

Apostates and New Religious Movements

Every religion which makes claim to a definitive body of doctrine and practice which it regards as exclusively its own, is likely to be faced with the fact that from time to time some erstwhile members will relinquish their allegiance and cease to subscribe to the formalities of the faith, in at least some, perhaps all, of its teachings, practices, organization, and discipline. Apostasy has been a common phenomenon in the history of the various denominations of the Judaeo-Christian-Muslim tradition. Each new schism from an already established organization of faith has been likely to be seen, by those from whom the schismatics have separated, as a case of apostasy. There have been dramatic instances on a large scale, as in the so-called "great schism" of the eastern (Orthodox) and western (Catholic) churches, and in the emergence of Protestantism at the Reformation. (It needs to be added, if only for the record, that the dissentient and departing parties have generally no less often accused those remaining in the earlier established body of apostasy from some earlier putative standard of faith and practice.) Given the number of religious bodies in Christendom which originated in schism, it must be clear that apostasy has been of widespread and common occurrence.

Not every incident of apostasy results in the formulation of a deviant and separate religious party or sect, however. Apostasy may be considered no less to occur when a single erstwhile believer renounces his vows and his former religious allegiance. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at a time of crisis in Christian belief, there were some celebrated cases of apostasy from the Roman Catholic Church. They were represented as occurring in that church because of the rigour of its requirements of belief and practice; because of its resistance to modernism; and in particular because it encouraged the most devoted of its votaries to join monastic orders or congregations. Some of the lurid stories of monastic life, purportedly related by apostated monks and nuns – the celebrated case of Maria Monk was widely publicised – turned out to be largely fictional, but were much used by the anti-Catholic propagandist media of the day. In the present age of religious pluralism, in which a spirit of ecumenism prevails among many of the major Christian denominations, and in which the so-called "switching" of allegiance from one of these movements to another is not uncommon, the charge of apostasy is less frequently heard. But since c. 1960, with the appearance in western society of various new minority movements which have distinctive religious teachings and which require a strong sense of specific commitment, a member who departs is likely to be regarded as apostatizing, and all the more so, of course, if that member then proceeds to ridicule or excoriate his former beliefs and to vilify those who were previously his close associates.

In recent decades, given the emergence of so many new religious bodies which make strong demands on the loyalty of their members, instances of apostasy have become matters of considerable attention for the mass media. The apostate's story, in which he is usually presented as a victim, is seen as good news-copy for the media, particularly if he offers to "reveal" aspects, and perhaps secrets, of the movement to which he formerly belonged. In consequence, apostates receive perhaps an unwarranted amount of media attention, particularly when they are able to present their previous allegiance in terms both of their own vulnerability and the manipulation, deception, or coercion exercised by the leaders and members of the movement into which they were recruited. Because these accounts are often the only information normally available to the general public about minority religions, and certainly the most widely disseminated information, the apostate becomes a central figure in the formation (or misformation) of opinion in the public domain concerning these movements.

Academic scholars interested in religious minorities, and in particular sociologists, in whose field this subject matter particularly lies, normally pursue their scholarly enquiries by a variety of well-recognized methods. They gather their data not only by archival research and the study of printed matter and documents, but also by participant observation, interviews, questionnaire surveys and, directly to the point at issue here, from informants. Apostates are often very willing informants, but sociologists generally exercise considerable caution with respect to this possible source of evidence. As I have written elsewhere, in discussion of the sociologist's techniques of inquiry:

Informants who are mere contacts and who have no personal motives for what they tell are to be preferred to those who, for their own purposes, seek to use the investigator. The disaffected and the apostate are in particular informants whose evidence has to be used with circumspection. The apostate is generally in need of self-justification. He seeks to reconstruct his own past, to excuse his former affiliations, and to blame those who were formerly his closest associates. Not uncommonly the apostate learns to rehearse an 'atrocious story' to explain how, by manipulation, trickery, coercion, or deceit, he was induced to join or to remain within an organization that he now forswears and condemns. Apostates, sensationalized by the press, have sometimes sought to make a profit from accounts of their experiences in stories sold to newspapers or produced as books (sometimes written by 'ghost' writers). [Bryan Wilson, *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, p.19.]

