

Cultism:

A Conference for Scholars and Policy Makers

sponsored by

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Preface

From September 9th to 11th 1985, The American Family Foundation, the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute, and the Johnson Foundation convened "Cultism: A Conference for Scholars and Policy Makers" at the Johnson Foundation's Wingspread conference facility in Racine, Wisconsin.

The goals of the conference were to:

1. examine our level of knowledge about cultic groups and their effects on individuals, families, and society;
2. identify areas in which scientific studies of cults have been inadequate; and
3. consider ways in which social policy regarding cults might, without violating fundamental civil liberties, be changed for the greater protection of the public.

Participants included representatives from law, medicine, education, religion, government, business, law enforcement, mental health, the behavioral and social sciences, and the media. Participants met in plenary sessions both before and after dividing into three discussion groups on education, research, and law. As a result of their discussions, the participants developed a consensus on broad policy recommendations about the three designated areas.

[Louis Jolyon West, M.D., Director of the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute, moderated the conference. Dr. West and Michael D. Langone, Ph.D., Director of Research for the American Family Foundation, prepared the **Background** section of this report, which was then reviewed in its entirety by the participants.

Background: The Problem of Cultism

During the past fifteen years, thousands of media reports, articles, expert testimonies in legal cases, and legislative hearings have described harmful activities associated with political, psychological, and religious cults.

Although estimates vary, there are probably more than a thousand cults in the United States and Europe. Most of these groups are relatively small, but others have tens of thousands of members and incomes of many millions of dollars a year. It seems probable that more than one million Americans have been members of cults during the last twenty years.

Some of the larger, more powerful cults have branches in many countries, extensive property holdings, subsidiary organizations with special names for special purposes, and a growing degree of influence. International concerns about the detrimental effects of certain cults on the well-being of their members, members' families, and society in general have led to a recent national conference on the problem in West Germany, a nationally televised debate in Spain, a resolution by the European Parliament, and this Conference.

The elderly and the very young are not excluded from cults, as demonstrated by the membership of the People's Temple and demography of the dead at Jonestown. However, persons between the ages of 18 and 30 are especially subject to cult recruitment. A recent study of students in the San Francisco area found that half were open to accepting an invitation to attend a cult meeting; approximately 3% reported that they already belonged to cultic groups.

Mental health professionals who have studied the matter believe that no single personality profile characterizes those who join cults. Many well-adjusted, high achieving individuals from intact families have been successfully recruited by cults. So have people with varying degrees of psychological impairment. To the extent that predisposing factors exist, they may include one or more of the following: naive idealism, situational stress (frequently related to normal crises of adolescence and young adulthood, such as romantic disappointment or school problems), dependency, disillusionment, an excessively trusting nature, or ignorance of the ways in which groups can manipulate individuals.

Definitional Issues

Webster's Third New International Dictionary (Unabridged, 1966) provides several definitions of cult, among which are:

1. "A religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious (the exuberant growth of fantastic cults); also, a minority religious group holding beliefs regarded as unorthodox or spurious . . ."
2. "A system for the cure of disease based on the dogma, tenets, or principles set forth by its promulgator to the exclusion of scientific experience or demonstration . . ."

3. "a: great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing...
- "b: the object of such devotion . . .
- "c: a body of persons characterized by such devotion (America's growing cult of home fixer uppers)."

These definitions are very broad, and some of the other dictionary definitions are even broader or more benign. Our concerns are not about cults of "home fixer uppers" but rather about fanatical groups capable of exploiting or harming their own members, disrupting or destroying members' families, and threatening or even attacking critics, former members defined as renegades, government agencies, or any person or group seen as opposed to their activities.

Some observers have chosen to avoid the pejorative connotation of "cult" by using such terms as "new religion" or "new religious movement" to describe groups of the type described above. A problem with this approach is that it may lend unwarranted respectability to some very dubious enterprises. Would it really be appropriate to refer to the People's Temple as a "new religious movement"? Surely the term "new religious movement" is inappropriate in the case of cult-like groups that are not religious, or cults that form around charismatic healers who then exploit their patients/followers in various ways, or non-professional psychotherapies that convert themselves to "religions," thereby obtaining various tax benefits and legal protections, or satanist cults that, even if qualifying as "religions," could hardly qualify as "new."

This conference is concerned with those cults that can properly be described as totalist. The term "totalist" is used in the sense of Robert J. Lifton in *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., New York, 1963). Lifton derived his concept of totalism from Erik Erikson's contribution to *Totalitarianism* (C. J. Friedrich, Ed., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1954, pp. 156-71). Lifton (p. 429) describes a tendency to "all-or-nothing emotional alignment [which] exists within everyone" and which can be exploited by "those ideologies which are most sweeping in content and most ambitious – or Messianic – in their claims, whether religious, political, or scientific. And where totalitarianism exists, a religion, or political movement, or even a scientific organization becomes little more than an exclusive cult." In a later work, *The Broken Connection* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1979), Lifton (p. 293) explicates "a dangerous four-step sequence from dislocation to totalism to victimization to violence."

The following definition is provided to specify our focus of concern on totalist cults.

Cult (totalist type): a group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control (e.g. isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience, powerful group pressures, information management, suspension of individuality or critical judgement, promotion of total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it, etc.), designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community.