

The Joy of Sects

What the movement for global change can learn from religions

4,941 words

This paper is a continuation of a theme established in a previous piece of ChangeStar output – the report entitled ‘Why is it so hard to change people’s behaviour?’. To read this paper in its correct context it would be worthwhile to read the full report first. This is available free of charge at www.changestar.co.uk/thinking_reports.htm.

Introduction – The Movement for Global Change

As argued in a previous ChangeStar report, ‘Why is it so hard to change people’s behaviour?’, we need a worldwide movement for social and global change. A movement that unites as many people and organisations as possible behind a common desire for a better world and helps them pursue this vision effectively.

An individual or organisation’s desire for a better world would be expressed by registering support for a particular set of ethical values – perhaps up to 10 of them - which would be explicit in the movement’s communications and work. The values would be broad enough to ensure that people could support them regardless of their faith or lack of it – for example ‘We need to live sustainably – within the limits of one planet’ and ‘Human beings should have equal rights, regardless of their gender, race etc.’ⁱ They could be described as the common values of modern humanity.ⁱⁱ

The movement would embrace organisations and individuals campaigning on a massive range of social and global issues, including environment, poverty (both domestic and international), fair trade, human rights, population, organic food, animal rights, anti-globalisation, well-being and many others. All organisations in the movement would be encouraged to join it, and in doing so carry its logo on their letterhead and in all their communications. Individuals in the movement and beyond would also be encouraged to join, and various involvement devices (e.g. bracelets) could be developed to enable every individual to advertise their support for it.

At its most basic level, the movement could simply act as a ‘brand’ for a particular set of values – a vision for a better world that people could unite under. It could however do more than this. Among the other functions it could serve are the following:

- Provide a way to engage more individuals in the pursuit of these values – from simply helping them to register their support and feel part of this common cause through to helping them to change their behaviour and take action;
- Provide a function that helps to empower members of the public with the intellectual skills, ‘values awareness’ and socio-political conditions that will enable them to

become well-informed, intellectually independent and ethical global citizens. Whether or not this is a central function of the official movement, it will need to be addressed by actors within the movement in some form if the movement is to be as effective as possible in gaining change from individuals;

- Provide overarching context on the work of individual organisations in the Movement;
- Embed these values in human society by developing the movement into a 'philosophy of living' that flows through every area of an individual's life – from their dealings with other people in daily life through to their effort in cutting carbon emissions. To assist this process, the movement could establish institutions to promote this philosophy of life in the long term. In this view of the future, the movement could function as an 'alternative to religion'.

This paper will focus on and expand the final point above. It will aim to show that a movement for global change (hereon referred to as 'the movement') could become a more powerful force in itself and provide greater benefit to society if it were to offer some of the practical functions that the major religions provide.

It is critically important to note from the outset that ChangeStar is *not* advocating the *content* of any religion or religious views – as can be seen from other papers on our site, we are highly critical of this as a viewpoint in itself and of many of its effects as a cultural force.

We do however suggest that religions have certain practical tools and functions that could not only make a movement for change more powerful but also provide benefits to society generally. In another setting, these practical functions could carry content that is quite empty of religious thought and specific religious ideas.

The paper will focus on the Christian religion as it is the one most familiar to the author. It should of course be noted that other religions may well offer further useful functions. The list of functions is far from exhaustive, even within Christianity. An initial selection of functions has simply been chosen in order to illustrate the argument.

The adoption of these functions in a coherent and coordinated way could turn a movement for social and global change into a socio-cultural phenomenon and a way of life for many people.

'An Alternative to Religion'?

What do we mean by the movement as 'an alternative to religion'? There are many definitions of religion – for example, the Chambers dictionary describes it as:

“Belief in, recognition of, or an awakened sense of a higher unseen controlling power or powers, with the emotion and morality connected with such”.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this paper we will define religion as 'a set of basic foundations of belief about the world and existence that underpin a particular set of moral values which in turn profoundly guide an individual's life and attitude towards it'.