Sociologists and other investigators into minority religions have thus come to recognize a particular constellation of motives that prompt apostates in the stance they adopt relative to their previous religious commitment and their more recent renunciation of it. The apostate needs to establish his credibility both with respect to his earlier conversion to a religious body and his subsequent relinquishment of that commitment. To vindicate himself in regard to his *volte*

face requires a plausible explanation of both his (usually sudden) adherence to his erstwhile faith and his no less sudden abandonment and condemnation of it. Academics have come to recognize the "atrocious story" as a distinctive genre of the apostate, and have even come to regard it as a recognizable category of phenomena [A.D. Shupe, Jr., and D. G. Bromley, "Apostates and Atrocious Stories", in B. Wilson (ed.), *The Social Impact of New Religious Movements*, New York, Rose of Sharon Press, 1981, pp. 179-215.] The apostate typically represents himself having been introduced to his former allegiance at a time when he was especially vulnerable – depressed, isolated, lacking social or financial support, alienated from his family, or some other such circumstance. His former associates are now depicted as having prevailed upon him by false claims, deceptions, promises of love, support, enhanced prospects, increased well-being, or the like. In fact, the apostate story proceeds, they were false friends, seeking only to exploit his goodwill, and extract from him long hours of work without pay, or whatever money or property he possessed. Thus, the apostate presents himself as "a brand plucked from the burning," as having been not responsible for his actions when he was inducted into his former religion, and as having "come to his senses" when he left. Essentially, his message is that "given the situation, it could have happened to anyone." They are entirely responsible and they act with malice aforethought against unsuspecting, innocent victims. By such a representation of the case, the apostate relocates responsibility for his earlier actions, and seeks to reintegrate with the wider society which he now seeks to influence, and perhaps to mobilize, against the religious group which he has lately abandoned.

New movements, which are relatively unfamiliar in their teachings and practices, and the beliefs and organization of which are designed in terms that are new or newly adapted, are most susceptible to public suspicion; If they have secret or undisclosed teachings, or appear to be exceptionally diligent in seeking converts, or have a distinctive appeal to one or another section of the community (e.g., the young; students; ethnic minorities; immigrants, etc.) or if the promises of benefit to believers exceed the every-day expectations of the public at large, then they may easily become objects of popular opprobrium or even hostility. The atrocious stories of apostates, particularly when enlarged by the sensationalist orientation of the press, feed these tendencies, and enhance the newsworthiness of further atrocious stories. Newspapers are well known to recapitulate earlier sensationalist accounts when locating new stories in similar vein about particular movements -- a practice designated by some sociologists as the use of "negative summary events." ["This refers to the journalistic description of a situation or event in such a way as to capture and express its negative essence as part of an intermittent and slow-moving story. An apparently isolated happening is thereby used as an occasion for keeping the broader, controversial phenomenon in the public mind." – James A. Beckford, *Cult Controversies: The Societal Response to New Religious Movements*, London, Tavistock, 1985, p. 235.] By this means, the dramatic import of each apostate's story is reinforced in its significance, to the detriment of objective and ethically neutral enquiry into religious phenomena of

the kind undertaken by academic sociologists. Contemporary religious bodies, operating in a context of rapid social change and changing perceptions of religious and spiritual belief, are likely to be particularly susceptible to the disparagement and misrepresentation which occurs through the circulation and repetition of the accounts of apostates.

Neither the objective sociological researcher nor the court of law can readily regard the apostate as a creditable or reliable source of evidence. He must always be seen as one whose personal history predisposes him to bias with respect to both his previous religious commitment and affiliations, the suspicion must arise that he acts from a personal motivation to vindicate himself and to regain his self-esteem, by showing himself to have been first a victim but subsequently to have become a redeemed crusader. As various instances have indicated, he is likely to be suggestible and ready to enlarge or embellish his grievances to satisfy that species of journalist whose interest is more in sensational copy than in an objective statement of the truth.

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