

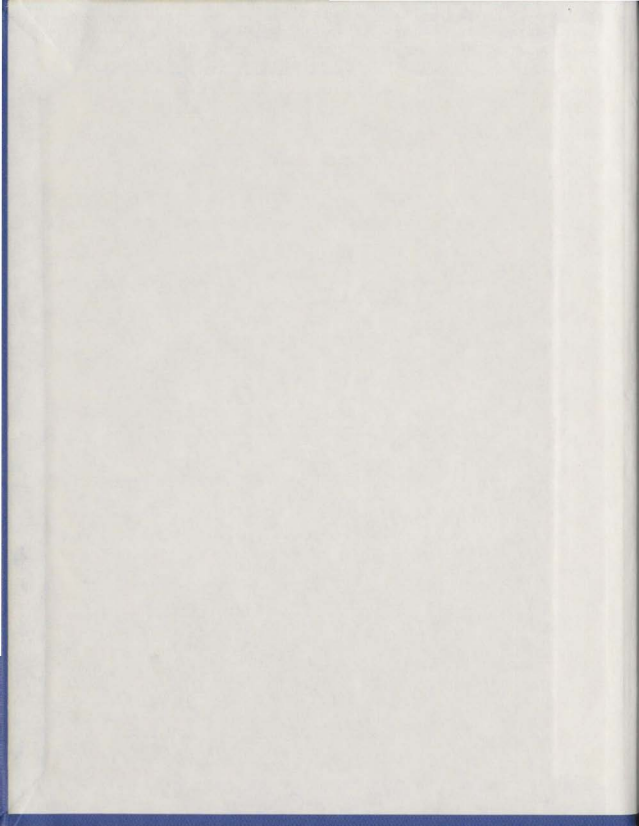
THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF  
GOD - A STUDY OF  
SECTARIAN EVOLUTION

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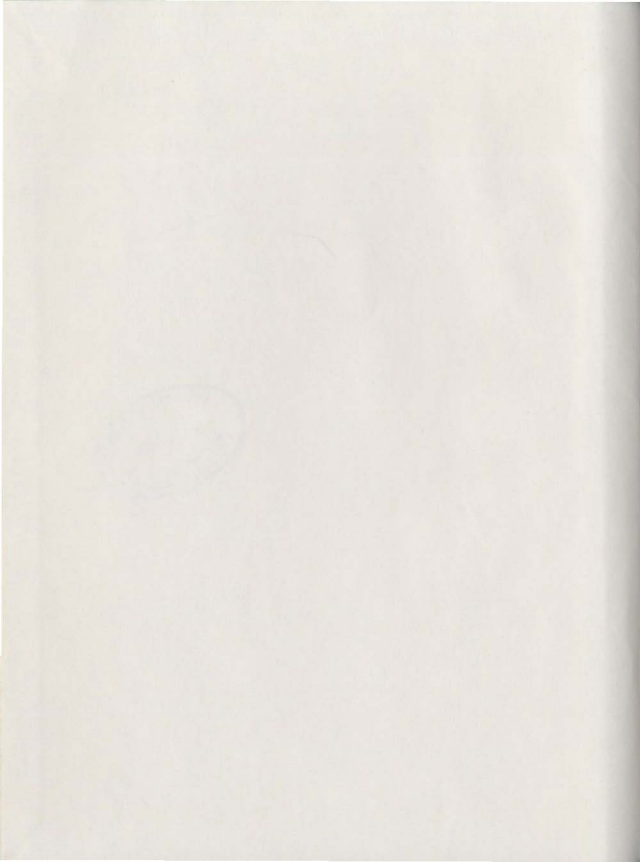
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THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD - A STUDY OF SECTARIAN EVOLUTION

by

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

The Worldwide Church of God had its beginnings in the early thirties and since that time it has experienced considerable change. Upon close examination, I have found that this change is not random, but orderly and consistent. I have labelled it sectarian evolution.

I studied this process by examining examples of change in many major doctrinal areas of the Worldwide Church of God such as tithing, healing, Sabbath observance, etc. I concluded that significant change had occurred and that the Worldwide Church of God is moving toward a "church-type" religious organization in contrast to a "sect-type".

On the basis of my investigation of the many areas of Worldwide Church of God sectarian evolution I formulated an explanation of its cause. I found that the need for a religious sect to remain in a workable state is the basic reason why constant change is necessary.

A pivotal area which I concentrated on in the latter stages of the thesis is concerned with how the Worldwide Church of God remains united and how it maintains a growing membership in the face of ongoing sectarian evolution.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my appreciation initially to a very thorough and discerning advisor, Dr. J. Ross, who constantly aided me in avoiding the "cart before the horse" approach. His suggestions and criticisms were invaluable.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

## Introduction

The study of the sociology of church and sect, i.e. religion, is central to the concerns of contemporary social science. Its importance can be determined quite simply by noting the fact that most of the North American population have been, or are presently affiliated in some way with a church or sect. Religious organizations have traditionally had much influence in the determination of societal changes. However, societies have also interacted with religious organizations in a dialectical manner and have caused considerable quantitative and qualitative changes in them.

These changes and trends in religious organizations may be easily identified because of their frequency of occurrence, especially in relation to sects. In this paper I will discuss religious change by focusing on its sectarian aspect as manifested in the Worldwide Church of God (hereafter referred to as the WCG). The next section is an introduction to this sect.

### The WCG - Its Beginnings and Early Growth

The head minister and administrator of the WCG is Herbert W. Armstrong, with his son, Garner Ted Armstrong, second in command. Herbert W. Armstrong maintains that the WCG is simply the contemporary version of the Church of God which was started by Jesus Christ and his Apostles. Whether or not this claim is a valid one is indeed a matter to be investigated by church historians. The central concern here is how and when the WCG originated and evolved into its present form. This account is fairly well laid out in the Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong.



Armstrong says that he began his search for the "true" church of God in 1928. He possessed many preconceptions as to what doctrines this "true" church should embrace - observance of the Saturday Sabbath, baptism by complete immersion, belief in the "2nd Coming" of Christ, etc. He states that he narrowed his choices down to the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Seventh-Day Baptists, and the Church of God.<sup>1</sup>

Armstrong believed that the Scriptures designated only one correct name for God's church - the Church of God - or at least a variation of it. Largely on the basis of this seemingly insignificant criterion he concluded that the Church of God (i.e. the above sect), had "more Bible truth than any [other] church."<sup>2</sup> He therefore became increasingly involved with it. He was ordained a minister in 1931 at Stanbery, Missouri (the location of the church's headquarters and publishing house).

During the ensuing years of the early and mid 1930's Armstrong met much opposition and conflict in the Church of God. He submits in his autobiography that the church was moving towards a Pentecostal type of religion in its proselyting endeavours and religious services. Actually, this era of the WCG is shrouded in mystery because there has been absolutely nothing written about it except by Herbert W. Armstrong himself. Many think, but cannot prove, that the reason behind these conflicts was Armstrong's attempts to assume total control of the sect. When he failed to do this, they assume, he started his own sect, the "Radio Church of God". Armstrong submits that this splinter group consists of those who "remained true to the faith". In any event, 1934 saw the start of the "World Tomorrow" broadcast and the Plain Truth magazine - the two most important tools of the WCG today.

From this small beginning the Radio Church of God gradually expanded to become a sect with over 75,000 members and a yearly income of over 50 million dollars.

#### The Central Beliefs of the WCG

The WCG is a sect which believes in the literal interpretation of the Bible. It believes this because it submits that God inspired the writing of the Old and New Testaments and therefore they must be absolutely correct. The sect carries its literal interpretation belief to great lengths as exemplified by its many unorthodox practices - adherence to Jewish food laws, adult baptism by complete immersion, non-celebration of holidays such as Christmas and Easter, etc.

The basis of WCG beliefs is that society is evil because human nature is basically evil. Man can consequently only be saved through an acceptance of the Bible and through a dedication to live by its principles. However, since only a handful (according to the Bible, they say), will do this it is inevitable that man will destroy himself because he now has the capacity to do so. This will happen unless a divine intervention ("2nd Coming") occurs. The WCG firmly believes that this is exactly what will happen in the near future - i.e. Jesus Christ will return.

In other, more "mundane" doctrines, the WCG also claims that it takes its beliefs directly from the Bible. In the area of healing, for example, the sect believes the Scriptures literally when they command an individual to "put your trust in God". Doctors have little importance in the WCG. In the area of tithing the WCG believes that Christians

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should diligently give 10% of their income to the "church" (actually, the figure is closer to 30% according to the WCG's interpretation). Commonly accepted "Christian" holidays such as Christmas and Good Friday are not recognized by the WCG because they are not specifically mentioned in the Bible. They do, however, celebrate a number of "holydays" (e.g. Feast of Tabernacles, Day of Atonement, etc.), which they believe the Bible commands them to do. The same applies in regard to the observance of the Sabbath - the WCG believes that it should be observed on Saturday, not Sunday. These doctrines reflect an emphasis upon the "letter of the law" in addition to the "spirit of the law".

The system of government in the WCG is centered around Herbert W. Armstrong - top down authority which the WCG purports to be Biblical. He is the chief minister and administrator; Garner Ted Armstrong is next, and various other high ranking ministers make up the remainder of the top level of the hierarchical pyramid. The only decision which individual members may make is to decide whether to continue as members or to leave the sect.

#### Classification of the Sect and Church

In 1912 Ernst Troeltsch, a German theologian, historian, and philosopher, developed a classification of religious bodies which has become known as the Troeltsch church-sect typology. David Moberg explains Troeltsch's "church type":

[It] is conservative, to a certain extent accepting the secular order of society although claiming domination over it. In principle it is universal in that it desires to cover the whole life of humanity. It uses the state and the ruling classes to accomplish its goals; thus it becomes an integral part of the social order dependent upon the upper classes.