In view of this definition, the movement would seek to unite people at a slightly lower level of abstraction than a religion:

- **Top Level** – in a religion, people are united by a particular ‘top level’ foundational belief in ‘how the world is’. As the Chambers quote above suggests, the basic foundations of belief in many religions are based on a belief in the mystical or supernatural. There would be no such foundations for the movement. Members of the movement would be encouraged to reach their own conclusions on the basic foundations of their beliefs.^{iv} Thus, members of the movement might not be united in their foundational beliefs. Instead, the uniting factor at this level for members of the movement would simply be a *shared experience of humanity* - the profound experience of existing as human beings is something we all share - thinking, worrying, caring, doubting, feeling pain, pleasure and many other things.
- **Secondary Level** – members of the movement would be united by a shared set of moral values – these values are as previously discussed.

The presence or absence of specific foundational beliefs is therefore the big difference between the extended version of the movement and a religion. Beyond this however there are similarities. For example, like religion, the extended conception of the movement will enable individuals to develop a worldview that will influence all their actions and attitudes on a daily basis, giving them a sense of identity with others who share the same worldview. It is more than simply the act of holding shared values – it is also *the public expression of the driving role of these values in one’s life, and a commitment to strive to live in line with these values.*

When we describe the extended version of the movement as an ‘alternative to religion’ we mean that it would provide many of the useful functions that, in current mainstream society, only appear to be provided by religions. It is an ‘alternative to religion’ in this respect only, and therefore does not imply that the movement is only suitable for non-religious people – it is set up specifically to welcome people from most belief systems.

Why Should the Movement Become an ‘Alternative to Religion’?

Why is it necessary to turn the idea of a movement linked together by a set of basic values into ‘an alternative to religion’ and a ‘socio-cultural phenomenon and way of life’? Even without this ‘Alternative to Religion’ extension, the idea of a movement based on a set of global and social values is, in itself, a reasonably radical idea. A global movement like this does not currently exist in any coherent way in mainstream society and building one would certainly be a great improvement on the uncoordinated, disparate set of campaigns and causes we see today. This movement might also take some time to snowball into something that secured the involvement of the full range of members - both organisations and individuals – that it has the potential to.

But even this ambitious and radical improvement to our current situation would be missing an opportunity. There are three major reasons why we might want to go further and choose the extended idea of the movement as an ‘Alternative to Religion’:

1. There is a need in society for certain things that only religion currently seems to provide. These things seem highly appropriate for the movement to provide, firstly

because they fit neatly with the values it is promoting and secondly because its (global) ambitions are large enough to make it a potentially effective vehicle to deliver them;

2. It makes the movement more effective in recruiting members and gaining behavioural, social and political change, both from members and wider society;
3. It is a natural extension of the ethical argument that the movement is making. In fact, it makes it more complete as a view on life and how to live it.

Arguments to support the first two points made above will be given in each of the functions presented in the next section of this paper. The third point will be revisited at the end of the paper.

Functions of Religion

This section will summarise a selection of the functions that the movement for global change could adopt from religions, and will consider the ways in which each could make the movement for global change more powerful and also provide wider benefits to society.

Many of the functions listed below represent things that are lacking in any mainstream context in society other than in religions. For example, many commentators argue that individuals have become more isolated in modern times and the cohesion of local communities in many areas has eroded.^v An investigation on the full range of gaps and how they have emerged is an interesting topic but it is beyond the scope of this paper. It can however be argued that the global economic orthodoxy (i.e. the overarching push for ongoing economic growth) has been a central driver of these gaps – its effects have been dispersed into our lives, cultures and societies.

The functions are as follows:

Providing Cohesion for the Local Community

Religion provides a glue for many communities. In the modern world, individuals have become increasingly isolated from each other, and churches provide a central focus for many members of the local community to meet each other. This focus is not simply provided through church-going on a Sunday but through the local church providing various forms of 'outreach' activities that establish a strong presence in the local community. These activities and functions are not just set up to 'spread the word' or establish this strong presence – some of them help to engage the local community in pursuing the values of the religion. For example, in working to enable a local town to attain 'Fair Trade' status or in giving time and help to less advantaged members of the local community.

