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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/assr/21613>
DOI: 10.4000/assr.21613
ISSN: 1777-5825

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 31 December 2009
Number of pages: 75-342
ISBN: 978-2-7132-2218-4
ISSN: 0335-5985

Electronic reference

Grace Davie, « Nathalie LUCA, Individus et pouvoirs face aux sectes », *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* [Online], 148 | octobre-décembre 2009, document 148-85-1, Online since 27 January 2010, connection on 21 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/assr/21613> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/assr.21613>

This text was automatically generated on 21 September 2020.

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- 1 Nathalie Luca's insightful new book takes as its theme the following question: what can "sects" tell us about the societies in which we live? It is this rather that the religious movements themselves that catches her attention. This question, however, prompts a series of others. Luca wants to know why some religious groups are considered to be sects' while others escape this appellation. And why is it that the same religious groups—or at least groups that bear the same name—are received (and so designated) differently in different societies?
- 2 For Luca, the key unit of analysis in this respect is the nation state. This focus needs a word or two of explanation given that many sects operate internationally and that the nation state itself is increasingly subject to pressures from outside. A good example of the latter is the growing need for the member states of the European Union to respect EU legislation regarding religious groups of all kinds. That said, such legislation is adopted within the framework of the nation state, an entity which has acquired traditions of its own—traditions that are crucial to a proper understanding of religion. How else can we account for the marked difference between neighbouring countries such as France or Britain in their attitudes towards, and treatment of sects? It is quite clear that the nation state remains a highly significant player.
- 3 For the sake of the English-speaking readers of this journal, it is worth outlining the content of *Individus et pouvoirs face aux sectes* in some detail before offering some reflections of my own. Luca starts by outlining her theme, explaining that sects (as she understands the term) are essentially a modern phenomenon. Traditionally contrasted

with the more inclusive notion of church', sects are now seen more as a challenge to the state—in many ways the secular inheritor of the church. In this sense sects are seen as an irritation to the process of secularisation in that they compromise the autonomy of states to make decisions regarding the citizens under their jurisdiction. Members of sects, for example, may resist the state with regard to financial, political and military obligations—challenges which more often than not are perceived negatively.

- 4 The first section of the book explores these issues in the European context, paying particular attention to the French case. This is hardly a new issue—French intolerance of sects is well-known—but Luca is particularly well-placed to consider such attitudes in a comparative perspective. Somewhat provocatively she suggests that the French model is closer to states that do not always conform to the norms of a Western democracy than it is to France's European or transatlantic partners, notably the Anglo-Saxon countries. Such a statement needs, however, to be interpreted carefully. It is true that recent legislation in France has been received negatively—i.e. as an affront to religious liberty as this is normally understood. France, however, possesses an independent judiciary capable of challenging the state where necessary. That is not always the case elsewhere. In this sense there is a crucial and qualitative difference between France and the parallels suggested by Luca, notably the Chinese case.
- 5 Explaining the relative intolerance of the French case is nonetheless important. Such an explanation lies in the specificities of French history, in which two quasi-monopolies confronted each other: on the one hand the Catholic Church, with its own claims to exclusiveness, and on the other the secular state, underpinned by a doctrine of *laïcité*. The eventual resolution of this stand-off left no space for small or unconventional religious groups which are seen, almost, as a challenge to Frenchness, whether this be Catholic or secular. Specifically, a state that is wary of religion of all kinds, sees the sect as challenge to financial rectitude, to the freedom of *conscience* (itself in tension with the freedom of *belief*), but above all as a threat to *laïcité*—the notion that religion must remain strictly in the private sphere. Some of the attempts to control such groups come perilously close to infringing the norms of toleration.
- 6 Rather different are the solutions found in the various European states that surround France: for example the United Kingdom, Belgium and Germany, all of which exemplify different approaches to the sects and new religious movements. The most obvious contrast lies however with the United States—the country that worked out its democratic principles at more or less the same time as France but in a very different way. Broadly speaking the French Revolution defined itself against religion (specifically the Catholic Church), whereas the American Revolution was effectively carried by the myriad Protestant denominations that had arrived—indeed were still arriving—in the nascent country. Part of the tension between France and the United States emerges from the fact that both claim a degree of universalism for their chosen model and have difficulty conceding that democracy can be built in different ways, not least with respect to religion.
- 7 The marked contrast between France and the United States introduces what I consider to be the key insight in Luca's book: that is her articulation of three different models (philosophies) of national community, all of which approach the question of "sects" in different ways. The three types are the republican (epitomised by France and China), the multicultural (epitomised by the United States), and the cultural (exemplified by Japan). Each have their advantages and disadvantages and each locate the problem of

“sects” rather differently. The three types are developed in some detail in the core chapters of this book.