Troeltsch's "sect type" is virtually a diametric opposite of the "church type":

Sects are comparatively small. They renounce the idea of dominating the world and tend to avoid the state and society - either by merely tolerating them or by attempting to replace other institutions with their own society. They tend to be connected with the lower classes and other elements that oppose the state and the established culture.

This church-sect typology is a very neat classification of religious organizations - in fact, it's probably too neat because many churches and sects simply do not conform with the characteristics of their respective group. A typology, though helpful, is simply inadequate in this case in that it contains too many exceptions to the rule. Bryan Wilson realizes the problem of this type of "package definition":

The task of formulating general characterizations of sects has become more, rather than less, difficult since Troeltsch wrote because of the many new combinations of elements that sects might now embrace in a world where men have far more diversified social experience. Particular styles of organization, doctrine, and ethical practice cannot now be said to be necessarily associated with each other, or with recruitment of a sect's personnel from particular strata.

In addition to this, Troeltsch's church-sect typology fails to discriminate sects on a multidimensional level. For example, secular retreatism is one dimension in which many sects may be very similar but this does not imply that in regard to other dimensions the similarity will prevail. Sectarian diversity is as prevalent as denominational diversity.

Troeltsch's church-sect typology, though useful, can be improved upon by amending it into the form of a continuum. Of course, it must be realized that this is simply another crude method of sect classification which creates virtually as many problems as it solves. It suffers from the inherent difficulties of a unidimensional classification system but it does at least provide a visual illustration of a religious organization's relative position on a scale which is basically correct.

The church type and its characteristics would be situated at one end of the continuum and the sect type and its characteristics would be at the other end. These would represent "ideal types" because they would be rarely found in society in their pure form.

The WCG may be placed well to the left of center in the continuum (Figure-1), because it manifests many sectarian characteristics. It may be called a small organization in terms of the size of its local congregations scattered throughout the world. These congregations rarely exceed 200 members except in large metropolitan areas. However, in terms of world coverage and representation in the media it is by no means a small sect.

Upon initial observation the WCG would seem to be very dissimilar to the sect type because of its intense daily contact with society through the media. However, this is not the case because individual members are expected to interact primarily with other members in both work and social settings wherever possible. The WCG has many activities which are designed to achieve this end of insuring that members do not need to search outside the organization for social and

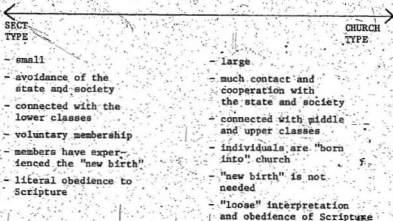


FIGURE 1

TROELTSCH'S CHURCH-SECT CONTINUUM

recreational activities. Examples abound -- intra-sect floor hockey leagues, planned all day outings, occasional dances, swimming parties, bowling leagues, etc.

In regard to Froelisch's statement that sects are generally connected with the lower classes, suffice it to say that the WCG does not deviate significantly from other sects in relation to the class origins of its members. However, to ascertain if the majority of its members are actually from the lower classes is a matter of extensive sociological investigation.

Membership in the WCG is voluntary in contrast to the infant baptism practices of many established churches. However, it cannot be said to be totally voluntary when the "soft sell" approach which the sect utilizes is considered. This will be discussed further in the next section.

In my status as "observer" of the WCG for four years I can say without fear of contradiction that no member with whom I have come into contact has ever professed to be "born again". This is a term which the WCG does not recognize but, like other sects, each member must experience a "reawakening" before baptism occurs.

This "reawakening", however, is simply an individual realization of his conception of the validity of the sect's beliefs. In many respects, though, it is similar to the "born again" teachings of most sects.

The literal obedience of the Scriptures to which most sects subscribe is emphasized in the WCG. Essentially, the only variation which exists is in relation to different interpretations and emphases.



Bryan Wilson has developed a descriptive classification of sects in which he utilizes various categories or "sect classes". He chose these "classes" in order to facilitate a sociological examination of particular areas important in the study of sects.

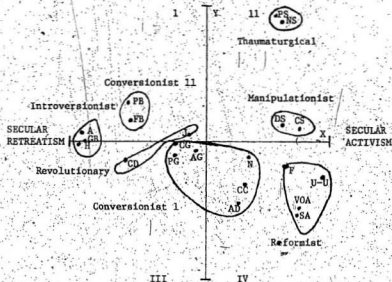
The general framework that we have now developed in application to Christianity will permit us in the following chapters to look at actual sects in some detail, and in particular at the origin and development of particular movements, their organization, the classes from which they have recruited, the means by which they have grown, or the causes of their decay, their social practices, and the way in which their patterns or response have shifted in the process of social change.<sup>6</sup>

Michael R. Welch has examined Wilson's sect classes and has used them in constructing a bidimensional classification system. The two dimensions which he utilizes are "organizational precariousness" and "secular retreatism - activism".

The former dimension refers to the "precariousness" of the sect's state of being in relation to organizational activities, resource base, and the "paradoxes of institutionalization". The latter dimension indicates the degree of protective isolation which a sect manifests.

Welch's bidimensional classification system (Figure 2), is a very useful method of locating and differentiating religious sects on the basis of two important, specified characteristics. However, it does little to aid the delineation of the sect as distinct from the church.

HIGH ORGANIZATIONAL PRECARIOUSNESS



LOW ORGANIZATIONAL PRECARIOUSNESS

- |                                |                                              |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| AG Assemblies of God           | NS National Spiritualist Association         |
| CD Christadelphians            | GB Old German Baptist Brethren               |
| CS Christian Science           | A Old Order Amish Movement                   |
| CC Church of Christ            | PC Pentecostal Church of God of America      |
| CG Church of God               | FB Pentecostal Fire-Baptized Holiness Church |
| N Church of the Nazarene       | PS Progressive Spiritualist Association      |
| DS Divine Science              | SA Salvation Army                            |
| F Friends                      | AD Seventh-Day Adventists                    |
| H Hutterian Brethren           | U-U Unitarian-Universalist                   |
| J Jehovah's Witnesses          | VOA Volunteers of America                    |
| PB National Primitive Baptists |                                              |

FIGURE 2

WELCH'S BIDIMENSIONAL CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

Max Weber conceived of three broad types of authority or domination which can be usefully applied as a classification of churches and sects.<sup>4</sup> These three types are charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal.<sup>7</sup>

Charismatic authority refers to the authority of one individual possessing extraordinary leadership qualities. Garner Ted Armstrong, the voice behind the "World Tomorrow" radio broadcast and "Garner Ted Armstrong" television productions, is a good example of this type of individual and the WCG is a good example of a charismatic sect.

Traditional authority is rather self-explanatory in that it operates upon the "sanctity of age old rules and powers".<sup>8</sup> The Roman Catholic Church is one of the best examples of this type.

Rational-legal authority is based upon the common acceptance of impersonal norms and rules which define legitimate domination. The personal and traditional qualities of leadership are of no relevance in this category.

Another interesting religious organizational typology, which can be conceived in terms of a four fold table (Figure 3), is one proposed by Roland Robertson.<sup>10</sup> It consists of two axes - "membership principle" (exclusive - inclusive) and "self-conceived basis of legitimacy" (pluralistically legitimate - uniquely legitimate).

The "membership principle" simply refers to the quality of the standards of entry into the religious organization. The WCG is very definitely near the "exclusive" end of the continuum in that its standards for acceptance of new members are quite rigorous.

The "self-conceived basis of legitimacy" is the axis denoting the religious organization's view of itself in relation to being one of many legitimate churches offering salvation (pluralistically legitimate), or, being unique in this respect (uniquely legitimate).

I placed the WCG in the upper right square of Robertson's four fold table because its membership principle is "exclusive" and it conceives itself to be "uniquely legitimate". In fact, it claims that it alone is the true Christian faith and all other religious bodies are various forms of paganism.

#### The WCG as a Voluntary Organization

One must take note of the unique nature of religious organizations when one decides whether to refer to them as voluntary or otherwise. Most voluntary associations experience tension in some form between their leadership and their membership. Usually, though, these tensions are quickly resolved by reference to stated and/or unstated rules. In a Christian church or sect, however, the REAL leader is thought to be Jesus Christ - the "Lord of Lords", the "Prince of Peace" who "rules with an iron hand". Considering this, can any church be truly voluntary since it is ruled, at least symbolically, by a monarchical system leaving little room for voluntary action because of many statutes, rules, procedures, and commandments?

It would seem, in relation to the WCG, that a negative answer to this question is in order. When an individual becomes an official member of the sect he is expected to concur with church doctrine in both his thought and action. If, however, he purposefully

SELF-CONCEIVED BASIS OF LEGITIMACY

|            |           | Pluralistically Legitimate | Uniquely Legitimate |
|------------|-----------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| MEMBERSHIP | Exclusive | Institutionalized Sect     | Sect (WCG)          |
|            | Inclusive | Denomination               | Church              |

FIGURE 3

ROLAND ROBERTSON'S FOUR FOLD TABLE

fails to do this in a repeated, rebellious manner, in all likelihood the local minister will expel him from the sect. The remaining members, with whom he has usually built stable friendships, will then, for all intents and purposes, ostracize the expelled member (except in cases such as an accidental meeting where common courtesy is required). If the former member had established considerable dependence upon these relationships this ostracism practice would have considerable effect, either in severely punishing him for becoming deviant or preventing the deviant actions which could lead to his expulsion. This social pressure limits the voluntary nature of his actions.

The WCG, therefore, because of the above factors, cannot be located at the extreme "voluntary" end of a voluntary action continuum. Through its unique commitment structure it has sacrificed some of its voluntarism in relation to the continuing actions of its members, but the actual process of joining this sect, or virtually any other religious organization, remains truly as voluntary as the term may reasonably imply.