The adoption of similar functions by the movement would enable it to reach more people with its message, engage more members in activity that will benefit its ends and generally have a greater influence than it does at present. By establishing roots in the local community, the movement would be able to embed its values more in people's attitudes and lives. The movement establishing itself in local communities would also bring benefits to wider society – perhaps most notably by promoting greater community cohesion. As previously noted, it is widely recognised that recent decades have brought increasing isolation to individuals and erosion of communities in western societies.

Providing a Sense of Belonging and Shared Identity

Human beings seem to get a great sense of comfort and reassurance from feeling that they identify with other human beings – that they are part of a group with similar values or interests. This is more than the sense of supporting the same football team – it is a sense of belonging at one of the most profound levels – namely, one's views on how the world should be and how we should treat each other.

The lesson from this point for the movement is that if you can link people together on the basis of shared values, you link them at quite a deep level, thus making this link (and the resulting strength of identification with the movement and others in it) very strong.

In modern society, there is little sense of shared identity for those people who have no religion but who wish to see a better world. Some people seeking change have identified themselves with particular interest groups (e.g. Oxfam) but these tend to represent single issues and restricted views of the world. Aside from this, in the last decade or so the mainstream political landscape has become so homogenised (and many peoples' attitudes towards it so cynical) that identity cannot be adequately represented through support of a particular party. This lack of this sense of belonging or shared identity can be a significant source of alienation for the many people who experience it. It could therefore be argued that if the movement were able to provide people with this identity, it would bring benefits to the well-being of many individuals in society.

Regular Reflection on Ethical Matters

Religions are often centred on a particular view of how the individual should live. Within a religion, one of the key criteria by which an individual judges themselves and their life is their values, and further, their success in living a life that is consistent with these values. This elevation of values to a central role in one's identity is an important function of religion. Making the same prioritisation could clearly be a useful starting point for the movement.

Because values play such a strong role in one's identity and self-image within a religion, much of the focus of religion is on understanding these values and how to best live with them in one's day to day life.

Importantly, advice is also given on how to incorporate these values into your life and, in particular, how to live day to day life in a way that is consistent with them. Again, this is delivered through a variety of means, but case studies (in the form of stories or parables) are a common method, and can also show how to navigate through some of the complexities and questions that present themselves when attempting to live a 'value-driven life'.

Another important feature of the 'ethical coaching' provided by religion is the regularity with which this learning and practice takes place. Members might attend meetings (e.g. church services) at least once a week, but this attendance is supplemented by other formal activities (e.g. regular prayer) and encouragement to give ongoing attention to their ethical conduct – having it at the forefront of their minds as they go about their day.

Finally, the practice of regularly reflecting on your actual behaviour is also useful. By giving regular time to evaluating how consistently their behaviour has reflected their values, the individual is able to consider the real impact their values have had on the

world, learn from experience and ultimately improve the areas where they have not yet met their own standards.

It should of course be noted that we are not suggesting that we need to have religious beliefs in order to have a moral approach to life. This old chestnut is such an absurd argument that we will not cover it here. The point we are making is that religious *practices* could be very useful to the movement for global change in ensuring that members perceive values as a key aspect of their personal identity and then learn how to fit them into their lives effectively, both on an intellectual and day to day level.

As regards the benefits that this could bring to broader society, the ChangeStar report 'Why is it so hard to change people's behaviour?' sums up the current gaps in this area: "For the many millions of people who are not religious, there is very little opportunity to gain moral guidance, reflect on their own moral principles, or learn about how to put them into practice - particularly the universal moral principles that affect our response to living in a globalised world. We do not seem to have an explicit set of values as a globalised society".^{vi} It therefore seems that the movement would be addressing an important social need if it were to adopt these practices.

