

During Lent '79 Wed. evenings, I went around to churches inviting me to "do" an evening in their Lenten series--and it was always on cults, because always that was what they asked me to "do" the evening on. Must be important, yes? Not just because Jonestown, Guyana, is a current codeword for the fear of the uncanny unknown, the irruption of the occult unconscious, today's lava flow of irrationality over the failed rationalism of "the West" (meaning the world as it now is, wants to be, and hates itself for being). But also because of a nameless jealousy which the feeling of superiority over "cultists" is not sufficiently powerful to squelch or drive out: the cultists have solved, no matter how inauthentically, the problem endemic to the human heart: *Where can I find a meaning that leaves nothing out and a community that, in celebrating that meaning, does not leave me out?* Which makes me think of a Marty definition of religion: "Meaning and Belonging, Inc."

1. The first three words in this thinksheet's title represent, in retrograde order, the divine (biblically, "God" in his power-character-will), the special-in-relation-to-the-divine (and in contrast to both the "profane" and the "secular"), and the degenerate sacred (biblically, "idols"). For the present purpose, I'll say a "church" is creative of truly human ends, a "cult" is destructive of truly human ends, and a "sect" has not yet shown (in the universal mix of destructivity/creativity) its leaning (or "tilt" or "sail-set"). Now, I put "church" in quotes because of course I do not mean everything that calls itself church or temple or synagogue; "cult" is quoted not only for this reason of self-labeling ambiguity but also because, seen through Establishment eyes, every new faith looks destructive; and "sect" is quoted because it's even more ambiguous in meaning and use than the other two words. (As for my phrase "truly human ends," it's spelled out in detail in my TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF LEISURE--leisure there being defined as "the use of disposable hours and expendable dollars for truly human ends.")

2. Cults are sacrosanct (degenerate-sacred, idolatrous) in idolizing-divinizing the Leader. Iran is now a sacred society, but not sacrosanct: Komeini does not think of himself as divine or as a special God-sent being. From the standpoint of Judaism, Christianity is, thus, a cult, for our Leader Jesus is Immanu-el, "God [come] among us to be with us." So, on behalf of my own Faith, I special-plead against this definition of cult--my definition! But I do not entirely demur: Jesus worship can be, often has been, destructive of truly human ends; and Christianity tilting toward the gnosticism of radical incarnationism needs here the polar corrective of Judaism (primarily through the modesty, and ambiguity, of Jesus' self-claims in the canonical gospels; Sun Moon is, for his own case, making the most of this ambiguity both as question [e.g., by "Son of Man" did Jesus mean himself or Sun Moon?]) and as model [as in the last sentence of Schweitzer's VOM REIMARUS ZU WREDE: "In following him..., we shall find out who he is"].

3. In making a taxonomy of positions, I have mainly in mind its potential for stimulating my students to self-location and self-questioning. Here it is:

(1) You can call all "religion" fanaticism, and point with self-congratulation to Jonestown as what all religion, though most of it potentially rather than actually, "really" is, viz. fanaticism of spirit and absolutism of mind and totalitarianism of body. Trouble is, "religion" here must be defined broadly enough to include all human ways of self-destruct--e.g., patriotism.

(2) You can damn all nonfanaticism as nonserious: to be "truly human" is to be "wholly committed." Trouble is, thus human community becomes impossible.

(3) You can say both yes and no to both of those positions, and pray for an emergent which loses none of the values of either tribal or global, either passion or reflection. Trouble is, the nonexistence of historical models for this argues that you are impossibly utopian about "human nature." In this case, I thus begin my creed: "I, Willis Elliott, being impossibly utopian...."