#### Sectarian Evolution

There are many areas that one could choose to concentrate on in the study of a religious sect such as the WCG. Commitment of members to the totality of the sect's doctrines and beliefs would undoubtedly prove to be a fruitful study as would an investigation into exactly what type of person joins the WCG and what specific individual characteristics that the proselyting of the sect attempts to capitalize on.

However, I will concentrate on the process which most sects, including the WCC, experience - sectarian evolution. This process involves increasing change in the sect in the direction of contemporary social mores and values. Usually this means progression to the right along the church-sect continuum.

I use the term "evolution" simply as an alternative to, but not as a synonym of, the term "change". The essential difference is that "evolution" implies a change which is not random (although usually not consciously planned) - a change which may be examined, understood, and therefore predicted.

Generally speaking, sectarian evolution is a process which all sects go through in some manner, but this does not imply that it is always in the same direction. Sometimes, in response to societal pressures, a sect, such as the Rappites or the Old Order Amish, will retrace their steps and entrench themselves in the "old faith".

The central question, however, is "why does sectarian evolution occur?". Possibly the answer may be found in literature from the sociology of organizations. For example, "institutionalization" is a process which may be identified in many sects. After the initial charismatic effect of a sect's founder begins to diminish many of its operations and doctrinal practices must then become formalized. Weber's "routinization of charisma" principle applies here because it deals with the succession problem and the formation of traditional

and/or legal rules.

All but those who submit that religious organizations have their own intrinsic origin and quality will recognize that change in religious sects often follows as a result of social change in the larger society. The degree to which a sect manifests exclusivity will determine the extent that it reflects social change.

Many other explanations of sectarian evolution exist such as those which focus on individual changes in leadership or changes which follow a doctrinal reinterpretation. These will be examined closely in the following chapters.

#### Voluntarism and Sectarian Evolution

One of the important factors affecting the extent of sectarian evolution is the degree of voluntarism that a sect exhibits. In the course of evolution a sect must make important changes which frequently involve compromises in many pivotal doctrinal areas. This has happened to the WCG in respect to many issues, divorce, remarriage, tithing, prophecy, etc.

The ability of a sect to absorb these changes and to undergo a smooth evolution is enhanced if it exhibits a low degree of voluntarism. Its members, therefore, since they are expected to initially join and consequently remain in the sect, will probably not leave even if they do disagree with some decisions made by their leaders. However, in a voluntary sect a number of members will voluntarily leave if the sect changes perceptively from the state in which it originally motivated these members to join.



The "growing pains" which the WCG are experiencing are largely attributable to this cause. The ways in which it deals with them, may reveal important insights into its nature.

#### Summary and Theoretical Orientation

Thus far I have briefly examined the history and contemporary makeup of a well known (at least in terms of its leaders) religious sect - the Worldwide Church of God. I have shown its relative position on various classification schemes including the Troeltsch church-sect typology. This typology, or continuum, is preferable to the other classification schemes presented because it graphically describes the process of sectarian evolution. Though it has deficiencies, such as that of overgeneralization, I will use this system to trace the movement, or evolution, of the WCG through the years since its inception.

The term "sectarian evolution" has been introduced and its possible causes have been briefly detailed. However, I have not yet examined this process in relation to the WCG or established a subsequent theoretical orientation.

The remainder of this paper will be devoted to an analysis of the process of sectarian evolution which has occurred, and is presently occurring, in the WCG. The reasons as to why sectarian evolution occurs may be seen clearly when an analogy with the Darwinian theory of evolution is drawn. This latter theory submits that physical evolution occurs because it allows organisms to better adapt to the surrounding, ever-changing environment.

This is essentially the same theme which I will utilize in describing the reasons for sectarian evolution - i.e. it is a process which allows sects to at least minimally interact with and function in society. Sectarian evolution does not have to be consciously planned, in fact it rarely is, but it occurs because it is vital in maintaining the life of a sect.

One could generalize and say that sectarian evolution simply involves movement to the right along the church-sect continuum derived from Troeltsch. In the majority of cases this is actually what happens because in order for a sect to adapt to the surrounding social environment it must perforce assume many characteristics of an established church. Of course it's true that established churches often lack smooth interaction with the social environment but they are generally accepted as being an integral part of society whereas sects are considered aloft and different.

To be more precise, however, sectarian evolution is actually a process which transforms a sect from an increasingly dysfunctional state to an increasingly workable state.

This paper will look at some dysfunctional elements which have existed in the WCG and the subsequent changes which have occurred to transform them into workable elements. If this process did not occur in some manner atrophy would result. The WCG has experienced several crises which have determined its policies and beliefs on various doctrines. These crises, and the ensuing consequences, will be examined closely.

In the WCG sectarian evolution is a centralized process in contrast to the many sects which exert little or no control over local units. If the headquarters of the WCG in Pasadena decides on a doctrinal matter the local churches will ALWAYS concur with and support the judgement. This tight control system will be analyzed because of its importance in keeping the sect united when it is going through a period of central change. S

In addition to the above, the "routinization of charisma" problem will be examined. If a sect is to survive it must of course change its leaders periodically because of their death or incapacitation. The fact that Herbert W. Armstrong is well over eighty years of age has necessitated the placing of Garner Ted Armstrong into a position from which he could assume total control of the sect if his father died. This has created problems within the WCG. Many ministers have rebelled because they think that this system of father-son rule is neither equitable nor Scriptural. The manner in which the sect has confronted and dealt with these problems will also be studied.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup>Armstrong assumed, by searching for the "true" church of God, that there indeed WAS a true church of God. He is of necessity rejecting the view that all churches, or most churches, are paths to salvation.

<sup>2</sup>Herbert W. Armstrong, The Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong. (Pasadena: Ambassador College Press, 1967), p. 342.

<sup>3</sup>David Moberg, The Church as a Social Institution. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 74. (The ideas and concepts of Troeltsch which Moberg and myself refer to are taken from Troeltsch's book The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, trans. by Olive Wyon (London: George Allan & Unwin, 1931), 2 vols.)

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. p. 74.

<sup>5</sup>Bryan Wilson, Religious Sects. (New York: World University Library, 1970), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p. 47.

<sup>7</sup>Michael R. Welch, "Analyzing Religious Sects: An Empirical Examination of Wilson's Sect Typology". Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. 1977. 16(2): pp. 125-141.

<sup>8</sup>Anthony Giddens, Capitalism and Modern Social Theory. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 156-163.

<sup>9</sup>Max Weber, in Ibid. p. 156.

<sup>10</sup>Ross P. Scherer, "The Church as a Formal Voluntary Association". In: Jerry C. Bode, Voluntary Action Research. 1972. Lexington: D.C. Heath & Company 1972), p. 90.

<sup>11</sup>Roland Robertson, in Michael Hill, A Sociology of Religion. (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1973), pp. 90-91.

Chapter 2

Sectarian Evolution in Action

# INTRODUCTION

Since the WCG came into existence in the early 1930's (although it was then simply called the Church of God), it has evolved and grown in considerable proportions. The changes which it has experienced are of course greater than mere physical changes such as the number of people involved in the organization and the annual income which it receives. Equally as impressive are the many doctrinal amendments and changes which have occurred repeatedly through the years.

The next section, however, will examine the actual qualitative and quantitative physical growth of the WCG.

## From a Molehill to a Mountain

In 1933 Herbert W. Armstrong, aided by his wife and a few close friends, initiated a monthly publication called the Bulletin and a weekly radio broadcast on radio station KORE in Eugene, Oregon. These quickly transformed into the Plain Truth magazine and the "World Tomorrow" broadcast which were to become the two most powerful tools of the WCG throughout its existence. Combined with these Armstrong conducted many public meetings during which he expounded his version of the Christian way of life.

In 1933 the Plain Truth magazine had a circulation of 250 and the "World Tomorrow" broadcast reached a maximum of several hundred people. Today the Plain Truth is subscribed to by over 4,000,000 people worldwide, the "World Tomorrow" broadcast is heard by countless millions of people in dozens of countries, and the actual WCG

membership is 75,000.

During the past seven years Herbert W. Armstrong has undertaken a new plan of attack to disseminate his gospel to the peoples of the world. With surprising success he has attained meetings with many world leaders and high officers of government in order to initiate a "top down" preaching approach.<sup>1</sup> He proclaims that God is opening these "doors" to him so that he may preach the only true Gospel available today.

It of course follows that as the WCG expands both its membership and its outreach program, its annual income will consequently escalate. The year 1946 saw the WCG acquire some acres of prime properties in Pasadena, California. This was a giant step for the sect in the transformation of itself from a poverty stricken state to one of great affluence. Indeed, one publication describes Ambassador College (the private university which was founded by the sect in 1947 and located on these prime properties), as:

.... a Garden of Allah surrounded by quiet streets and manicured lawns and very expensive homes, including Garner Ted's large ranch-style affair, which is easily worth \$150,000. Date palms, Royal palms, Australian gum myrtle, Norfolk pines, live oaks, and sycamores grace the hillsides. Ducks and swans meander on the greenward. There are waterfalls, fountains, reflecting pools, and streams stocked with fish. A sumptuous sunken garden separates the modern chemistry and fine-arts buildings. The college recently won an award designating it "The Most Beautiful College Campus" in America.<sup>2</sup>

The actual buildings of Ambassador College are also illustrative of the sect's extreme wealth:

doctrines. Theory, however, often differs from practice. The WCG has experienced much change since its inception but it has only occurred when there has been no other route to follow. Any significant change was usually preceded by a crisis situation which dictated that the sect either reform its present doctrine or face consequences in the form of mass dissatisfaction either on the ministerial or member level. It seems that the WCG is not as open to change as its leaders claim.

