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The Cults as Theological Judgment

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Writing early in the last century, J. K. Van Baalen argued that “the cults are the unpaid bills of the church.” Van Baalen’s influential work, *The Chaos of the Cults*, represented one of the very first comprehensive efforts to evaluate the various cults of the day from the vantage point of orthodox Christianity. Van Baalen’s survey considered movements and groups such as Spiritism, Theosophy, Christian Science, Rosicrucianism, Swedenborgianism, Mormonism, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses, among others.

In Van Baalen’s analysis, orthodox Christianity had opened the door for the cults to emerge and to proliferate throughout the culture. Sidelined by pragmatism, distracted by divisions, and committed to a “smallest common-denominator faith,” the orthodox churches had left the larger culture, and even some of their own members, unprepared to meet the challenge of the cults.

If anything, the problem is more acute in our own day. The seductions of postmodernism and the complexities of a pluralistic culture compound the difficulty involved in engaging, understanding, and confronting the cults.

In one sense, the rise of religious cults is nothing new. The religious pluralism confronted by the apostle Paul at Mars Hill must have represented something like a foreshadowing of postmodern America. This nation’s experiment in religious liberty provided cults with a safe environment for growth even as the spent emotionalism of American revivalism left a vacuum the cults were only too willing to fill. New York’s legendary “burned-over district” is but the most well-known of those regions that soon gave birth to various cults and emergent religious groups. Writing in the 1920s, Charles W. Ferguson described the United States as “overrun with messiahs.” As he argued: “I refer not to those political quacks, who promise in one election to rid the land of evil, but rather to those inspired fakirs who promise to reduce the diaphragm, or orient the soul through the machinery of a cult religion. Each of these has made himself the center of a new theophany, has surrounded himself with a band of zealous apostles, has hired a hall for a shrine and then set about busily to rescue truth from the scaffold and put it on the throne.”

These new religious movements attracted both sociological and political attention. Walter R. Martin, whose book, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, became an evangelical classic, resisted the temptation to reduce the challenge of the cults to sociology. His particular concern was with those cults that, while deviating from historic Christianity, nonetheless insisted “that they are entitled to be classified as Christians.” Martin would cite Professor Lee Belford of New York University as stating, “The problem is essentially theological where the cults are concerned. The answer of the Church must be theological and doctrinal. No sociological or cultural evaluation will do. Such works may be helpful, but they will not answer the Jehovah’s Witness or Mormon, who is seeking Biblical authority for either the acceptance or rejection of his beliefs.”

More recently, some Christian scholars have been giving careful attention to the apologetic root of the cults that have claimed some Christian connection. The best work to emerge from this approach has focused on Mormonism as a distinct challenge to Christian orthodoxy. In an important new work, *The New Mormon Challenge*, a group of skilled evangelical

scholars consider not only the scope of Mormon teachings, but the root impulse behind Mormonism as a movement.

In a fascinating chapter, Craig J. Hazen, Professor of Comparative Religion and Apologetics at Biola University, argues that Mormonism sought to “solve” many of the intellectual problems orthodox Christianity faced in 19th-century America. Confronted by the challenges of the Enlightenment and its aftermath, many Christian denominations appeared confused and defensive about Christianity’s most crucial truth claims. In particular, Hazen points to issues of theodicy as important catalysts for the emergence of Mormonism and its distinctive theology.

Troubled by questions such as the faith of the unevangelized, the doctrine of predestination, and the anticipation of hell, many Christian churches appeared to lack confidence in biblical doctrines or the ability to provide coherent answers to the questions of the day. Beyond this, the existence of rival Christian denominations, focused on debates over what some consider to be secondary issues, left the ground open for movements such as Mormonism to step in and to claim to resolve those vexing difficulties.

Inevitably, any Christian defense of poor doctrines had to be rooted in the apostolic witness and authorized by biblical authority. The distinctive Christian revelation claim required orthodox believers to look backward into a distant past in order to define and defend Christianity. As a Restoration movement, Joseph Smith and the Mormons claimed to speak with the authority of *living* apostolic witnesses whose experience was presumably far closer to that of contemporary Americans.

Against the Christian doctrine of salvation through faith in Christ alone, Mormonism promoted a form of universalism. According to Joseph Smith and later Mormon teachers, hell would be inhabited only by a few “sons of perdition” who had obstinately rejected the light of Mormon doctrine. While orthodox Christians face the difficult question of unevangelized persons, Mormonism assured the public that almost all persons, without regard to conscious adherence to Mormonism, would find some place in paradise. Similarly, the Mormon reconfiguration of the sacraments offered the opportunity for previous generations to be evangelized through the baptism of the dead.

In other words, the Mormons capitalized on perceived doctrinal difficulties even as many Christian churches appeared to be befuddled, confused, or unwilling to confront the challenges. Confused by the emotional excesses of revivalism, many Americans saw Mormonism as an intellectually satisfying alternative to orthodox Christianity. Through what Hazen identifies as a literalistic and highly selective approach to Scripture, the Mormons were able to promote their system as an updating of Christianity for a new age—complete with a new book and new ecclesiastical authorities.

As Professor Hazen acknowledges, “One cannot make full sense of the initial rise of Mormonism without recognizing that there were strong elements in it that resonated with thoughtful people on the frontier.” Like the late Walter R. Martin, Hazen recognizes that Mormons, along with other cults, were often driven by explicitly theological motivations. All this serves to remind contemporary Christians that J. K. Van Baalen was right—the cults *are* “the unpaid bills of the church.”

Churches that surrender in the face of philosophical challenges, that reduce their doctrinal substance to minimal doctrines, and that fail to offer substantial theological arguments grounded in Scripture, leave their own members in a state of vulnerability to the cults and their arguments. Theological immaturity and doctrinal ambiguity represent an open invitation for cults old and new to proliferate. Beyond this, when Christians appear to be befuddled, embarrassed, or inept in the defense of the faith, the Church’s witness is inevitably weakened.

A lack of theological maturity and doctrinal confidence leaves a legacy of missed opportunities. These “unpaid bills” demand to be paid.

