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NEW BOOKS REVIEW

BUCHBESPRECHUNGEN

## PROPHETS OF THE "NEW TRUTH"(SECTS AND CULTS) \*

New social movements, especially religious ones, require a careful analysis as well as questioning. It has been noted that the concept of the "new religious movements" is often used in such a way that it can involve private interests of religious or economic and commercial nature.

At the level of the means they are using, purely *social movements* (for instance, cults, sects, movements propagating some special cultural life styles, tradition or practice) use perfectly legitimate and recognizable forms of action such as legally guaranteed freedom of worship and cultural freedom. The tensions with a wider environment are resolved in various ways, namely, starting from an open conflict to the withdrawal into a private area where they can practice their cults and their own life styles.

Answering to the question *What should we know about new religious movements* posed by the author of the book in question, D. Đorđević, it should be stressed first that these issues have many aspects, sides and opposite sides, "fronts". Some of them imply many good sides as well as things that are clearly harmless. On the other hand, there are new religious movements whose exclusive aim is to set up some control over the means by which our views and behavioral patterns are shaped, namely, upon those factors that "ensure" personal prosperity, carrier and welfare.

An essential characteristic of Đorđević's approach is a well-balanced standpoint which is especially important at the times of universal militancy and exclusiveness at the very thought of sects and cults.

Anyway, the aim of the research is to present a clear idea of the project and the book dealt with. The aim of the book, as suggested by the author, is to encourage, by his own writings as well by a selection of a variety of papers, *more fundamental sociological theoretical and practical research in order to introduce responsibility into public discourse concerning new religious movements*. It can rightfully be noted that there is "terminological starvation" as well as conceptual confusion; due to this, a new theory of religious movements should be established. In this book, Đorđević clearly pins down major bearings of possible new theories of the religious movements, pointing out that these new orientations must start from a balanced and well-supported discourse about religion and new religious movements. As for his own standing, he states that it is neither in favor not anti-cult oriented, though the book is justifiably oriented toward so much visible signs of an awakening of uncultivated, immature and naive anti-cult movement that has, let's mention it, brought along lucrative commercial effects, in addition to moral

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\* Dragoljub B. Đorđević, *Proroci "nove istine": sekte i kultovi*, JUNIR and Otvoreni klub, Niš, 1998

panic (See B. Stojković, p. 112).

While following Đorđević's work and engagement as well as the lectures that we both participated in, I have had many opportunities to make sure of his reactions to extreme behavior of the anti-cult movements. Eager to grasp all the nuances, he carefully measures presented arguments in order to estimate whether something is just plain insanity or a form of spirituality different from ours. This is something lacking in others who overestimate their knowledge of the things in question. To admit, even Đorđević sometimes gets carried away while reacting to hate orgies of the militant anti-cultists and tends to use a harsh word or two ("critical club", "not to read by any means"). But his reaction is understandable since he scientifically as well as emotionally warns us that we are sometimes on the verge of insanity.

The author starts his book by analyzing tolerance and religious pluralism; he states that confession and self-criticism are not manners highly appreciated by "domestic religions since it is always easy to *put the blame on someone else*" ("we/they"). The book is permeated with the author's pleading for coexistence and for the experience of the different. Very interesting analyses are those of *economic, communicative and tolerant behavior*.

While adhering to the Stark and Bainbridge's thesis that "the degree to which a group is essentially religious is an empirical expression of its momentary position on the continuous measuring scale", Đorđević offers an effective slogan that "every cult would like to become a sect, and this through the church denomination." The fundamental text at the beginning of the book is Stark and Bainbridge's "On Churches, Sects and Cults - Introductory Concepts for a Theory of Religious Movements." This text offering new patterns in the understanding of the relationship between cults, sects, denomination and churches or a new paradigm of religious organization, "by the miraculous miracle", as stressed by the author, has not been used in domestic vehement disputes concerning small religious communities (though published as early as 1987). Đorđević is really right since it is a text that can, in a nutshell, introduce some order where previously there was none.

In a very impressive manner of the modern sociologist Đorđević demonstrates a case study (Old Religious Communities - Case of an Adventist) as well as application of the most heterogeneous empirical material in the section entitled "Anti-cult Movements in Their Serbian Version". At the end, the author warns once again through *Pro et Contra* that not all has been carefully thought out in the approach to religious organization. The selection of texts is knowingly done and it seems to be covering the entire problem. My impression is that it would have also been fruitful if an introductory text about religion in the transition society had also been introduced including everlasting questioning of the guaranteed practicing of religious freedom that I am going to refer to just now.

New religious movements are a living testimony that people of modern times *are believers, but they do not believe together any longer*. Religion is in transition, and a new religion is a religion *a la carte*; the selection is no longer restricted to old monotheistic religions, but it is extended to include new religions. In his book *The Big Transition*, Guy Sorman states that God himself has become one of the many divinities: everyone has adopted his own definition of God, metaphysical, economic, spiritualist, by himself and beyond himself. This expansion of the market to include the good of salvation (Raymond Lamier) makes institutions, churches and pastors increasingly useless. The modern believer approaches to the sacred only by his own imagination or *the media mass* that is a

consumer of spiritual goods; he is doomed to permanent shortage of these goods. The market, in fact, cannot meet these needs; in order to persist, the market stimulates the needs without ever satisfying them.

The same stands for religion that is turning into a market religion. An individual is left to himself at every moment of time; he is free to choose, but lonely; he is constantly crucified between apparent happiness and, on the other hand, frustration and loneliness. This choice is offered to him by a new *spiritual supermarket of religiosity* as well as *paganism in the offensive* created by capitalism in search of blessed and immanent self-legitimization. At the end of the twentieth century a great problem is not scientific skepticism but *mass mimicry*. People are ready to believe in anything offered to them with sufficient persuasion, especially in myths, images and leaders for universal consumption. Not only old cults are renown, but new religions are being invented: "New American religion is a set of sects based upon personal experience of the believers who live their religion by their own free choice... American religion has not been discovered, it is being experienced. For this experience, churches are only simple envelopes or machines for producing social rituals and a group zeal" (Harold Bloom). The fact is that ninety percent of Americans believe in God. D. Bell interprets this fact carefully stressing that it does not speak realistically about the faith of the Americans; it just measures their loyalty or their desire for allegiance to the particular community. This desire is even stronger with them than with the Europeans since the USA remains a conglomerate of the communities that have been joined together by a triple contract, namely, *the political* (democracy), *the economic* (capitalism) and *the conformist* (religion, no matter which). Daniel Bell differentiates two levels when he studies religion, namely, *the religion level* which is more resistant to modernization and *the organization level* which is secularized by capitalism by selecting the communities that are best adapted to the society it creates.

The market religion, marketing, mass media and new religious movements have created a new sensibility as well as the production of new spirituality. These processes should not be ignored; concerning this, I see a great value and contribution of D. Đorđević's book *Prophets of "New Truth" - Sects and Cults*.

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