#### An Invaluable Source of Information

To aid me in this examination of the sectarian evolution of the WCG I will rely heavily on my interviews with a former member of the sect whom I will refer to simply as "Smith". This individual was in an ideal position to become closely associated with the internal workings of a local division of the sect. His dealings with the WCG in Newfoundland date back thirteen years as he was one of the first few people to attend the infrequent meetings of the sect in 1965. He became a member shortly after and therefore was in a position to witness the growth of the local congregation from its miniscule beginnings to its present state which includes weekly Sabbath services attended by over two hundred people in the St. John's area and handled by two permanent ministers assigned to the region. Smith was invaluable to me in this study because he possessed what appeared to me to be a close approximation of an impartial attitude. Unlike many former members who have a harsh, vindictive attitude he sought only to expose the truth.



...the \$11-million Ambassador Auditorium [has]...interiors...made from emerald-green granite, cut and polished in Massa-Carrara, Italy. The walls are lined with rose onyx from Turkey and Persia, cut and polished in Italy...Hanging from the ceiling is...a 30-foot chandelier resplendent with 1,375 crystals, all imported from Belgium.<sup>3</sup>

The past thirty years has been a period of phenomenal growth for the WCG in relation to its printed matter, its radio and television broadcasts, the quantity and quality of its land holdings, its annual income, and the wealth of its leaders. The growth, or more correctly, the evolution of its doctrinal beliefs and practices has closely paralleled its physical growth. This is the subject of the next section.

#### The Evolution of the Beliefs and Practices of the WCG

Although Herbert W. Armstrong and Garner Ted Armstrong proclaim that the "truth" is universal and unchanging, it would appear that this is not the case when one examines the WCG and the many doctrinal changes which it has experienced over the last forty-five years. The Armstrongs state, however, that no individual church (or sect) has the total truth available to them at the present time because God has not chosen to reveal all of His truth at once. Therefore, that which might appear to be a change of doctrine is simply a re-adjustment to a new Biblical truth which has been discovered.

In theory, the WCG is an excellent example to utilize in the study of sectarian evolution because it professes to be open to change (i.e. new truth) and will not hesitate to re-examine its

### The 1973 Crisis

The major crisis which the WCG has encountered occurred in 1973. It initially involved only one issue but later escalated to include many which were simmering under the surface. The sect was experiencing change before 1973 but it was unvoiced for the most part. This crisis simply directed attention to it and showed the Armstrongs that change, drastic change, was in order if the sect was to survive.

Garner Ted Armstrong's affair. Actually, the 1973 crisis was preceded by a crisis of a different nature which occurred in 1972. Garner Ted Armstrong himself was caught in the middle of a scandal which alleged that he committed several sexual improprieties. His father, Herbert W. Armstrong, was of course forced to expel him from the sect. However, as expected, considering the drastic financial and "spiritual" losses following Garner Ted's expulsion, he was once again admitted to the sect and his former responsibilities were again bestowed upon him. This episode paved the way for the 1973 crisis.

Divorce-remarriage issue. The primary doctrinal matter which precipitated this crisis was the divorce-remarriage issue. WCG doctrine dictated that the first marriage is the one and only binding marriage whether or not a couple are members of the WCG. The only exception occurs when the husband (or logically also the wife), finds out that fornication had been committed prior to marriage. He or she would then have grounds for a "Scriptural" divorce.

This doctrine has rather obvious distasteful implications for ministers of the WCG. For instance, when a minister visits a couple becoming interested in the WCG he must, if one or both have been married previously, inform them that despite the happiness of their present marriage, despite their healthy, radiant children, they must separate.

A group of thirty-five WCG ministers who were convinced that the sect was in gross error in regard to the divorce-remarriage issue arranged a series of meetings among themselves. They could not see how a concept which caused so much anguish, pain, and suffering could be Scriptural. The purpose of their meetings was to investigate this doctrine from a Biblical standpoint to prove it the position of the WCG was Scripturally right or wrong.

Extensive research convinced them that the WCG's position was wrong, in fact it was diametrically opposed to Biblical teaching, they said. From an examination of all the relevant passages and the original Greek they believed that the Bible taught that many sexual sins besides fornication were adequate grounds for a divorce. This was expanded to include many non-sexual sins such as desertion, mental cruelty, physical cruelty, etc. Essentially, it boiled down to the fact that if a divorce was legally binding then it should also be spiritually binding. They were convinced that they had more than adequate Scriptural proof for their position.

These thirty-five ministers submitted a brief to Herbert W. Armstrong containing a step-by-step account of their Biblical explorations and conclusions in regard to the divorce-remarriage issue.

They were convinced that Armstrong would recognize and welcome this new truth which would alleviate so many problems for both ministers and members. They were wrong.

The WCG's first reaction to this group of ministers came from the sect's legal counsel, Stanley R. Rader. He described the thirty-five ministers as:

A few little people who get a few people together for a short time. [The Armstrongs] won't bring themselves down to the gutter to answer these charges.<sup>5</sup>

These comments are truly amazing when one considers the claims that the WCG makes in regard to its approachability and sincerity in regard to doctrinal truths.

The thirty-five ministers thought that their complaints and suggestions would be met with at least a logical refutation, not an unqualified dismissal. Twenty ministers went so far as to charge the WCG with "doctrinal inflexibility". These ministers were promptly dismissed and relieved of any further responsibilities.

In March, 1974 these thirty-five ministers and a number of lay members left the sect and formed their own religious organization called the Associated Church of God. Walter Sharp of Texas, vice-chairman of the new organization, explained the reason for the split:

But what the split actually boiled down to is the realization by many of us that the Worldwide Church [of God] has a totalitarian system of government which we have come to feel is not New Testament.<sup>6</sup>

The ironical aspect of this issue is that shortly after the thirty-five ministers left the WCG Herbert W. Armstrong and Garner Ted Armstrong, along with some leading ministers, re-examined the

divorce-remarriage issue and arrived at essentially the same conclusions as did the thirty-five dissatisfied ministers - i.e. divorce may have many and varied genuine reasons and these are all acceptable from a Biblical standpoint. Second and subsequent marriages are therefore considered binding.

This about-face by the WCG, however, did not bring back the lost thirty-five ministers or the hundreds of members who had left. Their accusation and the issue remained the same - namely, the WCG had a totalitarian system of government.

The accuracy of their accusation leaves a lot to be desired when the WCG is examined from the standpoint of sectarian evolution. Though the system of government seems to be totalitarian when one is trying to effect changes, it ceases to be so when it is viewed over time. The point here is that the WCG DID change; sectarian evolution DID occur, at least in respect to the one issue which I have thus far examined.

Ernst Troeltsch's "sect-type" emphasizes the literal obedience to Scripture. The WCG also emphasizes this in principle. However, in regard to the divorce-remarriage doctrine it eventually adopted a stand characteristic of the "church-type" - i.e. a loose interpretation of the Scripture. A more dogmatic stance could have been taken but the WCG chose to take the line of least resistance in respect to the social environment and the prevailing mores of society. Their moderate position increased a state of cooperation and smooth interaction with society which, again, is characteristic of Troeltsch's "church-type" rather than his "sect-type".

This movement along the church-sect continuum derived from Troeltsch has occurred in many areas other than the divorce-remarriage issue.

Tithing. Tithing is a principle found primarily in the Old Testament which refers to the giving of a tenth of the "increase of your labour" to the church. Most contemporary churches do not consider this to be a binding principle today and therefore submit that an individual should "give according to his means". Many sects, however, such as the Seventh Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses, do believe in strictly following this principle.

The WCG also believes this but its views on the subject have changed perceptively over the last five years. Prior to the 1973 crisis members were expected to give 10% of their gross income directly to the sect, another 10% was to be put into the bank to be spent solely for the purpose of attending the Feast of Tabernacles (a yearly series of holidays occurring every fall at pre-selected locations around the world), and yet another 10% was to be given to the sect every third year to help its widows, orphans, and those unable to subsist solely on their own financial resources.

The tithing system for ministers, however, was slightly different. They had to give the standard 10% but were exempted from the third 10%. However, they were reimbursed their second tithe to help pay for their expenses at the Feast of Tabernacles.

The 1973 crisis was instrumental in the evolution of the WCG tithing system. This was a secondary issue which the thirty-five

dissident ministers discussed with Herbert W. Armstrong and Garner Ted Armstrong. Their main point was that the tithing system as interpreted by the Armstrongs was overly burdensome on the membership because of its excessive demands. For example, tithes were to be paid on gross income in contrast to net income; one must also give 10% of any supplemental income such as proceeds from any home grown vegetables; and even if a family was living on unemployment insurance or welfare they must nevertheless tithe.

In 1974 these stringent laws began to change in accordance with a "looser" interpretation of the Scriptures. Only net income was to be tithed, small sources of supplemental income was ignored, unemployment insurance and welfare payments were not to be tithed, attendance at the Feast of Tabernacles was no longer compulsory which resulted in a second tithe only when economically feasible, and the third tithe was cancelled.

One could say, with some justification, that these doctrinal modifications were truly a change of direction for the WCC, but they actually were simply accelerating a trend which had taken root many years previously. This trend is sectarian evolution towards the "church-type".

#### Healing

The area of healing is perhaps one of the most important areas which distinguish sects from churches. A literal interpretation of the Scriptures virtually demands an extremist position on this issue not unlike that taken by many sects. If God has promised to heal the faithful in times of sickness, then why should they go to doctors?

This was the position of the WCG for many years. Doctors, drugs, and treatments were considered needless. In fact, according to Smith, himself a former member, medical doctors were considered to be "servants of the devil". WCG members were told by their ministers that trust in physicians was actually commitment of idolatry. In other words, it was putting them before God.

