

## **Sects and Cults**

### **A cult Defined**

What is a cult? The origin of the 'word "cult" is the Latin cultus which is a perfectly ordinary term meaning any kind of ritual, ceremony or liturgy. A secondary meaning according to the Shorter Oxford Dictionary is "devotion to a particular person or thing as paid by a body of professed adherents."

The term "cult" is loaded. No one wants to be classified as a member of a cult. When a youngster joins Moon's Unification Church he will not say to his friend, "I have just joined a cult." In current journalism reporters confuse the bizarre new cults with "traditional" sects. The Jonestown tragedy has been detrimental to objective writing on the old sects and cults, and the new ones which spring up almost daily.

What distinguishes a sect from a cult? I believe that the distinction is determined by the techniques used by the cults and their practices. The cults employ many techniques used by the cults and their members. Some of them are psychological coercion, brainwashing, peer-group pressure, sleep deprivation and removal of privacy. Cults are deceptive. Some sound like counterfeit Christianity. They don't openly contradict the Christian faith. Christian terminology is often used, though it is devoided of its Biblical sense. Great blessings are offered. Wealth, health, peace of mind, security for this life and the life to come.

### **1. Youth**

The cults, the new religious movements and groups all have some common features. They all recruit among young people, particularly from the middle class. The "trust nobody over thirty generation" finds itself well represented in the new religious movements. What will happen to them when they grow older? Interestingly, today's cult leaders, except the Guru Maharaj Ji, were born in the first quarter of this century.

### **2. Authoritarian leadership**

Another feature is the authoritative and totalitarian leadership of the founders. The leaders are elevated to the position of the only repository of divine truth. They constantly refer to "my revelation and my message." Devotees in their movements regard their pronouncements as divine. The status of their masters is demonstrated by the way they are approached and often expressed by their honorary titles given. For example, Dr. Moon, the Korean millionaire and founder of the "Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity" is honoured by his followers as "the true father." He is the "Messiah", "the Lord of the Second Advent", the personalized second coming of Jesus Christ. He has conquered Satan and is to establish God's kingdom here on earth.

### **3. Salvation**

Such total submission to the leader and his veneration are based on the belief that he alone can bring salvation. Cults do not believe that Jesus Christ came from heaven to earth to take sin upon Himself and bear its punishment. They do not believe in the Lord's substitutionary atonement. They reject the apostle Peter's teaching about the Lord that "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been, healed." (1 Pet. 2:24)

Herbert Armstrong of the World Tomorrow proclaims that salvation is through works. "Only as you keep the Ten Commandments, can you be saved. If you keep obeying God's laws for the rest of your life, you will be born again when Jesus returns to earth." Armstrong also says that salvation is only possible through membership in his group. Members of his movement are the only ones who will ever get a chance to be saved. Other groups, and also churches, are the works of Satan. "Every other work rejects the message of Jesus Christ or else rejects His rule through His laws. There is no exception. Yes, this work is the work of the true church of God. All others are satanic counterfeits! It is time we come out from among them and become separate.

In the cults nobody can be sure whether or not he will be judged worthy by God. Cult members live in perpetual uncertainty and are kept that way. The lack of assurance is used by the cult leader to encourage his followers to do more, pay more and show more devotion to his teaching.

#### **4. Total submission**

The total submission required by the cults and exercised by their followers is frightening. Brainwashing is commonly practiced. Violence is even used by some groups when members leave or are taken away from them. Many instances show how absolute the authority is. To give just one example. In the book *Revolution for Jesus - How To Do It*, published by the Children of God, we read: "Obey your parents (in the Lord) IN ALL THINGS!!! Eph, 6:1 and Col. 3:30; If they are in the wrong, God will have to reward your faith in Hebrews 13:17. You are better to follow one of God's leaders who has made an 'error' than to trust In your own insight (Prov. 3:5; 23:4) that is, to trust in human beings (yourself) which carries with it a curse (Jer. 17:15). And In the same book: "You must obey your leader in the Lord unconditionally, immediately and without question."

