Dollar inflating?" David Berg, founder of the Children of God, asks. "The Jews are selling out their European currencies and buying Dollars instead. . . . Any Christian who stands with the Jews at a time like this is a traitor to his own faith!" The declarations of Lyndon LaRouche, founder of the U.S. Labor party, a political cult, sound as if they could have been written forty years ago: "The U.S. Zionist Lobby, since its creation by Theodor Herzl, Louis Brandeis, Eugene Meyer of Lazard Frères, and the British Foreign Office earlier in this century, has served as a foot-in-the-door for British sabotage of U.S. industrial growth and for the terrorizing of American industrialists and workers."

The anti-Semitism of these groups is not too surprising. Scapegoats, as Hitler pointed out, are necessary to the messianic vision, and Jews have always been preeminent candidates for that role. They are different, relatively few in numbers, and perceived as inordinately powerful. Beyond that, anti-Semitism has a particular meaning for messianic groups because of the biblical designation of Jews as Chosen People, the precise role the cults have claimed for themselves.

Despite the violent nature or potential of some of the cults, there appears to be little chance for them to evolve into an important political force. To do so, they would have to join forces and work together, and any extensive cooperation is not likely, given the egocentric character of cult leaders. The heterogeneity of America also works against the possibility of a coalition of cults arising: the very differences and prejudices in the population militate against any one group gaining a great deal of power.

A realistic projection about the future of the cults must be based on the history of similar groups in this country. Two general fates exist for these movements. They either die away, often upon the death of their leaders, or they become legitimate, fully accepted churches. With legitimization, many of the extreme qualities of these groups fade.

One of the indications of this country's strength is its ability to absorb and assimilate marginal groups. This has been accomplished by informal means as well as through the formal apparatus of the state.

In framing the Constitution, the Founding Fathers were careful to protect the freedom of the individual, establishing boundaries beyond which the state cannot intrude. The freedom of individuals and groups to hold varying beliefs was built into the Constitution, with religious pluralism protected by the First Amendment. As well as protecting the "establishment and free exercise of religion," this amendment implicitly guarantees the individual's freedom of choice. And freedom was thought to belong to the individual rather than to any group to which he might belong. The First Amendment, while protecting religious groups from government interference, was also designed to enable people to make free choices, to freely discuss and examine alternative ideas, and to protect the unrestricted access to information.

In consequence, this country has always been a haven for new and marginal religious groups. Cults, sects, and religious revivals have been a continuing feature of American life. The general attitude toward these groups has been one of resigned acceptance, so long as their practices did not violate social norms. Indeed, alternate belief groups have not encountered antagonism for their beliefs so much as for their habits and customs.

Occasional Supreme Court decisions reveal the shifting balance between personal freedoms protected by the First Amendment and the government's obligation to maintain social order.