The WCG, being therefore very extremist in its views on divine healing and the role of doctors, placed itself in a position of constant agitation with the surrounding society. Extensive contact with it in regard to this issue of healing had to be avoided because of the extreme unpopularity of the sect's views. For example, though I listened to Garner Ted Armstrong for four years and attended Sabbath services of the WCG for two years, I was only really informed of the WCG's stand on healing from my conversations with Smith about four months ago. This, and other unpopular doctrines of the WCG are concealed from the general public and interested non-members until they become firmly entrenched within the sect.

The past decade, however, has seen an evolution of its beliefs and teaching on healing. Again, this evolution is bringing the WCG further away from Troeltsch's "sect-type" and closer to the "church-type" end of the continuum. Its beliefs are now considerably more acceptable to society in general because they now more closely approximate an accepted norm.

A "looser" interpretation of the Scriptures is once more responsible for this evolution. The sect still believes that God has the power to heal, and often does heal, but man must do all in



his power to aid the process of healing, whether it be through taking a prescription of drugs or through medical surgery.

This evolution may be viewed by some as simply a minor re-adjustment of Biblical interpretation but it actually represents a radical departure from previous beliefs. The medical profession, who were previously considered to be "servants of the devil" are now seen as agents of healing. The WCG truly exhibits much sectarian evolution in this area.

#### Personal appearance

The sectarian evolution of the WCG in regard to the personal appearance of its members has also progressed significantly in the direction of more liberalized trends. The toleration of increasing amounts of hair both on the face and on the head is characteristic of the sect's changing views on this subject in recent years. Sideburns may now be extended below the ears, hair may now creep over the ears, and moustaches and beards are now acceptable.

The sect's views on clothing styles are also evolving in the direction of increasing liberalization. For example, bell bottom slacks and jeans, once considered unsuitable, are now considered appropriate; ladies skirts and dresses may now be sinlessly worn above the knee (if the contemporary style permits); ministers are no longer required to preach in black suits, black ties and white shirts; wide ties may now be substituted for the more modest narrow ties of the past; and women are now permitted to wear small amounts of make-up and lipstick.

These changes, perhaps more than any others, illustrate the WCG's gradual movement along the church-sect continuum derived from Troeltsch. Unlike most of the changes previously described, they do not occur in a spasmodic manner but rather at an even pace throughout the years.

Additional Examples of Sectarian Evolution

Disfellowship. This is the term which the WCG uses to refer to the excommunication of a member. Local ministers have the power, if they believe that there exists adequate justification, to disfellowship any member.

In the early years of the sect a disfellowship could occur for any number of small "eins" such as partaking of a chocolate bar on a fast day, or letting swear words slip by inadvertently. The passage of time, however, has drastically changed the criteria for disfellowship. A trend towards the "church-type" is again manifest in that the traditional characteristics of sects, such as rigidity of doctrine, are giving way to a "looser" interpretation and subsequent looser enforcement of Scriptural content.

Today, essentially the only justification which a WCG minister would have to disfellowship a member is if he recognized that the individual in question not only ignored WCG doctrine on one occasion, but if he did so in a repeated, rebellious manner. This would indicate that not only the "letter of the law" had been transgressed but also, more importantly, "the spirit of the law".

Voting. The WCG has been traditionally against all forms of voting because of their literal interpretation of Christ's statement, "My kingdom is not of this world".<sup>7</sup> Sect members were not permitted to vote in federal, provincial, or municipal elections; union elections; or even in a simple intra-office vote concerning office matters. These forms of voting were prohibited not because of any inherent sin which they possessed but because members would be exhibiting the wrong spiritual attitude by voting. They should remain aloof from the affairs and politics of the world because these are full of sin and consequently will be changed when Christ returns.

The change in the WCG's policy on voting has been a recent one, although it has not occurred suddenly. The sect no longer finds it inconsistent to believe on the one hand, in Christ's return within the century when he will set up his own government on the earth and, on the other hand, to exercise one's franchise. It is now considered largely a matter of personal conscience whether a member decides to vote in an election or plebiscite.

Once again, the WCG is opting for closer contact and cooperation with the state and society.

Holidays and holydays. The traditional Christian holidays of the Western world, such as Christmas, Easter, Good Friday, etc., were not recognized by the WCG because of their pagan origins and their lack of Biblical justification. The sect carried this doctrine to its extremes as it would not even allow the exchanging of a Christmas gift or its members'

children to be present in the school classroom when Christmas songs were in progress.

Though the WCG still does not officially recognize or celebrate these holidays, it now tolerates them. A less rigid Biblical interpretation is preferred to one which is dogmatic and which results in frustrating its members and antagonizing the surrounding society.

The WCG does, however, celebrate its own holidays, or holydays, such as the Passover, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Day of Atonement, etc. Attendance, in the form of being present at a local holyday service or at a centrally located larger scale service, was formerly compulsory for all members, but this has evolved to the extent that members are not reprovved and/or disfellowshipped for missing a service.

#### SUMMARY

The WCG was, and still is illustrative of Ernst Troeltsch's "sect-type". However, in this chapter I have presented examples which demonstrate that it is on an evolutionary path toward the "church-type". The increasing size and wealth of the sect is one area which has been examined but, more importantly, the actual doctrinal evolution of the sect has been explored.

Much of this sectarian evolution has been of a gradual nature but the crisis of 1973 in the sect greatly accelerated the process. The changes which have occurred are moderating the sect and transforming it into a more acceptable part of society.

Perhaps, though, the changes may be best characterized by looking at them primarily as changes of attitude and secondarily as changes of practice. The "letter of the law" is being subjugated to the "spirit of the law".

The reasons behind the sectarian evolutionary process will be explored in the next chapter with continuing emphasis being placed on the nature of the process and the direction in which it is travelling.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong has had many meetings, conferences and visits with such notables as Indira Ghandi, Ellsworth Bunker, Golda Mier, Josip Broz Tito, Anwar Sadat, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Neville Williams, "Reverend Doom". Penthouse. April. (New York: Penthouse International Ltd. 1977). p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> Piegelhaupt, Barbara. "Church Holdings Worth More than \$100 million". The Evening Telegram. Dec 12, 1977. (St. John's: St. John's Publishing Company Ltd., 1977). p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Interested, potential members were usually only informed of this doctrine after they had been extensively exposed to the sect. Rather than risk initial revulsion, ministers united until the "die had been cast" to drop their bombshell.

<sup>5</sup> Rader, Stanley R. in "35 Ministers and Lay People Leave Armstrong Church in Rift". The N.Y. Times. Mar. 16, 1974. p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> John 18: 36.

### Chapter 3

#### An Explanation of Sectarian Evolution

### Introduction

This chapter will be devoted to an explanation of the causes and catalysts of the sectarian evolutionary process. Actually, as I will demonstrate later, this process has only one basic cause but it has many catalysts. Care must be taken to differentiate these catalysts from the causes because though they may appear to be similar to the latter they are simply processes which occur as a result of pressure upon a sect to evolve. I will deal with this topic in detail after I first examine the utility of the church-sect continuum derived from Troeltsch's church-sect typology and the WCG's changing position in relation to it.

#### A Further Examination of the Troeltsch Church-Sect Typology

The Troeltsch church-sect typology pointed to the many differences between the "sect-type" religious organization and the "church-type" religious organization. However, these types are rarely, if ever, found in society. I therefore amended the church-sect typology into a church-sect continuum in order to facilitate the positioning of the WCG in a position at some point between these two extremes. An exact position, of course, cannot be ascertained because a continuum such as this can only suggest the direction of movement at the least, and an approximate position at best.

To illustrate the WCG's progression along the continuum I am going to discuss four of the most relevant dimensions of change, from Chapter One, which Troeltsch mentions: size of the religious



organization; the amount of contact and cooperation with the state and society; the requirement of a "new birth"; and the degree of literalism in regard to interpretation and obedience of Scripture.

#### Size

The WCG has grown immensely since its beginnings in the early thirties. This growth has been, for the most part, slow and gradual up until the late sixties and early seventies when it achieved an annual rate of about 25%.

The WCG can now virtually be conceived of as a world-wide conglomerate organization with its "fingers in many pies". It publishes two high quality magazines, produces a daily radio broadcast and a weekly television telecast, owns and runs a university college, sponsors the Ambassador International Cultural Foundation, has built a \$24 million concert hall (among many other expensive buildings), has a bureaucracy which requires multi-million dollar computers, has an annual income of over 75 million dollars, and a membership of 75,000.

Considering the wealth, assets, and annual income of the WCG it is indeed a large organization - larger than many established churches. The actual membership, however, when viewed from a worldwide context, is more typical of the "sect-type". Obviously though, much distance has been covered on the church-sect continuum.

#### The Amount of Contact and Cooperation

##### With the State and Society

In the last 10-15 years the WCG has experienced a significant transformation in its relations with society. It once taught that

contact, cooperation, and interaction with society should be limited because the latter was "controlled by Satan". Leonard W. Zola, a writer for Ambassador Review (no connection with Ambassador College), describes the WCG's attitude in this regard:

For many years the Armstrongs and the Worldwide Church of God ministry have attacked this "evil, Satanic world" in publications and sermons. Countless harangues warning members of the necessity of remaining "separate" from the world's influences were preached... Members were strongly discouraged from donating to outside humanitarian causes.

The Armstrongs now preach and illustrate by their actions that the WCG SHOULD become involved with society. One of the most striking recent examples of this was the creation of the A.I.C.F. (Ambassador International Cultural Foundation), which arranges classical music, and drama performances in the Ambassador auditorium (ticket prices are \$35-\$100!). Another example of greatly increased contact with society is Herbert W. Armstrong's frequent trips abroad to visit world leaders and exchange expensive gifts with them.

Zola labels these examples of change "blatant hypocrisy". I prefer to view them as illustrations of the process of sectarian evolution which is occurring in the WCG. In respect to the area of contact and cooperation with the state and society the WCG is moving rapidly toward the "church-type".