Regular Reflection on Spiritual^{vii} Matters

Aside from focussing on values, religions also focus on some of the big questions in life (what life is about, our position in the universe etc.). Whilst we would argue that religions do not generally allow people to consider these issues with a genuinely open mind (there is always an agenda to encourage adoption of the faith), the simple function of encouraging people to consider these issues is important. It enables people to gain perspective on their own individual lives – to see themselves in the context of a much bigger picture – something that may bring clarity and wisdom to the way they perceive and live their own lives. It also enables them to experience the simple pleasure of abstract thinking.

The above factors are benefits in themselves both for the movement and society generally, as there are very few opportunities to undertake this sort of reflection in mainstream society, so once again if the movement were to provide such a function it would fill an important gap. From the movement's own perspective, giving members the chance to reflect on spiritual matters also helps to provide strong intellectual foundations for its ethical values – it 'squares the circle'. If people are simply told to adopt particular values (e.g. 'We should seek equality'), these might seem intuitively attractive principles, but they would gain much more power at a personal level if the individual had the opportunity to work out *why* these issues matter to them. Spiritual reflection therefore enables members of the movement to connect with its values at a more profound intellectual, emotional and experiential level than they would have done if they had simply been told to adopt them.

The advantages of regular reflection on these matters are similar to those outlined in 'Regular Reflection on Ethical Matters' above.

The Shared Experience of Reflection

In both of the areas of reflection noted above, members of religious groups tend to undertake at least some of their reflective activity together – for example, in a church service or a study group. This shared experience can make the reflective process more powerful, because if the individual always undertakes the process on their own, they are

cut off from anyone who might be affected by the attitudes and behaviour resulting from their reflection. By undertaking some of their reflection with others, the reflection process is not simply abstract and intellectual (within the individual's own head), but is also grounded in real life – in other human beings. This in turn can make the individual's conclusions more focussed and representative of real life.

Supportive Environment

Churches provide various forms of support to people. Perhaps the type of support most relevant to this paper is that which helps the individual to put their values into practice. It can be a challenge to live in a way that is consistent with one's values, but religions consist of people with shared values and these people can offer each other support in living lives based on these values. Not only is there a supportive community of members, but there are also local representatives (e.g. vicars and other individuals) who have a certain degree of learning and wisdom in these matters are able to act as 'ethical advisors' to support and encourage people's efforts to live in line with their values.

This package of support is extremely powerful, not only to help people overcome obstacles but also to give them additional motivation and encouragement. The potential benefits of this type of support system to the movement should already be clear. Indeed, the closing report by the Sustainable Development Roundtable suggests that this feeling of collective effort ('I will if you will') is a crucial ingredient in ensuring that people change their behaviour to become more sustainable: "We need to feel confident that we are acting in step with others – neighbours and colleagues, friends and family – not alone and against the grain".^{viii}

The provision of support to people seeking change is therefore a critical ingredient in achieving significant change. One of the most important things currently missing from the work of most organisations within the movement that are seeking change from the public however is the provision of support to people who are attempting to undertake changes in behaviour – for example, in cutting down their energy use. Many organisations provide 10-point plans to help people reduce their emissions, but from this point onwards they tend to leave people on their own to face the (considerable) challenges of making significant changes to their behaviour.

Buildings

Religious buildings and places of worship provide highly appropriate locations and conditions for people to participate in the various activities outlined thus far in this paper. Some of the factors that make them appropriate are listed below:

- They inspire people – many places of worship were specifically built to inspire awe in the visitor. The precise reason(s) why their builders wished to inspire awe is not necessarily relevant to the movement for global change – the important point is that the buildings provide a feeling of removal from the day-to-day world – an encouragement to see one's own situation in a wider perspective and to consider bigger matters. This can be appreciated whether one is a believer in a particular religion or not;
- They provide a peaceful haven away from the world – their simple, peaceful surroundings provide ideal conditions for reflection. This is particularly important in the modern world given our vulgar, commercialised, loud surroundings. Again, whether or not one adheres to the views of a particular religion, it is easy to

appreciate the sense of peace that can be brought about by sitting in, say, an empty church.

