

CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTS

Concerned Christians - Children of God - Branch Dividians - Millenium and Apocalyptic Groups.

Why do people, especially young people, get messed up in cults? How can people be induced to commit mass suicide? It can be understood in terms of basic social-psychological concepts.

Research has shown that people will perform extreme acts under the instructions of an authority figure such as David Koresh or authoritarian countries such as Iraq or China, particularly when no one else rebels. In cults, dissent is severely punished, both physically and through public humiliation. Because of informers, no one feels free to voice complaints to anyone else. This serves to isolate people and to promote the feeling that no one else has doubts. Also, the members have earlier been asked to commit to less extreme acts, followed by demands that were gradually increased. This "foot-in-the-door" technique contributes to compliance and to self-justification of that compliance.

When any religion becomes a cult, peoples' freedom is the first thing to disappear. A cult cannot exist where people are free - free to think for themselves, free to discuss critical human issues, free to disagree with authority, free to play responsible roles in the religious family to which they belong. Cults are controlled by the few from above.

In politics, it is called totalitarianism. But there is no difference. Both demand total control of the human mind and forbid freedom of discussion and dissent. Both strip people of their dignity and freedom. They not only assault the intelligence and self-respect of their members but also violently tear God's family from his control, telling the people, "You belong to us. You will no longer form your own conscience or ask yourself what would God want. From now on, we will form your conscience and tell you what we want you to think and believe, and how you are to act." And they do this in the name of God and of religion.

It is the desperate admission of failure by a religion that has lost the respect of its members because it failed to lead by goodness and the intrinsic honesty of its teaching. In its place, its leaders substitute intimidation and brute force in an attempt to gain the control that they could not win by honest and reasonable discussion of issues.

Cult leaders use excellent techniques of persuasion. Members are gradually indoctrinated through long sermons or lectures, often when people are tired from long hours of activity, and are taught to distrust contradictory views. At the same time, outside information and contact is reduced. Moreover, a jargon is developed that masks the true meaning of statements. These factors, coupled with the fear of punishment and the prohibition of dissent, results in members blaming apparent discrepancies on their own inadequacy rather than on that of the cult or cult leader.

One of the most puzzling aspects is that many of the cult members have no desire to leave, believe in the cult leader, and commit suicide or other acts quite willingly and happily if instructed to do so. When people do defect, they are faced with embarrassing and unanswerable questions: "If the cult was so bad, why did you stay so long?" This can possibly be answered through the concept

of cognitive dissonance. Members are at first offered a tremendous amount of love and acceptance. They feel wanted. As their participation expands, members are required to sacrifice personal property and family relationships and to experience a host of undesirable events. Making such sacrifices would be irrational if the group and the cult leader were bad. To reconcile the dissonance between the sacrifice and the worth of the group, members maintain that the group is good and doing a good thing. As the sacrifice increases, so does their belief in the group. By the time the cult leader calls for mass suicide, for example, or other activity, many members are totally committed to the leader and to the group, so their obedience is not too surprising.

Keys to entrapment, then, are the need for acceptance, approval and love - fear - conformity - compliance - obedience - no questioning or difference of opinion - dependency.

--Edited by Patrick J. Hession