#### Requirement of a "New Birth"

The third important area of change which Troeltsch mentions deals with the emphasis which a religious organization places on the "new birth". Though the WCG technically rejects the "born

again" term, it embraces the principle behind it. That is, a true Christian must come to the realization that his past life was sinful and must be rejected in favour of a totally new form of existence.

The WCG has previously taught that this "new birth" was essential for salvation and that it could only come through a dedication to God as manifested by an acceptance of WCG teachings. Herbert W. Armstrong, on this latter point, said in a 1976 sermon:

The Gospel had not been preached until God raised me up to preach it. That gospel you never heard from any preacher except one from this church. You never heard it from Billy Graham. You never heard it from any Protestant preacher. You never heard it from any Catholic priest.<sup>2</sup>

This "one true church" dogma, however, was recently contradicted by Garner Ted Armstrong:

I don't believe that [the above dogma] either, except for the invisible church, the Body of Christ. But it is definitely not necessary to belong to the Worldwide Church of God in order to be saved [i.e. "new birth"].<sup>3</sup>

This revised position represents a radical departure from previous beliefs for the WCG. It is assuming a characteristic common of the "church-type" in that it recognizes that other paths to salvation, or the "new birth", exist other than through itself.

#### Interpretation and Obedience of Scripture

Troeltsch said that a common characteristic of the "sect-type" religious organization is an emphasis upon a literal interpretation and obedience of the Scriptures. For many years the WCG stressed

this principle and its major doctrines reflected it.

This is still essentially the position of the sect but one must wonder when one considers recent practices which are obviously at variance with Scripture. The A.I.C.F. practice of using tithe money from sect members and giving it to the rich in the form of the subsidization of symphonie concerts and champagne receptions is surely one striking example. It seems that when a change of doctrine is in order the WCG doesn't throw out its "literal interpretation" principle but it seeks Scriptural proof for their revised position. Very rarely has the WCG actually changed a doctrine as a result of FIRST finding Scriptural proof and consequently altering the doctrine in accordance with it. A "church-type" approach is therefore becoming characteristic of the WCG in that its emphasis upon literal interpretation and obedience of the Scripture is being compromised to matters of expediency.)

In the four above areas of change which Troeltsch mentions in connection with his church-sect typology the WCG has experienced considerable sectarian evolution towards the "church-type" end of the church-sect continuum. This evolution, however, is not complete and in many areas it has not even been initiated, but it does demonstrate that the WCG has started the process and has therefore experienced the pressure to evolve. This pressure and its cause is the subject of the next section.

#### The Cause of Sectarian Evolution

Sectarian evolution has occurred in the WCG because of a specific reason - the need for the sect to remain in a workable state. Though it

attained a workable state many years ago it must nevertheless still constantly evolve because its surrounding social milieu is also in a state of perpetual flux.

First of all, however, I must define a "workable state": This refers to a mode of existence in which a religious organization exists in society in a manner which thwarts atrophic tendencies and minimizes conflictual interaction. A non-workable state cannot persist because the above problems will result in the disintegration of the sect.

The need for a sect to remain workable is therefore the root cause of sectarian evolution. Many catalysts, or indirect causes, can be identified such as the succession problem which exists when the original charismatic founder dies or becomes incapacitated. The leadership policies of a successor often lead the sect in a different direction, or possibly, the direction remains unchanged but the pace becomes accelerated. In any event, this should not be construed as being a cause of sectarian evolution, but simply a catalyst.

#### Sectarian Evolution in Action

At this point I will provide a brief example of the reason why sectarian evolution has occurred and is occurring in the WCG. This example revolves around the practice of tithing.

Up until 1973-1974 the WCG believed that 1) an individual's tithes (i.e. first, second and third tithes), were to be subtracted from his/her gross income, and 2) all tithes were compulsory for everyone.

This doctrine, however, changed substantially in 1973 in that

1) tithes were to be paid only on net income; and 2) tithes were not to be paid by those on welfare, unemployment insurance, or a minimal income.

The important question to ask here is "why did these changes occur?" One could answer that it was because of the 1973 crisis and the demands made by the group of 35 dissatisfied ministers. This, however, would be misleading because the crisis was simply a catalyst which precipitated the changes. What actually caused the sect to evolve was its need to remain in a workable state. This was being made increasingly difficult because of the many external and internal pressures upon the sect to change its tithing doctrine. The surrounding society (or at least that part which came into contact with the WCG), WCG members, and WCG ministers were all applying cogent pressure upon the sect to adopt a more reasonable, humanitarian, and indeed, Scriptural approach to the doctrine of tithing. Relations between these groups and the WCG were becoming strained and characterized by conflictual interaction. In order to avoid this, Herbert W. Armstrong and Garner Ted Armstrong organized one of their "doctrinal committees" to study into the question of tithing. Not surprisingly, Scriptural proof was "discovered" for a revised position which would appease the dissenting groups.

Summary

The church-sect continuum as derived from Troeltsch has utility because it allows one to examine the characteristics of both the "sect-type" and the "church-type" religious organization and subsequently plot the amount of sectarian evolution which the WOG experienced in the major categories of differentiation.

This continuum, however, has no explanatory value in regard to the actual cause of sectarian evolution. I have shown that this cause is the need for a sect to remain in a workable state in relation to itself and society. Most major changes, and the catalysts of change, can be traced down to this explanation.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup>Leonard W. Zola, "From Those Wonderful People Who Brought You '1972', We Present .....A.I.C.F.", Ambassador Review. Vol. 1, No.1, June. (Pasadena: 1976), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Herbert W. Armstrong, in "What the Armstrongs Say About Other Churches", Ambassador Report. (Pasadena: 1977), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Garner Ted Armstrong, in "Where Would You Go?", Ambassador Review. Vol. 1, No. 1, June. (Pasadena: 1976), p. 32.

<sup>4</sup>This cause of sectarian evolution (i.e. the need to remain workable), may be considered somewhat analogous to the cause of the Darwinian theory of evolution. The latter submits that organisms evolve in order to adopt to the ever-changing physical environment. The basic difference between this and sectarian evolution is that sects are subject to PRESSURE from the surrounding environment which usually results in rapid change. A form of stimulus-response relation exists.



## Chapter 4

### The Control Systems of the WCG

Part One

The Organizational Control System of the WCG

The Worldwide Church of God, although concentrated in North America, is truly a worldwide organization because it has local branches and/or members in virtually every country. The "World Tomorrow" radio broadcast is translated into many languages as is the Plain Truth magazine.

To achieve and maintain unity in such a vast organization is therefore no small task. The WCG has dealt with it by developing a governmental system which maximizes central control into the hands of a few top leaders. These people dictate doctrine, administrative procedure, and even the individual attitudes of the members worldwide.

The first section of Chapter 4 will describe this centralized governmental system which has preserved the unity of the WCG in the face of extensive sectarian evolution.

The WCG's Centralized System of Government

The WCG is ruled by a hierarchy which emphasizes the "top down" nature of a Scripturally sanctioned government. It is extremely organized and every administrator/minister (the two are usually synonymous) knows his exact responsibility and authority in the system. Herbert W. Armstrong is of course the "ruler" of this hierarchy because he set himself up as the one true "Apostle" of God in the early thirties. Not surprisingly, he chose his son, Garner Ted Armstrong, to be the chief "evangelist" of the sect. There are also,

in order of importance, sub-evangelists, regional directors, pastors, preaching elders, local elders, and deacons.

On the surface, this hierarchy appears to be of a simple and efficient nature but events of recent years have illustrated that this is indeed not the case. One of these events is the rise of Stanley R. Radar (Financial Director and Chief Counsel for the WCC) to a position of power and control in the sect. Until recently he was not a member but only a "sympathizer" who was hired to manage the legal affairs. Radar, and his assistant, Robert L. Kuhn, are now Herbert W. Armstrong's "right hand men", along with Garner Ted Armstrong. Radar, however, has manipulated himself into a unique position in the WCC. Leonard W. Zola describes this position:

Herbert and Ted wear the royal robes seen by the public while Stan manipulates the kingdom behind the scenes. Radar's power over the raps has multiplied in recent years as H.W.A. has become more and more dependent on him. Not only does Radar control financial affairs, but his political tentacles have reached out to embrace almost every department in the organization from Church Administration to College Internal affairs.

The "top-down" system of government of the WCC is nevertheless intact but it's becoming increasingly nebulous as to who exactly is on "top" because Radar's real power is hard to measure due to its covert nature. In the future, after Herbert W. Armstrong's death, it is fairly safe to predict that there will be a power struggle between the Stanley Radar faction and the Garner Ted Armstrong faction.

The WCC governmental system, however, has been very successful

in regard to the achievement of its central purpose - the maintenance of unity throughout its local units as manifested by a dedication to and obedience of central headquarters. This is partially due to Herbert W. Armstrong's "rule with a rod of iron". Local units worldwide are kept in constant contact with, and awareness of changing sect doctrines and specific practices through a system of "co-worker" letters and ministerial bulletins. Ministers who are suspected of deviating from WCC procedure or doctrine are quickly "disfellowshipped" and relieved of further responsibility.

Sect unity is emphasized at all times and the Armstrongs go to great lengths to protect this unity from both internal and external atrophic tendencies. I shall quote a letter in this connection written by a former WCC deacon who was instructed to "protect the church" and its present organizational system in the face of external questioning:

...concerning the WCC policy on healing. Many people suffered needlessly while headquarters took care of themselves [and their organizational structure]. I recall one very grave incident where a young girl was suffering from appendicitis. Many prayers were said for her by members, and visits were made by the ministry for anointing and counselling. In a serious situation like this the counselling would include a warning that if the child were to die (which she did, it ruptured) to be prepared with a story for the authorities so as not to get the church involved. The church was to be protected at all costs (even lying).<sup>3</sup>

Every local elder or deacon has received explicit instructions, such as the above, from headquarters on the methods to follow when dealing with problematic areas or individuals. The organizational

control is tight and there is little room for local deviation. The key word which is stressed is loyalty; i.e. loyalty to God as represented by Herbert W. Armstrong. This, however, leads into the next subject - individual thought control.

