" or "sect." According to *Britannica*, the term "new religious movement" is generally used to describe religious groups that have emerged in recent centuries or have taken shape on the periphery of established religious traditions.[1]

Historically, the term "sect" referred to groups that had broken away from major religious traditions, possessing their own distinct doctrines, leadership structures, and internal rules. In contemporary sociology, however, this term is used with caution, as it frequently carries a pejorative meaning. Regarding the term "cult," *Britannica* notes that modern researchers tend to prefer the term "new religious movement," as the word "cult" often carries a derogatory connotation.[2]

Main Body

The emergence of contemporary religious movements is linked to several factors. First, as a result of globalization, various cultures, beliefs, and philosophical perspectives are converging. Second, the internet and social media have accelerated the spread of religious ideas. Third, factors such as urbanization, migration, social isolation, and a sense of spiritual emptiness make some individuals more susceptible to the influence of new religious groups. Fourth, a decline in trust toward traditional religious institutions prompts some people to seek alternative spiritual or existential paths. Contemporary religious movements vary in their content. Some arise as movements for renewal within the framework of traditional religions. Others take the form of syncretic currents that blend

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elements from different religions, philosophical viewpoints, mystical concepts, and modern psychological ideas. Yet another category of movements is characterized by features such as the veneration of a strong, central leader, strict internal discipline, isolation from the outside world, and the application of psychological pressure on the minds of members. In such cases, these groups may be classified not merely as ordinary religious organizations, but as destructive sects. From a scholarly perspective, it is incorrect to immediately categorize any new religious movement as a dangerous group. This is because religious freedom is a fundamental principle of a democratic society. Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights establishes that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion—a right that includes the freedom to change one's religion or belief, and to manifest it, either alone or in community with others.[3] Therefore, a primary task for the state and society is to clearly define the boundary between legitimate religious activity—including freedom of conscience—and destructive activity that poses a threat to societal security.

The socio-psychological characteristics of contemporary religious movements are also of significant importance. In many cases, such groups capitalize on factors like an individual's spiritual needs, the search for meaning in life, a desire for emotional support, or the wish to find one's place in society. Young people, socially vulnerable groups, individuals living in the context of migration, and those facing family or psychological difficulties are particularly susceptible to the influence of such movements. For this reason, religious-educational upbringing, a sound belief system, critical thinking, and the development of an "information culture" serve as important preventive measures. According to research by the Pew Research Center, significant shifts in religious affiliation are occurring in the 21st century: in some regions, individuals are changing the religious identity they held in childhood, while in other societies, there is a growing trend of moving away from religious affiliation altogether.[4] These processes create a social environment conducive to the emergence and spread of new religious groups. However, the act of changing one's religion, showing interest in a new faith, or engaging in an independent religious search is not inherently dangerous; the danger primarily arises within groups that employ deception, coercion, psychological pressure, economic exploitation, or the promotion of violence.

Dangerous manifestations of modern sects can be identified by several characteristics. First, the leader of such a group is presented as the sole possessor of absolute truth. Second, members are expected to offer unquestioning obedience rather than exercise critical thinking. Third, a hostile attitude toward the outside world is cultivated within the group. Fourth, the personal lives, financial resources, and social connections of members are subjected to strict control. Fifth, psychological pressure or threats may be employed against an individual who wishes to leave the group. When such characteristics are present, a religious movement takes on a destructive nature in relation to society. In the context of Uzbekistan, the approach to religious matters is grounded in a constitutional and legal framework. Article 35 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan guarantees freedom of conscience, affirming that everyone has the right to profess any religion or no religion at all, and prohibiting the forced imposition of religious beliefs.[5] This provision establishes the legal basis for religious freedom and the principle of a secular state.

Furthermore, the Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" is intended to regulate relations concerning the assurance of freedom of conscience, as well as the activities of religious organizations.[6] These legal foundations serve to regulate the operations of religious organizations, protect the religious rights of citizens, and ensure inter-confessional harmony within

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society. Relying solely on prohibitions or administrative measures is insufficient for addressing issues related to modern religious movements and sects; rather, an educational and enlightenment-based approach is primarily required. Enhancing religious literacy among the youth, explaining traditional religious values on a scientific basis, fostering a culture of analyzing religious information found on the internet, and creating a healthy spiritual environment within families and educational institutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, contemporary religious movements and sects represent complex socio-spiritual phenomena within the era of globalization. When studying them, one must avoid a one-sided approach: it is incorrect to label every new religious group as dangerous, just as it is wrong to deny the harmful impact of destructive sects. A scientifically grounded approach requires the harmonization of principles such as religious freedom, human rights, the rule of law, spiritual security, and religious tolerance. Fostering a healthy religious and educational environment in society, developing critical thinking among the youth, promoting reliable sources of religious knowledge, and strengthening "informational immunity" against dangerous propaganda found on the internet are among the most effective ways to mitigate the negative influence of modern-day sects.

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