It can therefore be argued that, if the movement were to adopt some of the other functions of religions, it would be able to deliver them most effectively if it had a network of local buildings in each community to do this in.

It is also interesting to consider the role and availability of public meeting places in wider society. Currently, some villages still have halls, but elsewhere libraries seem to be the only free indoor public spaces available now and these seem inappropriate for the purposes this paper is discussing, for various reasons. Pubs are also inappropriate for these purposes and they remain commercial enterprises, essentially requiring a financial transaction to gain entry. We have already argued that there is little emphasis on community or various forms of reflection in modern society, but just as there is a need for these things, perhaps there is also a need for the state to provide more public places where communities can come together – to reflect, meet or engage in other activities that are of benefit to the individual and the community.

How Could it Work in Practice?

It is one thing to set out some of the functions that the movement could usefully adopt from the mainstream religions, but it is another to make this work in practice. Religions and their base of followers have developed over millennia, therefore we are being ambitious to say the least if we are seeking to develop comparable institutions!

But the time is right for this movement, and many of the useful functions of religion don't require money or land to make them happen - just communication with and between people, plus enthusiasm and commitment from them.

The vision we have is of an international movement which has many local groups in communities within each country – in a manner similar to the modern church. Each local group would be run by a member of the community who has had some training from the national branch of the organisation in certain skills, such as understanding moral territory. These representatives could be viewed as 'non-religious vicars'. Ideally these posts would initially be voluntary, but some could become salaried over time. These roles may be highly suitable for people with wisdom, experience of life and some time available – i.e. retired people such as business leaders. The local leaders would be supported by the national (and, in turn, international) organisation with materials, information and a certain level of initial funding. Local groups would however be expected to be broadly self-sufficient in terms of income generation.

The aim of the local groups would be to recruit new members to the movement, motivate, teach, empower and support existing members and promote the values of the movement in the local community. This will therefore see the local groups getting involved in local issues and activities (e.g. environmental causes) as well as in the development and support of individual members.

As far as their interaction with members is concerned, the local groups would absorb many of the functions discussed already in this paper. The focal point would be a weekly meeting (or 'service') of local members which would include opportunities for reflection of the types previously discussed, a spot in which news and schemes are

announced and time dedicated to socialising and exchanging ideas. This latter process of socialising is important for the movement as it not only helps to strengthen local communities and build networks but it also enables people to support each other and forge ideas for new schemes and initiatives.

Aside from the weekly meeting, the local group could have as many other activities and sessions as members wanted. These might include study sessions and action groups (e.g. on reducing waste or campaigning in the local community). The local leader would also be able to offer support on an ongoing basis.

Finding a 'home' for each local group to meet is of course one area that is not easily replicable from religions. The establishment of dedicated meeting places in religions has taken place over many centuries, and relies on the development of substantial financial wealth and devotion from its followers. So, the movement will have to be flexible and inventive when seeking venues.

Possible venues for a weekly meeting include village halls, community centres, arts venues and Quaker 'friends meeting houses'. Although they may not be ideal, it may be possible to book meeting rooms in libraries, pubs and other venues. It may be necessary to have a small collection for room hire but this is not a major problem. Also, in the author's experience, venues can be well disposed to 'good cause' groups and may offer spaces for free. In good weather, parks and the countryside are also possible meeting places.

Aside from a weekly meeting venue, members need places of peace where they can get away from the world and reflect. The most suitable locations for this purpose seem to be churches. After all, these are public buildings that welcome anyone and are often empty and nearly always peaceful. Members of the movement could simply ignore the religious connotations of churches and simply appreciate the various qualities they have to aid one's thinking and reflection – a feeling of awe, space and peace. Additionally, local members may be able to provide other suitable places for reflection – including their own homes.