## Part Two

### The Individual Control System of the WCG

The predominant theme of this second section is centered around 1) the methods which the WCG uses to inculcate its beliefs and doctrines into the minds of prospective members, and 2) the reasons why members stay in the sect and continue to actively support it in the face of constant sectarian evolution. Specifically, I will discuss the WCG's "soft-sell" approach, its degree of voluntarism and the effect this has upon sectarian evolution, and the dedication of individual members in terms of cognitive dissonance theory.

### The WCG's "Soft-Sell" Approach

The term "soft-sell" was first used in relation to the Armstrong sect about five years ago in Time magazine. It is actually an extremely descriptive term because Herbert W. Armstrong, a former professional advertising man, has intentionally used this approach to gradually lure unsuspecting semi-interested potential members into the sect. How does he do it and why is he so successful?

An important aspect of the WCG's "soft-sell" approach is the actual voice of Garner Ted Armstrong. When people hear this voice on their car radio on the way home from work, for example, it comes across as a logical, reassuring, meaningful voice. Garner Ted

Armstrong's message is also along the same lines - he speaks on relevant, topical subjects such as pollution, the energy crisis, inflation, etc., and hints that there is a way in which these world problems can be solved. He rarely, however, states that he believes this way is through the support of the WCG.

Garner Ted Armstrong is convincing because he makes people WANT to believe him. His approach can be compared to that of a beautiful woman attempting to seduce a man. The initial interest which exists is heightened by the skillful revealing of alluring parts of the body. Very soon, a point of no return will be reached and the man will then WANT the seduction process to continue and will take measures to ensure that it does.

Little material related to doctrinal matters is revealed on the "World Tomorrow" broadcast but the booklets which are advertised at the end of the program contain repeated Biblical references. Once a prospective member has "advanced" sufficiently to order some of these booklets he will then usually be in a position to absorb the Biblical content, and indeed, even embrace it.

Bobby Fischer, a former international chess champion, became interested in the WCG in 1962. After tithing over \$100,000 of his money to the Armstrongs he has since left the sect. He comments on the tactics which the Armstrongs use to attract initial interest and subsequent involvement:

First, they [potential members] get conducted in with a nice sweet program, no money, everything free, free, free? And then they get sucked in, and suddenly a few lies get mixed in. They are told that their human nature is wicked and these

nice people who gave them all these nice things [i.e. free booklets and magazines] wouldn't be lying to them, would they?...

Herbert Armstrong claims to be freeing you from the world's churches, freeing you from all the trash you've heard all your life.... You are completely under the power of Armstrongism. Good luck... you're going to need it.<sup>4</sup>

This professional "soft-sell" approach, while very effective, only works on a certain segment of the population. This segment has various reasons why they would allow themselves to be led into the Armstrong organization. One reason is that due to the convincing quality of Garner Ted Armstrong's voice and presentation and the obvious bits of wisdom and truth which he imparts an individual can be duped into thinking that everything the man says is "gospel". Another reason is that the individual has witnessed and felt what he perceives to be hopelessness in this society and he wants and needs a way out, or a concrete, optimistic belief to embrace. This latter type of person is prone to join virtually any form of utopian sect. The master salesman, Herbert W. Armstrong, realizes this and plays upon it. Bobby Fischer recognizes this aspect of the Armstrong approach:

He [HWA] talks about this world and how evil it is and all, but actually he's really of this world with all these high pressure sales tactics ..... Articles in old Plain Truths tell you that you haven't much time to develop character to prepare for Christ's return - to take the last train to sanity by joining Armstrongism. The idea is constantly drummed into your head that you must obey God - Armstrongism before it's too late..... This kind of super high pressure salesmanship leads people to make rash decisions, based on fear, often made against their better judgement.<sup>5</sup>

In slightly different analytical terms R. Stephen Estes, a former Ambassador College student, describes the type of person whom he feels is prone to join the WCG:

Indeed, not the least disturbing rumination on the "experience" is that we had or have the proclivity to it. A basic lack of reasonable humility (giving us the sense of God's scrutiny), a fear of error (leading to a surrender of personal autonomy), and a disgusting dilettantism and lack of patience among many other things, brought us to affiliate with this man whose character is like ours in kind but different in degree by several orders of magnitude.<sup>5</sup>

The basic reason why Herbert W. Armstrong and Garner Ted Armstrong have been so successful in garnering members and finances over the years is that they recognize the ways to appeal to people with a "proclivity" (sic) towards joining a sect and the ways in which to create this "proclivity" among casually interested parties. However, once they have succeeded in attaining initial thought control through the "soft-sell" approach, they then must ensure subsequent thought control in order for the sect to keep growing.

#### The WCG's Ongoing Thought Manipulation Mechanisms

Once an individual becomes interested in the WCG and takes initiative to further this interest he will then become exposed to its cyclic method of thought manipulation. The first basic premise of this method is that Herbert W. Armstrong is the one true "Apostle" of God in this age and the WCG is God's one true church. Secondly, mankind possesses a human nature which is totally selfish, wicked,



and Satan oriented. Therefore, we must put our trust in God through a belief in the Bible and its teachings. Since the WCG is God's one true church then we must accept its doctrines and practices as being those of God. Herbert W. Armstrong and Garner Ted Armstrong repeatedly tell both members and non-members in their booklets, that to doubt or question WCG principles (they label them God's principles), is a sign that Satan is trying to infiltrate their minds.

Once this cyclic process of ensnarement has trapped an individual it becomes extremely hard for him to disentangle himself and to realize exactly what is happening to his mind. He becomes indoctrinated with the belief that to stray from the WCG is to enter the hands of Satan.

One former member of the WCG DID realize what was happening to him and has commented on it:

But it is a certain truth that as long as one remains a supporter of the organization it is indeed difficult, if not impossible, to really see the WCG in its true light. Members of the WCG tend to reason in vicious circles - to doubt or question Mr. Armstrong is to doubt the apostle of God and that is tantamount to doubting God Himself and that brings the individual back to where he started with nothing resolved. This type of thinking has created probably the most confused, frustrated laity of any church organization in the world today.

The WCG essentially tries to stifle rational thought processes though it purports that these processes are essential to fully understand and live by Scriptural principles. The obvious problem which exists here revolves around the fact that the WCG is a closed society. The social, recreational, marital, and to some extent, occupational relations of its members are carefully controlled and observed by

the ministers in order to keep them confined within the boundaries of the sect. This closed society approach is carried over into the thinking process because members are taught, both covertly and saliently, that they should only have rational, questioning attitudes in regard to matters other than those concerned with WCG doctrine and practice. The latter, since they are supposedly logically derived from inspired Scripture, should be accepted as self-evident truths.

The WCG's cyclic process of indoctrination is so effective that it can catch even highly logical and intelligent people in its trap. One such example, as I mentioned previously, is Bobby Fischer. He, however, now recognizes the Armstrong approach and their subtle methods of indoctrination:

Church members shouldn't let themselves be confused. They begin not trusting in their own judgement, and then they're finished.... From there you just get more and more confused. Once you think that your own mind is not your friend anymore... then I think you are on your way to insanity. You have been stripped bare. All your defenses are gone. You must trust Armstrongism, his ministers, doctrines, and organization. Otherwise you're going in the wrong direction, and you know where that leads.

In addition to the above cyclic thought manipulation method the WCG uses assorted techniques to ensure loyalty of the membership and to weed out troublemakers. One such technique is mail censorship at Ambassador College. When "objectionable" mail is received at Ambassador College its usual fate is to be "lost" because of a "procedural error". Actually, this translates into mail censorship by the college administration.

Another technique is what is referred to as tithe checks. This refers to the computerized examination of receipted donations (tithes) of any or all of those people who gave money to the WCG. Though this activity has been repeatedly denied by Herbert W. Armstrong and Garner Ted Armstrong, recent investigations by neutral parties have indicated that many members have been checked upon and asked either to resume their delinquent tithe payments or be disfellowshipped.

Techniques such as the above and the cyclic thought manipulation method are designed to protect the ideological and doctrinal insulation of Ambassador College and the WCG. They have proven successful in the past and will probably continue to do so in the future because they are controlled by intelligent individuals who understand the intricacies of thought and attitude manipulation.

#### Degree of Voluntarism and Its Effect on Sectarian Evolution

The degree of voluntarism which a sect exhibits directly affects the sectarian evolutionary process. Low voluntarism will result in a relatively smooth, uninterrupted process and a highly voluntaristic sect can expect to encounter difficulties as it changes. First, however, the term "voluntarism" must be defined.

I use the term "voluntarism" to refer to the nature of a sect's proselyting process. In its initial stages it can simply be a straightforward presentation of doctrine and beliefs. That is, psychological manipulation, or thought control, is not utilized and therefore plays no role in a potential member's decision to join the

sect. This is a state of high voluntarism because members have joined the sect voluntarily on the sole basis of their belief in the validity of the sect's doctrines. A highly voluntaristic state such as this, however, is rarely found in reality.

A sect characterized by low voluntarism is one which stresses manipulative thought control in both its members and, more importantly, interested potential members. Once an individual becomes exposed to a sect of this nature he then faces a variety of possible manipulative techniques aimed at making him a member of the sect. The individual might think that he joined voluntarily but this is not so because he was actually the victim of psychological manipulation. The WCG, therefore, should not be considered to be the type of voluntary organization consisting solely of individuals who voluntarily became members. The extensive psychological manipulation used by the sect to attract new members has disqualified it from this status. To be more precise, it can be correctly labelled a "pseudo-voluntary organization". It attempts to portray itself as being a highly voluntaristic organization (i.e. in regard to initial membership attraction), but it is obviously characteristic of a low voluntaristic organization.

