

The new age movement essay sample

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Assess the view that cults, sects and New Age movements are fringe organisations that are inevitably short-lived and of little influence in contemporary society. (33 marks)

There are in fact a range of debates about the nature of cults, sects and New Age movements. Some sociologists suggest that they are fringe organisations in the sense that they appeal to only a minority of the population, however Heelas found a large increase in New Age activity in his Kendal research. Other sociologists, such as Niebuhr, argue that sects, cults and New Age movements are short-lived, either becoming denominations or dying out altogether. Some post-modernist sociologists propose that the growth of new religious movements shows the increasing influence they have in society today.

Many sociologists state that sects, cults and New Age movements only appeal to a minority of the population. For example, people on the margins of society who are poor are often attracted to sects as they offer them a sense of belonging. Others who may be undergoing a personal crisis such as the death of a loved one, may find that belonging to a sect or cult may help them to overcome this crisis. However, when they feel they have been helped to get over the crisis, they often leave the sect as there is no further reason to belong to it. This seems to suggest that these organisations only appeal to a small section of the population perhaps seeking short term help, so they will remain fringe organisations. However, other organisations such as the Scientology movement are still around today, and with a well recognised and idolised member such as Tom Cruise, this influence on society will perhaps remain high.

Heelas rejects the claim that these organisations are fringe organisations, particularly New Age movements. His research in Kendal suggests that participation in New Age activities is widespread among the population there, which suggests that New Age movements are not fringe organisations. However, Bruce points out that Heelas's data reveals that only one in fifty people in Kendal were involved in any sort of New Age activity. This suggests that the appeal of New Age movements is in fact a minority one.

Nevertheless, post-modernists argue that the appeal of new age movements reflects the pick and mix nature of post-modern society. People today feel they have a choice as consumers of religion, they have become spiritual shoppers. Religion is now individualised as more and more people develop their own 'do-it-yourself' religions that give some sort of meaning to their lives.

There is also a key debate surrounding the life-span of sects, cults and New Age movements. For example, Niebuhr believes that they are inevitably short-lived, either turning into denominations to survive or dying out completely. This is because they place heavy demands on their members and it is difficult to maintain commitment and enthusiasm, particularly amongst second-generation members. Also, some sects and cults rely on a charismatic leader to keep up the commitment and enthusiasm, which means when the leader dies, the sect often disappears. For Niebuhr, these facts suggest that sects tend to die out. However, Aldrige suggests that many sects have existed a long time while still retaining their features as sects, such as Jehovah's Witnesses. Also, sects can maintain strict standards, including expelling those who fail to conform to these standards, over long

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periods of time. Furthermore, he points out that many sects have been successful in socializing their children into acceptance of the sect's beliefs and practices, while also converting adults.

Barker suggests that, in new religious movements, as younger people grow older, the reasons that drove them into the sect begin to disappear, and they begin to look for more normal lives. This may mean that the sect disappears, or that it loses its world-rejecting features and becomes more like a denomination.

However, Wilson questions whether world-rejecting and interventionist sects can ever survive in denominational form. This is because to become a denomination there will be a need to convert people by going outside the sect to preach. This is likely to be a corrupting experience, and would compromise and destroy the fundamental beliefs of the sect. Such sects therefore cannot survive in denominational form.

Sociologists are also interested in the influence that sects, cults and New Age movements have on contemporary society. For example, Wilson argues that the growth in the number of sects, cults and New Age movements is evidence of the declining influence of religion. He argues that sects are the last outpost of religion in a secular society. Competition between these groups for members means that their overall influence on society is declining. However, studies by Greeley and Nelson argue that the growth of sects, cults and New Age movements is evidence of a religious revival, therefore suggesting that the influence of these groups is increasing.