- 8 I have already outlined the French case. The American model requires similar scrutiny. Like all modern societies it was built by a multiplicity of individual and group decisions described at some length in Chapter VI. More precisely the notion of religious liberty—though enshrined in the foundational documents of the United States and claimed as a continuing virtue—has not always been applied equally to all religious groups. Catholicism and Catholic immigrants, for example, were not as readily assimilated as their Protestant equivalents—a resistance that persisted until the 1960s. Nor is it the case that the United States has been without its problems regarding sects per se. The tragedy of the Branch Davidians, following the siege at Waco Texas in 1993, is a case in point.
- 9 It remains the case, however, that the American model is fundamentally different from the French one. The former enshrines religious liberty by means of a rigorous separation of church and state. The latter must not encroach on the former. In France, the reverse is closer to the truth: the church (or religion per se) must not encroach on the state which is considered the superior entity. Different again is the cultural model, in which the community of citizens finds its unity in a shared religious worldview. In this case, religious groups that do not share this perspective are considered suspect—a situation that frequently occurs in the Orthodox countries of Eastern Europe. The example that Luca develops at length, however, is the Japanese case—noting both the almost pure expression of the cultural type in imperial Japan, and its mutations in the subsequent democracy, much influenced by the presence of the American in the post-war period. From the point of view of sects or new religious movements, the troublesome case here is Aum Shinrikyo—a movement which, Luca claims, was left to its own devices for far too long. This laissez-faire attitude is largely accounted for by American influence.
- 10 The third section of *Individus et pouvoirs face aux sectes* looks at these groups from a transnational perspective. Religious movements—just like everything else—are increasingly subject to the flows and counter-flows of what English speakers term globalisation (the French prefer their own term: mondialisation). Here the three models outlined above are seen from a different perspective—they react variously to religious movements which are coming in from outside. Nation states, from this point of view, are on the defensive. Equally varied are the religious movements themselves—in terms of both their organisation and their motives. Luca deals first with the “ultra-liberal” group: namely the Unification Church and Soka Gakkai. The former, born in Korea, is seen as a carrier of Americanism in face of the communist threat; the latter as an agent of Japan. The second group is found primarily in the developing world and have particular appeal to those who are excluded from economic success, though aspire to this. Here the examples include a very varied list: the Full Gospel Church of South Korea, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Brazil, the Celestial Church of Christ in Nigeria, the very different forms of religion found in Haiti (including voodoo), and the many and diverse forms of religious life that compete for attention in Brazil.
- 11 A short but penetrating conclusion completes the text. It is framed by Luca’s central question: what do sects teach us about our own societies, an approach reminiscent of that developed by James Beckford in *Cult Controversies* (*Cult Controversies. The Societal Response to New Religious Movements*, London, Tavistock, 1985)—a synergy that I

find very striking. Specifically, new religious movements (the term preferred by Beckford)—though numerically of limited significance—provide us with a powerful lens through which to view the society of which they are part. By looking at the way that different societies react to new religious movements and the controversies that they generate, we can discover more about the society itself. What, for example, is regarded as normal or abnormal, as acceptable or unacceptable, tolerable or intolerable in any given case? Controversies surrounding new religious movements become, therefore, “the barometers of changes taking place in a number of different societies” (Beckford 1985: 11)—exactly the point articulated by Luca.

- 12 The reverse is also true for both authors: a full understanding of the place of new religious movements in any given society depends as much on the society in question as it does on the religious movements themselves, and nowhere more so than in France. To develop this point in more detail, it is helpful to look at Beckford’s book in relation to David Martin’s *General Theory of Secularization* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1978). The crucial essay, the penultimate chapter in *Cult Controversies*, draws very directly on David Martin’s classic analysis. Just as the historic churches form different “patterns” across Europe (and elsewhere) in terms of their modes of secularisation, so too do the minority groups, including new religious movements—and for exactly the same reasons. Particular features can be identified which have predictable effects both for the process of secularisation and for the management of innovative or unusual forms of religious life. One such feature is the state. In France the state assumes a moral quality, becoming itself an actor in the religious field; no other European society exhibits this tendency to quite the same degree. Once again, I am struck by the parallels with Luca’s work: the importance of looking at the social and political context, the links between sects and the process of secularisation, the primary role of the state, and the need to develop the analysis from a comparative perspective.
- 13 It is abundantly clear however that the question of definition bedevils a great deal of this discussion. The French prefer the word “sect”, the Anglo-Saxons use the term “new religious movement”. Are they the same thing? And what should and should not be included in this category? Luca addresses the second issue very directly, offering a minimalist definition of the term: “la secte est un groupe religieux socialement non assimilé et perçu comme menaçant pour la stabilité d’une société donnée (p.102)” [A sect is a religious group which resists assimilation and is perceived as threatening to the stability of a given society.] It follows that any religious group or movement that does not quite “fit” the society in question can be considered a sect. It is at this point that I find myself questioning Luca’s approach—a hesitation that leads in turn to my concerns about the third section of her text (the material on transnational movements). It is not so much that I have a difficulty with the argument as such; it is more a question of what should or should be included in a volume concerned primarily with sects.
- 14 To be more precise, quite a number of the movements included in Chapter IX, in particular the Full Gospel Church of South Korea, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Brazil and the Celestial Church of Christ in Nigeria, are not, in my view, sects at all. They are part of the global Pentecostal movement that is growing exponentially, particularly in the global South—so much so that they would hard to contain within the definition set out above. These movements are simply too big to be thought of as sects and, in some places at least, are becoming part of the religious mainstream. Of course

the lines of demarcation are difficult. It may well be the case that there are “sects”, or sectarian tendencies, within Pentecostalism just as there are in other religious traditions, but it is important to be clear about the starting point.

- 15 But I repeat: I do not dispute the argument as such. I entirely agree with Luca that unusual or counter-cultural forms of religion are of central interest for the sociologist of religion—indeed for the sociologist *tout court*. This is so for two reasons. The first is that they tell us a great deal about the societies of which they are part (the central theme of Luca’s book). The second is related: in order to understand these movements better, it is imperative that we see them in context. I am, however, less convinced than Luca that this argument should be limited to groups that are called sects’, regardless of the definition. It is equally true for many, very different types of religion.
- 16 That statement, however, might tell you more about me (a British-trained, pragmatic, problem-solving sociologist) than it does about this Luca’s text, which is beautifully written by a French-trained, rather more conceptually minded author, who is responding to a question that continues to preoccupy the French in ways that the British sometimes find difficult to understand. It is clear that the sociologist, as much as the notion of sect, is conditioned by her context.