

## Cults in America

*Is the alarm about new religious movements justified?*

THE FATAL STANDOFF NEAR WACO, TEXAS, PUT the cult phenomenon on front pages in a way not seen since the 1978 tragedy at Jonestown. But experts on cults — or “new religious movements,” as some prefer — note that cults have been growing steadily in the past two decades, largely outside the media spotlight. Groups such as the Unification Church and the Church of Scientology have become big businesses with complex international networks. Critics of cults and families of many members say the groups use mind control to isolate adherents from society, setting them up to be preyed upon financially, psychologically or sexually. Defenders cite First Amendment rights to freedom of religion and denounce the harsh tactics used by deprogrammers who seek to “rescue” cult members.



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## Defining the Word 'Cult'

The term "cult" is more apt to be used by the news media or by families of people who've joined a new group than by the so-called cults themselves. "We resent being included with cults," says Jennine Fellmer, the media coordinator at the Maharishi International University in Fairfield, Iowa, which is operated by the Transcendental Meditation movement. "A cult has a set of beliefs based on authority and is separate from society. The difference is we have a set of ideas that, though not yet accepted, is deliberately being put out for scientific evaluation in an open society."

Many scholars of the subject prefer the terms "sects" or "new religious movements" to the word "cult." Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary* offers a broad range of definitions for cult, ranging from the innocuous — "a system of religious beliefs and ritual" — to the mildly pejorative — "a minority religious group holding beliefs regarded as unorthodox or spurious."

To activists working against cults perceived as harmful, a clear distinction should be made between a group's theology or appearance and its behavior. "Cults differ from 'new religions,' 'new political movements,' 'innovative psychotherapies' and other 'new' groups," writes Michael D. Langone, executive director of the American Family Foundation in Bonita Springs, Fla., "in that [cults] tend to use manipulative techniques of influence to subordinate the

well-being and psychological identities of followers to the leader's benefit. . . . Cults also differ from most authoritarian groups, for example, boot camp or certain monastic orders, in that the latter are not deceptive about their aims, tend to be contractual rather than seductive, and are usually accountable to higher authorities." †

"Totalist cults," as the more threatening variety are termed, were defined at a 1985 conference of academics, summarized here by University of California-Los Angeles psychiatry Professor Louis J. West: "A group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing, and employing unethical, or manipulative or coercive 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, promotion of total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it, suspension of individuality and critical judgment, and so on) designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the possible or actual detriment of members, their families, or the community." ††

† P.A. Keller and S.R. Heyman, eds., *Innovations in Clinical Practice: A Source Book* (Vol. 10), 1991, p. 263

†† Marc Galanter, ed., *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Report of the American Psychiatric Association* (1989), p. 169

Rudin writes in an article co-authored by her husband, Rabbi A. James Rudin: "Believing they possess the truth, they are intolerant of other religions and ideas, and see the world in black-white, us-them terms, perhaps speaking of outsiders as satanists."

"Some cults have expanded into an international growth industry with hundreds of millions of dollars," notes Dr. Louis Jolyon West, a psychiatry professor at the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) and a longtime observer of cults. "What concerns me increasingly is the harm to members and their families. Parents essentially lose a child to a cult."

In the more-secretive cults, children are often schooled within a cordoned-off compound, there is no outside medical care and births and deaths go unrecorded. The state of Oregon spent

hundreds of thousands of dollars caring for 51 children removed from a cult called Ecclesia in 1988. Corporal punishment within cults has been reported regularly by former members, in one case causing the beating death of a 13-year-old boy.

Cults can also play havoc with traditional religious beliefs, overwhelming priests, rabbis and ministers with complaints from families of cult members. "A cult has to have original revelations, a new twist on reality that no one else has, its patented Coca-Cola formula," says Tal Brooke, a former follower of Indian guru Sai Baba who heads the Christian fundamentalist Spiritual Counterfeits Project in Berkeley, Calif. "The revelator is usually a charismatic leader, the group is exclusive and the world is seen as a dangerous place. The side effect is to blunt the critical

functioning and critical thinking of the followers."

Were cults and cultlike groups as purely evil as their critics maintain, however, it would be hard to imagine why anyone would join. Clearly, the groups have their attractions. "The whole room dissolved into a golden light," an 18-year-old enthusiast recalls of attending her first lecture by the Long Island-based spiritual and business guru Frederick Lenz. "I saw his face change into an Indian warrior, a Buddhist monk. . . . I was totally high. I couldn't wait to see him again."

