

Dear Class Member,

This week we learned that some African nations are debating how to handle religious leaders that preach strange teachings. Church history informs us that at times people who preached the gospel faithfully have fallen under suspicion because of teachings some perceived as "strange" or "cultic." So for our next class, we will explore what the scriptures tell us about what constitutes true or false teaching and how to guard against deception.

If you wish to start thinking about our topic in advance, below is some introductory material.

The Wired Word invites us to contribute news story suggestions for upcoming lessons. If you have a story you'd like to suggest, post it to The Wired Word forum at <http://thewiredword.squarespace.com/>.



Governments Push Back Against Religious Groups Defined as Cults

The Wired Word for the Week of February 14, 2016

In the News

Last month Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta urged that churches be regulated to ensure that "thieves" do not "use religion to steal from Kenyans." Kenyan newspaper *Daily Nation* quoted Kenyatta as saying that bogus preachers should be removed.

Pastor Conrad Mbewe, of the Kabwata Baptist Church in Zambia, said many Africans are looking for "a conduit that enables communication between humans [and] the various layers of spiritual beings, which include angels, demons and spirits. They see these prophets as messengers from God." But Mbewe said other Zambian church leaders suspect some of these prophets of sexual abuse and swindling.

Government leaders across Africa and elsewhere have also expressed concern about self-proclaimed "prophets or men of God" who use religious services to foment civil unrest and sedition.

In July 2014, PRI's *The World* reported that France classified about 300 religious groups as having "cult-like tendencies" including "manipulating people who are mentally weak, separating members from their biological families" or bilking vulnerable people out of their assets. Groups on the list could be targeted, investigated, harassed and prosecuted there even if they were not considered cults elsewhere. At that time, France had 400 anti-cult court cases on the docket.

Thoko Mkhwanazi-Xaluva, chair of South Africa's Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CLR), told the BBC that poverty and unemployment drive vulnerable, desperate people to flamboyant leaders who promise to transform their lives. Some claim to have the power to heal the sick and raise the dead, and some promote bizarre practices such as giving followers snakes, rats and grass to eat and fuel to drink.

Other religions such as Islam and Judaism appear to have systems in place to monitor and discipline spiritual leaders, Mkhwanazi-Xaluva said, whereas Christianity seems more volatile and uncontrolled. Hence the push to regulate churches by the South African government.

But Reverend Moss Nthla of the Evangelical Alliance of South Africa said, "It is difficult to see how the government would regulate churches; we've got reports of politicians themselves being faithful members of some of these controversial churches -- some of which are a law unto themselves."

South African Penuel Mnguni, nicknamed the "snake pastor" by locals, said he was "doing God's work and didn't need to explain God's ways to people." But a Pretoria man told the BBC that area residents burned down his church and drove him out. "Some people threatened to kill him if he ever returns," he said. "People here are angry at what he did -- that's why he ran away."

"There needs to be at the very least, a bare minimum standard that we as Christians can set and adhere to and any church found to be operating outside of that needs to be stigmatised," said Reverend Nthla.

Thabo Makgoba, Anglican Archbishop of Capetown, agreed: "Now for a cleric who's supposed to be trusted, who's supposed to talk about healing, wholeness and bring hope to take advantage of the desperate and make them eat snake, it's just unimaginable. We need these clerics investigated because they can't do it in our name."

But some church leaders are protesting government efforts to register religious organizations, audit membership rolls and financial records, and certify non-native religious ministers as a threat to freedom of religion. Others believe regulation should be done within the church rather than by government officials.

President Kenyatta affirmed that the Kenyan constitution guarantees "the right to worship," and insisted that his proposal to regulate churches was not meant to curtail religious freedom. He pledged to work with the nation's Catholic and Anglican bishops and other religious leaders to determine how best to "work together to root out people who use the church to enrich themselves."

A recent Pew Research Center poll reported that of those in Africa who identify with a religion, 63 percent call themselves Christians, 30 percent Muslims, and 3 percent practitioners of traditional religions (which are often mixed with Christian or Islamic beliefs).

Frank Ramirez, who is a member of *The Wired Word* team and is a pastor in the Church of the Brethren, warned of the dangers inherent in branding groups as cults. "Those of us from the

Anabaptist tradition have to deal with this sort of thing all the time. We, along with Friends and Mennonites, comprise the three historic peace churches. That makes us a target. Does the fact we Brethren wash feet -- as Jesus commanded -- make us a cult?"

Ramirez said that when larger denominations are empowered to define what constitutes Christianity and what doesn't, the results can be self-serving and even deadly. "When you mix Christianity and power you get people burned alive along with other tortures. I'm not convinced that's just part of the past. Brethren and Mennonites were tortured and killed in military camps during World War I."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Why Some African Governments Are Clamping Down on Churches. *BBC*](#)
[Kenyan President Kenyatta Says He Will Work With Bishops to Amend Guidelines for Regulating Religious Bodies. *Catholic Culture*](#)
[The French Want to Make Society Safe for Religion by Banning So-Called Cults. *PRI*](#)
[Lesego Daniel: "Cooking" Church Member -- More Church Madness from South Africa! *pimppreacher.com*](#)

The Big Questions

Here are some of the questions we will discuss in class:

1. Have you ever been drawn to a religious teaching that later you discounted as false? What was the initial attraction? What led to your becoming disillusioned later on? How hard was it to extricate yourself from the teachings, from the leader who taught them, and from the group that held to them?
2. Should churches and church leaders be held accountable only to God, or to some earthly religious authority, or to some secular entity? One, none, or all of the above? Defend your position.
3. What constitutes a cult, and how should Christians relate to such groups? Where have you seen cults take root in our own country? Why are they appealing? To what unmet human needs or desires do they speak?
4. How can Christians help others understand the difference between biblical faith and distorted teaching?
5. What should Christians do when people in government or the rest of society presume that they belong to a dangerous cult?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

We will look at selected verses from these Scripture texts. You may wish to read these in advance for background:

[Matthew 7:13-27](#)

[2 Corinthians 11:3-15](#)

[Acts 13:6-12](#)

[1 John 4:1-6](#)

In class, we will talk about these passages and look for some insight into the big questions, as well as talk about other questions you may have about this topic. Please join us.