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Q5(d)

What is cult ? Explain the growth of cults in the contemporary world

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- What is a cult? Explain the growth of cults in contemporary society
- Keep the explanation within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

- **Cult:** small, novel, often charismatic sacred group beside church and sect.

Troeltsch's lineage plus NRMs in Wilson and Wallis.

- **Growth:** urban **anomie**, disenchantment, media gurus, digital assembly.

Lockdown satsang is a recent form.

Census still shows large inherited communities.

Introduction

A cult, in the sociology of religion, is a small, loosely organised, often novel sacred group centred on a living teacher or a new revelation. It sits beside church and sect in the Troeltsch-Niebuhr lineage. Growth today follows urban **anomie**, media, and marketised salvation.

Body

Cult as a type

- Ernst Troeltsch contrasted church and sect. Later writers added cult as a new, extra-traditional offer of meaning, sometimes called a new religious movement.
- Bryan Wilson and Roy Wallis stressed voluntarism, therapeutic promises, and a break with the inherited parish.
- Cult is an analytic type. In public talk it is often a slur. The sociologist names organisation and claim, not a moral panic.

Why cults grow now

- **Durkheim's** **anomie** in cities and migration weakens old parishes; new assemblies offer effervescence and a moral community.
- **Max Weber's** disenchantment leaves a hunger that charismatic authority can fill for a time.
- Media and platforms scale a guru's face without a diocese. Indian urban gurus and global wellness cults share this form.

- Lockdown isolation and digital satsang showed how quickly a following can densify on a screen.

Caveat

- Growth is of types and visibility, not proof that "church is dead". **Census** religion tables still show large inherited communities.

Flow diagram

Church sect -> Religious organisation types
Cult NRM -> Religious organisation types
Anomie media charisma -> Growth of cults
Cult NRM -> Growth of cults

Conclusion

A cult is a novel, teacher-centred sacred offer outside the inherited church. It grows where **anomie**, **charisma**, and media meet. Wilson, Wallis, **Durkheim**, and **Weber** explain the demand. Treat the word as a type, and keep **Census** persistence of older religions in view.

Facts & figures

Church-sect-cult

A typology of religious organisation; cult names novelty and loose extra-traditional belonging.

NRM

New religious movement: a less loaded research term for many groups called cults in the press.

Charisma

Weber: authority tied to an extraordinary person; unstable unless routinised.

Anomie

Durkheim: weak regulation that can send people into new moral communities.