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DEVIANCE Defined most basically as normative violations, deviance occurs in a wide range of religious settings. As with analyses of other types of deviance, social scientists examine issues on both social psychological (micro) and social structural/institutional (macro) levels. Deviant activities occur within normative religions, within interactions between nontraditional religions and societally normative bodies, in social debates involving contesting parties over religious tolerance versus unacceptability, and within nontraditional religions as they attempt to control their members.

No social group can escape deviance, so the appearance of deviance within normative or mainstream religious organizations is not, in and of itself, noteworthy. Of considerable research interest, however, is the manner in which mainstream groups either cause deviance to occur or respond to it in socially unacceptable ways.

For example, discussion continues about the extent to which the celibacy rules for Catholic priests may relate to social psychological and personality factors among some sexual deviants who are members of religious orders. More certain, however, is the extent to which some Catholic authorities on an institutional level have facilitated priestly pedophilic behavior. Authorities have done so through such activities as transferring accused clerics to other parishes, neglecting to report allegations against priests to proper investigating authorities, sending suspected abusers to church-run treatment centers whose success rates are uncertain, buying victim silence through out-of-court financial settlements, and shifting blame onto either the victims themselves or the general sexual ethos of society. These same patterns of denial, avoidance, and blame-shifting have taken place in other denominations. In essence, the institutional behavior of some

mainstream religious denominations unintentionally facilitated the perpetration of deviant acts by some of their members.

By and large, pluralistic societies have transcended definitions of religious deviance based upon practices that differ from the majority because countless denominations, ethnic religions, and sects flourish within any geographic locale. Nonetheless, charges of unacceptable religious deviance still occur as previously dominant groups feel threatened by the religious requirements of others. For example, male Sikhs living in Western societies occasionally encounter societal restrictions (often involving employment) because of their turbans. Likewise, some Western countries have debated the possibility of banning Moslem head coverings on women in public schools. Finally, members of minority religions often must fight for the right of their members to observe their religious holidays without suffering employment penalties.

Problems such as these—involving religions having to defend their practices as acceptable behavior—become accentuated when at least one of the religious disputants is not representative of a major world faith. Various parties in these disputes call such disputing groups *sects*, *cults*, *alternative religions*, or *new religious movements*. Labeling groups in this manner becomes a political issue because each of the terms carries potentially significant societal implications regarding public images of acceptability.

In essence, the process of labeling religions as deviant is a highly charged social dynamic involving struggles for limited societal resources (such as status, influence, tax benefits, denominational cooperation). Consequently, religious groups aspire to have society define them as morally normative or, at the very least, acceptably deviant new or alternative religions. Critics and opponents, however, strive to have these same groups defined as unacceptably deviant cults and hence worthy of societal sanctions. Occasionally, entire communities get embroiled in these debates, as occurs when noticeable numbers of religious followers quickly move into a new locale and alarm longtime residents.

A strategy that many groups use in societal debates involves attempts to control the labels by which others identify them. They put forward a *demanding designation* about themselves that simultaneously emphasizes morally normative or tolerably deviant qualities while ignoring all other, and often less tolerable, aspects of their organizations.

A crucial part of this debate among societal contenders involves allegations that many “new religions/cults” impose unacceptable constraints and demands upon members. Critics (often from the so-called anti-cult

movement) charge that “cults” violate the “core selves” of members through harsh systems intended to maintain loyalty at the expense of personal well-being, financial security, and informed decision making.

While these charges overlook the complexities of conversions, membership, and defections, they nonetheless identify patterns of disempowerment that differ from mainstream religions. In extreme cases, “deviant” religions superempower leaders at the same time that they diminish members’ self-worth, self-control, and critical capacities. Indeed, adult members relate to group leaders as children do to demanding parents and, by doing so, often undergo forms of abuse similar to what dysfunctional families and abused spouses suffer.

It is not surprising, therefore, that parents of young adults who joined controversial religions in the 1970s were instrumental in founding so-called countercult groups in countries around the world. Some countercult members actively engaged in forcible removals of group members, followed by intense efforts to convince or pressure (i.e., “deprogram”) these detainees to renounce their newly adopted faiths. In turn, these new faiths responded by labeling their “countercult” opponents as antireligious bigots in an effort to portray the critics (and not the groups themselves) as intolerably deviant.

The high demands of commitment that some groups require increases the likelihood that their members will experience group sanctions. Consequently, some groups develop formal systems of sanctions against members who reputedly deviate from doctrines or prescribed behaviors. Some groups (e.g., Synanon) use structured situations of verbal aggression as a means to punish deviance and elicit conformity. Others (e.g., The Family/Children of God and Scientology) developed special penal systems for delinquents. Because of the intensity and harshness of many sanctions, these groups may achieve conformity among members while heightening their public image as deviant religious organizations.

By no means has all research on deviance and religion concentrated on dysfunction. Various studies have shown how participation in some nontraditional or deviant faiths has created functional benefits to both individuals and society. On a micro level, members of some groups gained freedom from substance abuse, developed a work ethic, and felt a sense of community. On a macro level, these same groups allow for social experimentation that could not occur within traditional social settings. Finally, they can be vehicles for social change because they can introject into societies sets of

ideas and projects that are not likely to arise within ordinary social constraints.

See also Cult, New Religious Movements

—*Stephen A. Kent*