What's more, questions about what constitutes a cult group are a source of continuing disagreement. (See *Start*, p. 396.) And some mainstream religious bodies and scholars of religion have long warned that efforts to monitor or investigate so-called cults by what they

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there and in a series of motel rooms, deprogrammers hired by her mother attempted to talk her out of her faith. On April 23 the jury acquitted two of the deprogrammers of aiding and abetting the kidnapping; the trial of a third defendant ended in a mistrial.<sup>49</sup>

One expert witness at the trial was James Lewis of AWARE, who in October 1992 toured the Montana headquarters of Prophet's church, which

has stirred controversy with its alleged arms purchases and doctrine of a coming nuclear apocalypse. Lewis observed the group's ceremonies, schools, child care and its much-discussed bomb shelter. He said he found Prophet living in a small trailer with her husband and grown daughters. "The negative press the church ... has received is grossly inaccurate," he says. "The assumption that it will be the next Waco is absurd." ■

chiatry Professor West. "The media think [cults] belong on the religious pages — and religious editors are not investigative reporters. Unless some religious leader knocks off 913 people in one day, it tends to be ignored."

Groups that are often considered cults, meanwhile, have continued expanding their presence around the world. The Hare Krishnas and the Scientologists, for example, have established a strong presence in Israel in recent years. Last summer, the European Parliament devoted a session to dealing with sects and new religious movements. This December, a contingent from The Family, many of them children of the original Children of God members from the early 1970s, sang for President George Bush and Mrs. Bush at the White House.

## OUTLOOK

### Religious Freedom

All the major religions started out as cults, says Dean Kelley of the National Council of Churches. "The anti-cult cults say they're unnatural, but it's ironic that as the new religions progress, they become larger and more numerous and become pillars of the community, like the Mormons."

If the Cult Awareness Network "had been around in St. Francis' time," quips Peter Ross, a spokesman for the Unification Church in New York City, "his parents would have dialed 1-800-CULTLINE. CAN would have designated Jesus as a cult leader."<sup>51</sup>

It is true that the major religions were once cults, says psychologist Singer, but "across time, they made provisions for the succession of power. And they did not remain at odds with the surrounding legal entities. They dropped their deception. And they did not remain at odds with the surrounding population. They stopped treating them as lesser beings."

Rosedale of the American Family Foundation recalls that a well-known religious scholar was once asked why the Jesuits were not considered a cult. The answer, he said, is that no one ever became a Jesuit by mistake.

"It is necessary to inform the faith-

ful, especially the young, to put them on their guard, and even to enlist professional help for counseling, legal protection, etc.," warns the Catholic Church's statement on cults. Yet, it continues, "we cannot simply be satisfied with condemning and combating the sects... The challenge of the new religious movements is to stimulate our own renewal for a greater pastoral efficacy."

The fact that many mainstream churches make common cause with cults to defend freedom of religion is a source of frustration to anti-cult activists. "It's discouraging that so many churches don't want to deal with the cult situation because they're afraid it will boomerang on them," says Kisser of CAN. "And as long as the government and institutions we charge with protecting our rights continue to permit a climate where cults can flourish, they will continue."

The human-rights violations of cults occur, she adds, "because government doesn't take responsibility. They occur not because the cult leader loses his temper but because the organizations systematically and methodically abuse people. Like the situation with illegal drugs, we won't ever totally eradicate cults, and in a pluralistic society we can't legislate them out of existence. But with proper education, we can cut down on them."

Generally speaking, "The public shrugs the whole thing off," says psy-

#### Checks and Balances

"In the short run, I'm optimistic that we're making inroads with public education," says Marcia Rudin of the International Cult Education Program. "But in the long run, it's like asking, 'Do you think we'll cure cancer?' We make progress, but the cults keep multiplying, with new pitches and new people. There always will be people willing to take advantage of other people. And now we have second-generation manipulators. Unlike with rabbis and priests, cults have no one supervising them. We need some checks and balances, even if these sometimes fail."

The Cult Awareness Network advises families of people in cults to record the names, addresses and phone numbers of persons associated with the cult, and to keep a chronology of events and relevant news clippings. Never send money to the cult member, it advises, but rather non-cash gifts such as clothing and non-refundable airline tickets. Do continue to communicate.

When confronted with street recruiters, "Don't talk with strangers about your spiritual life," advises the newsletter of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project. "You should no more