A sect's degree of the above form of voluntarism can have a direct effect on the process of sectarian evolution in that it can either create difficulties as the sect evolves or enable it to evolve smoothly. The former may happen if a highly voluntaristic state prevails. The members of this type of sect joined because they perceived the sect to be doctrinally correct. Significant consequent changes in the sect in regard to its doctrines, beliefs, and practices,

however, could leave these members to voluntarily leave because the sect has strayed from their ideals. Upon leaving, feelings of guilt and depression would be largely absent because the sect did not have a thought manipulation system which indoctrinated its members, either consciously or unconsciously, with the belief that only its teachings were correct and to stray from them would be to play into the hands of Satan. Sectarian evolution, therefore, would be accompanied by severely disruptive changes in the sect because of the possible exodus of a great number of its members.

This, however, would not be the case in a sect exhibiting a low degree of voluntarism. The WCG fits into this category because it utilizes extensive thought control techniques in both the proselyting of potential members and the ensuring of dedication in present members. These techniques, which I have described in a previous section, render the process of joining the sect substantially less voluntary. A smooth sectarian evolutionary process can consequently be expected because members are more likely to accept changes in the sect due to their ingrained belief that it is, and always will be, an instrument of God.

Though the WCG teaches and emphasizes free, logical thinking it nevertheless can be characterized by a low degree of voluntarism in that its members cannot truly be conceived of as "volunteers". Its sectarian evolution has not been without disturbances (i.e. ministerial dissent and disfellowships), but on the whole it has progressed relatively smoothly and significantly throughout the years. Its members believe that any sectarian evolution is inspired by God and

therefore should be accepted without question. The thought manipulation process of the WCG has enabled this to occur.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory  
and Thought Manipulation

Cognitive dissonance theory, developed by Leon Festinger, is useful at this stage in regard to the explanation of the WCG's thought manipulation process and the effect it has on its membership. This theory deals with elements which are in a contradictory, or more precisely, dissonant relationship. Festinger defines this in his book, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance:

...two [cognitive] elements are in a dissonant relation if, considering these alone, the obverse of one element would follow from the other. To state it a bit more formally, x and y are dissonant if not-x follows from y.

The need for individuals to maintain a state which minimizes dissonant relations is important in the understanding of the WCG's thought manipulation techniques and the resulting membership dedication. These techniques, which I have described previously, succeed in bringing members into a sect which requires such sacrifice and leads to drastic changes in one's life. The potential member, therefore, will reach a turning-point in which he will either unconsciously succumb to these thought manipulation techniques and become a dedicated member of the sect, or dissociate himself from it totally. The explanation is as follows.

The Turning-Point Explanation

Members of established churches are in a relatively "safe" position in that their beliefs, or lack of them, require little defense or justification because they are widespread and generally nonantagonistic. Furthermore, minimal sacrifice for their church is required because of the relative absence of pressing financial contributions such as tithe payments.

This, however, is not the case with sects. The WCG has many beliefs and doctrines which are very unpopular in society and very demanding of members. Therefore, at some time after their initial conversion, usually before the membership ceremony of baptism, an important turning-point is reached in that they must either totally renounce their previous beliefs and lifestyle and adopt a drastically new outlook and way of life, or turn away from the WCG.

"Luke-warm Christians", so to speak, are rare in the WCG because a dissonant relation would exist if one made such sacrifice in his personal life for a cause in which he did not firmly believe. In other words, it is inconsistent to make a great investment in an end which is not considered worthwhile. Once a prospective or present member has committed himself to the WCG, the "Rubicon has been crossed". The decision is virtually irrevocable because the sacrifice required to join the sect is not consistent (or consonant) with a less than wholehearted acceptance of its doctrines and practices. The need to avoid a dissonant relation acts as an effective method of control in keeping the member dedicated to the WCG.

The WCG has many doctrines, beliefs, and practices which are potential areas for a dissonant relation. Very frequently, for example, a sect member will lose his job because of his observance of the Saturday Sabbath. The Armstrongs dictate that members must totally abstain from any form of work during the period between sunset Friday evening and sunset Saturday evening. Not surprisingly, many sect members have had to sacrifice their jobs in order to observe this doctrine. A dissonant relation would therefore exist if they were to leave the WCG after having sacrificed a well-paying, satisfying job. The need to avoid this situation results in the continued membership dedication of the WCG.

Cognitive dissonance theory and my resulting "turning-point explanation" suggests yet another area in which the WCG exerts psychological manipulation on its membership. Many of its leaders are probably not even aware of the above processes or their effects, but they (i.e. the processes) are nevertheless important in that they allow the sectarian evolutionary process to occur smoothly because of increased membership dedication and loyalty to the WCG, despite its constant evolution.



SUMMARY

In this chapter I have focused my attention on the organizational and individual control systems of the WCG. Together they are successful in maintaining unity in the sect and allowing sectarian evolution to occur in a relatively smooth manner. The low degree of voluntarism in the WCG has been examined because it is a consequence of the individual control system.

Cognitive dissonance theory and the "turning-point explanation" which I derived from it were discussed because they also provide a new dimension of understanding in regard to the individual control systems of the WCG.

In summary, the WCG has been so successful, despite constant change and fluctuation in its doctrine and beliefs over the years, because it has an effective, workable system of controlling both its organizational and individual aspects. Its control systems, in other words, though they are not all consciously planned techniques, serve to perpetuate the sect in the face of potentially atrophic tendencies.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup>The term "evangelist" simply denotes a position of administrative and ministerial authority in the WCG. It bears little resemblance to the commonly accepted meaning of the term.

<sup>2</sup>Leonard W. Zola, "From Those Wonderful People Who Brought You '1972', We Present ...A.I.C.F.", Ambassador Review. Vol. 1, No. 1, June. (Pasadena: 1976, p. 12).

<sup>3</sup>Former WCG deacon, in "The Booklets Nobody Wants to Talk About", Ambassador Report. (Pasadena: 1977), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup>Bobby Fischer, in "Bobby Fischer Speaks Out", Ambassador Report. (Pasadena: 1977), p. 56.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. p. 57.

<sup>6</sup>R. Stephen Estes, in "Letters", Ambassador Report. (Pasadena: 1977), p. 83.

<sup>7</sup>James B. Rector, in "Letters", Ambassador Review. Vol. 1, No. 1, June. (Pasadena: 1976), p. 46.

<sup>8</sup>Bobby Fischer, in "Bobby Fischer Speaks Out", Ambassador Report. (Pasadena: 1977), pp. 55-56.

<sup>9</sup>The disturbances which the WCG has experienced were generally not due to unfavourable reaction by the ministers and the membership to evolutionary changes but to a reaction against hypocrisy and dishonesty in its upper echelons of leadership.

<sup>10</sup>Leon Festinger, A. Theory of Cognitive Dissonance. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 13.

## Chapter 5

### Summary

Summary

In this paper I have attempted to examine the changes and trends in a specific religious organization - the WCG. The relatively constant process of change, which has been identified, I have labelled sectarian evolution. In order to define it more precisely and to trace its direction I utilized the Troeltsch church-sect typology developed by Ernst Troeltsch in 1912. I amended it into the form of a continuum and illustrated how the WCG was increasingly acquiring characteristics common of the "church-type" in contrast to the "sect-type".

Using the many invaluable first hand reports provided to me by a former member of the WCG, who I labelled "Smith", and examining WCG literature of past and present I provided in Chapter 2 a summary of the significant areas of WCG sectarian evolution. This evolution has been essentially of a gradual nature up until 1973 when repeated doctrinal crises were encountered.

In Chapter 3 I further examined the Troeltsch church-sect typology and determined its utility in tracing the sectarian evolution of the WCG in respect to four specific areas: size; the amount of contact and cooperation with the state and society; requirement of a "new birth"; and interpretation and obedience of Scripture. This examination illustrated that the WCG has progressed significantly along the church-sect continuum.

The central question, however, which is pressing for an answer at this stage is "why does sectarian evolution occur?" From my examination of the WCG's changing doctrines I concluded that it

occurs simply because a sect needs to remain in a workable state. This requires constant change because the surrounding social milieu is always in a state of transition. Many catalysts of sectarian evolution can be identified but they all relate to this one root cause. I used the example of tithing to illustrate how the WCG was slipping into an atrophic state and how major changes were therefore needed. These changes did occur and this doctrinal area became less problematic.

In Chapter 4 I examined how the WCG maintains unity in the face of an ongoing process of sectarian evolution. Its central organizational control system keeps all local units in constant touch with headquarters in Pasadena. Therefore, as the latter changes, so does the entire sect.

In this chapter I also discussed 1) the methods which the WCG uses to inculcate its beliefs and doctrines into the minds of prospective members and, 2) the reason why members stay in the sect and continue to actively support it in the face of constant sectarian evolution. The "soft-sell" approach and the cyclic method of thought manipulation were examined in this regard.

I concluded that the WCG has maintained unity over the years because of successful techniques of thought control which it has utilized. It is because of these methods that I labelled the WCG a sect characterized by a low degree of voluntarism.

Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance provided a final standpoint from which to examine the success of the WCG's individual thought manipulation mechanisms. This theory points to a

justification process occurring in the member's mind which keeps him dedicated to the sect.

In summary, I have developed the concept of sectarian evolution, defined it, provided examples of it, examined its cause, and illustrated the reasons for its persistence in the WOG. I have therefore, hopefully elucidated this concept and illustrated its relevancy in regard to contemporary religious sects.

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