Converts are encouraged to reject their past, their parents, their church. For example, recruits for the Unification Church are told to give all their possessions to the movement, and reject family and friends as they have become members of a new family. No more T.V., books, newspapers or radio! No bathroom privileges during the four or five hour lecture sessions. You just don't ask questions. And no one is left alone for one moment. The mind is captured by the cults through steady indoctrination, lack of opportunity to think, and sleep and consistent hard work, selling flowers, candies or peanuts.

Most cults deliberately promote religious excitement and excessive zeal. Chanting, raising of hands, sing-song repetition of simple songs are common elements of cult

meetings. Not the mind but the emotions! Cult leaders attempt to set aside the mind. Don't think! This is an appeal to irrationalism in a technological and scientific age. Cults are dangerous. They are traps and snares laid by the devil (John 8:44; Eph. 4:14). Members do not join, they are recruited. Individuals are approached on the streets or in railway and bus stations. How do we reach the cultists? We may not dismiss them with name-calling or with a spirit of disdain. They too are created in the image of God. The cultists need the ministry of the Church - with love, concern and passion for their spiritually lost condition. Christ came to seek and to save those who are lost (Luke 19:10), including followers of cults.

### **Failure of the church**

Sects and cults are called at times the unpaid bills of the church. Historic Christian churches often fail to inspire, challenge, persuade and to satisfy today's young people. When we observe the fellowship within the sects and cults we are forced to ask ourselves whether the church really does show the world that she is not just an institution but a living, caring and dynamic communion of saints.

Traditional churches have neglected discipline. Many theologians seem dominated by rationalism. In their search to be relevant many offer less of God and more of secularism. The world is asked to present a working agenda to the church instead of the church proclaiming the Word of the living God to the world. Man's thirst for God is not quenched.

How much zeal do young people see in their churches for the cause of Christ? Dr. David Hesselgrave comments in his fine study, *Dynamic Religious Movements*: "It must remain as the primary Indictment of a great portion of the church of Christ that its truth remains closeted and cloistered while lesser causes advance, borne on by the zeal of the ordinary believers."

The current spiritual confusion invites people to turn to many directions. Religious apostasy and a spiritual vacuum have often led to the forming of new sects and cults.

### **Crisis**

There are certain times in history when cults and sects emerge and have their heady appeal. This is always the case in periods of crisis, stress, war and threat of war, whenever people are hard pressed or in trouble. In difficult and even perplexing circumstances, they look for relief, comfort and guidance. The world is now going through such a period of high tension and crisis. Several heroes of the Left, such as the late "Che" Guevara, have elevated violence to a virtue. We are no longer shocked by the attempt on the life of President Ronald Reagan and the shooting of Pope John Paul II. We seem to have reached the stage of the days of the Borgias (15th century) in Italy in which, as Jacob Burckhardt puts it, "the death of any powerful man is seldom attributed to natural causes."

The peril of war hangs like a heavy dark cloud over the future of our youth. Two World Wars have been fought in our century. Times have been unsettled since the last one. Today it seems that 1945 was a mere halt in the major multi-national conflict which has never ceased since 1914. The two Great Wars have sown the seeds for the inevitability of World War III. I believe that there has never been a more opportune time in world history such as ours for the rise and flourishing of sects and cults.

## **Technology**

This is the age of the heart transplant, instant communication via satellites, computers, nuclear physics, and the space shuttle. Technological ingenuity has reached unprecedented heights. But the average man starts to wonder about all these achievements. Disturbing questions are raised. If man is so clever why can't he keep down the crime rate and stop wars?

Many have come to realize that technological advances are mixed blessings. The pros and cons of nuclear power for energy are hotly debated. We hear of acid rain, polluted rivers, progressive destruction of the natural environment and depletion of natural resources. The earth is becoming impoverished through man's greed, with many plant and animal species becoming extinct.

In our technological age many young people have lost a sense of meaning. Questions such as "Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? What is the ultimate purpose of life?" have been superseded by a kind of worship of material conditions, longing for experiences, personality development and excessive concern with self. What is in it for me? Many young people are no longer part of a group, church or even a family, where the welfare of the whole is of prime concern. In their recruiting, the sects and cults appeal to the ego of such young people. "Gee, you are wonderful. We need someone with your special talent and ambitions to help change the world."

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