This overall vision may appear to be a rather grandiose and ambitious dream, but it could be started at a reasonably modest level. The central organisation could be established first, including the full development of the movement's values statement, business plans and the development of briefing documents for local groups. Materials relating to moral matters, philosophical matters and to help members put their values into action could be developed on an ongoing basis. A local group could be started as a simple community group interested in particular ethical issues, rather like the model of the 'Green Social' piloted in Worthing by ChangeStar (see www.changestar.co.uk/initiatives2.htm). This group could then recruit a leader (or group of representatives) to drive it forward.

A major operational advantage of the local group model is that it is self-organising – it doesn't need a huge amount of involvement from a central office to set it up – just clear guidance on the structure and role of the group, which could be provided on a website or in a briefing manual. Thus, local groups have the potential to spread quickly in all areas.

Conclusion – The Movement

In the introduction of this paper, we made the claim that “The adoption of these functions in a coherent and coordinated way could turn a movement into a socio-cultural phenomenon and a way of life for many people”. This may have appeared a somewhat inflated claim, but the arguments made since the introduction suggest that the movement has the potential to fulfil such a role.

Each of the functions of religion that we have explored in this paper would appear to offer benefits both to the movement and broader society if the movement were to adopt them. This, combined with its function of linking a commitment to certain values, learning about these values and consideration of how to live consistently with them, suggests that the extended version of the movement (i.e. where its status is as an ‘Alternative to Religion’) is a natural progression of the ethical argument that the movement is making – making it complete.

The movement could provide us with a real opportunity to make our lives and the world better – let us grasp it.

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www.changestar.co.uk
info@changestar.co.uk

Endnotes

ⁱ For a full list of these values, see www.changestar.co.uk/Downloads/OurValues.doc

ⁱⁱ Implying both humanity in the modern age and a sense that these are reasonably sophisticated values.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Chambers Dictionary, The Softback Review 1999, p.1395.

^{iv} An important footnote. Belief is a troublesome and divisive topic, and even in writing this paper we have spent some time considering whether it would be irresponsible for the movement to fail to take a position on foundational beliefs and simply let people 'bring their own philosophical foundations'. A choice has to be made between a) featuring 'the need to help people develop their foundational beliefs independently' as a key value within the movement and b) pursuing the movement's other values most effectively. This is because the inclusion of this value may alienate a large religious audience (even though it is not specifically attacking religion – merely trying to give people the 'level playing field' in developing foundational beliefs that most do not currently have), and therefore make the movement less effective than it could be at achieving its key practical goals such as sustainable living. The choice is therefore between a 'purist' view of the movement that promotes full intellectual independence or a movement that sacrifices this for more practical aims.

This is a wrenching dilemma for someone who believes passionately that a critical contributant to a better world is for everyone to have the opportunity to develop the thinking skills required to consider their foundational beliefs in an objective and well-informed way, as opposed to being influenced by tradition and circumstance into adopting a particular viewpoint. For now, this paper has been written assuming that 'helping people to develop their foundational beliefs' **will** feature as a value of the movement, and that potential members with religious beliefs will have the wisdom to accept this and not be deterred by its inclusion.

^v For one example of evidence for this, see Andrew Simms, Julian Oram, Alex MacGillivray and Joe Drury, 'Ghost Town Britain', nef report – www.neweconomics.org, December 2002

^{vi} Richard Docwra, 'Why is it so hard to change people's behaviour?', ChangeStar Report – www.changestar.co.uk, November 2006, p.9.

^{vii} Here we hit a bit of a minefield on phrasing. In this section, we have used the term 'spiritual' to mean something quite specific, and employed it because it is a recognisable term. It is however a phrase that has been so frequently abused by various interest groups that for clarity's sake, it is a word we would prefer to avoid.

^{viii} Sustainable Development Roundtable, 'I Will if You Will – Towards Sustainable Consumption' Summary document, May 2006, p.1.