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SPECIAL REPORT

ARE YOU IN A CULT?

SOME PERTINENT QUESTIONS

by Albert James Dager

The word, "cult," conjures in many minds pictures of lost souls projecting mindless stares, living in a world of unreality—souls destitute of individual initiative, whose only goal in life is to serve the wishes of some guru who promises a form of salvation to all who follow his dictates.

While this is an accurate description of some cults, the word has a much broader connotation, encompassing neither good nor evil. One definition of the word "cult," as found in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, is "a system of religious beliefs and ritual; also: its body of adherents."

To the Jews of Jesus' time, His following could have been considered a cult. Christianity became known as a "sect," which is another name for cult. In the minds of those opposed to what they considered a sect, or cult, within Judaism, the connotation carried with it a stigma. Those who followed Christ were considered outside the mainstream of the religion passed on from Moses through the Law. In essence, the new Christianity was a sect of Judaism which had broken from the mainstream to follow an itinerant rabbi. In reality it was the continuation of the genuine mainstream of God's truth—the latest application of God's redemptive plan as prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures.

So while those Jews who rejected their Messiah considered those who followed Him to be a cult, in reality the rejecters fell victim to the cult of the rabbis which led them away from God's revelation through Jesus Christ. Rejecting the true Way, they followed the way of Cabala—Jewish mysticism which applied esoteric interpretations of the Scriptures to an occultic religious tradition rooted in the Egyptian mysteries. Their hatred for Yeshua (Jesus) has continued unabated to this day through the teachings of the Talmud. And to

this day a Jew who rejects the way of his ancestors to follow His Messiah Yeshua is anathema to the cult of Judaism—"cult" being understood as "a system of religious beliefs and ritual."

Based on this definition, every church body may be classified as a cult. But there is another definition offered by Webster's, which is more in keeping with the use of the word as employed by theologians and sociologists: "a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious; also: its body of adherents," and "great devotion to a person, idea, or thing."



Yet because of wide distinctions between many sociological and theological viewpoints, even this definition is inadequate. There have developed several benchmarks from which to define a cult. For example, the Christian Research Institute, founded by Walter Martin, has established as its benchmark what it terms "orthodoxy"—the historical position of the Church or churches from the time of the apostles to the present. This includes the early Roman Catholic Church fathers. For this reason C.R.I. does not consider Roman Catholicism a cult, even though many beliefs and practices of Roman Catholicism meet the criteria for cultism. (See our special report, *Roman Catholicism: Is It A Cult?*)

In spite of the dictionary definition, the term cult has come to signify a strange, mind-bending organization led by psychological manipulators. In this

regard it is estimated by sociologists and theologians versed in cult psychology that one out of ten Americans is a member of some form of cult. These would be groups whose loyalties revolve around a forceful or charismatic leader and/or some peculiar doctrine of religious or psychological philosophy.

To the majority of people, including some cult researchers, the established religions of the world would not be included in these statistics; their influence over significant numbers of people preclude them from being called "cults," even though they may engage in bizarre rituals and adhere to doctrines of demons. This is because those who accept them as normative are basing their judgment on the sociological rather than the theological understanding of what constitutes a cult.

Cult researchers that use the sociological model rather than the theological model, treating established religions as "normal," do disservice to God's revealed Truth. Christians must concern themselves with theological rather than sociological implications of a group.

Even if the vast majority of the world's population adhered to a single religious system, in God's eyes that system would still be considered a cult simply because it has departed from His revealed Truth. Is a world religion under the anti-Christ not prophesied in Scripture? And would it not be classified as a cult simply because it will encompass the vast majority of mankind?

To say otherwise is to give credence to religious error, at least to the degree that it may be perceived as "normal" by the uninformed. In fact, however, no system that departs from the revealed Truth of God as embodied in the Scriptures is "normal." It is depraved, regardless of how it may fit the category of a world religious system.

Therefore, the term "cult" is applicable to any religious or psychospiritual movement or sub-movement both inside and outside the mainstream of biblical Christianity, whether that movement is an "established religion" or not.

By biblical Christianity we mean the true faith established by Jesus Christ as clearly revealed in the Bible. Esoteric, allegorical and other subjective means of establishing beliefs or practices are not germane to biblical Christianity. Neither are beliefs and practices based upon tradition or the writings of men apart from the Bible, which is the only essential and complete revelation from God to mankind.

Any group that adds to, subtracts from, or denies the Bible as the only and complete revelation from God is a "cult" by this standard. While this may raise protests from certain other cult research groups who consider themselves experts on the issue of cults, I offer no apologies, simply because all religious systems that exist apart from God's revelation are based on spiritual falsehoods. They are, therefore, destructive to spiritual and psychological well being. More importantly, they are in rebellion against God. To curry their favor by designating them something other than cults in the negative sense is to afford them credibility in the eyes of their adherents.

It matters not what size these groups are. They may range from small, localized groups meeting in private residences to multi-national religious and psychospiritual groups whose adherents number in the hundreds of millions.

In some sense, every denomination within mainstream Christianity may be classified as a cult, although I do not *de facto* include them as such. There are some denominations whose idiosyncrasies are relatively minor and open to interpretation from Scripture. While such idiosyncrasies are not justified they do not necessarily threaten the overall spiritual well being of their adherents.

Brooks Alexander, co-founder of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project, has established the criteria for determining what constitutes a cult from a biblical theological perspective: 1) a false or inadequate basis of salvation; 2) a false basis of authority.

The only true basis for salvation is faith in Jesus Christ's death as atonement for sin, and His resurrection as the guarantee for eternal life to those who believe. Cults tend to nullify or at least downplay the importance of the finished work of the Cross, stressing some form of works-oriented salvation.

The only true basis of authority is God's Word as revealed in the Bible. No man is the authority in any religious group. Pastors and elders must be in submission to God's Word in order to validate their own position of headship. Cults rest their authority as much or more on their leaders' interpretations of Scripture and, in many cases, their leaders' unbiblical teachings.

It is the responsibility of each person to study the Scriptures to show themselves approved, workmen that need not be ashamed, able to rightly di-

vide the Word of Truth (II Timothy 2:15). Those who do not seek the truth with a pure heart of humility before God will find themselves easy prey for one of the countless vain philosophies whose end is destruction.

There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death. (Proverbs 14:12)

EARMARKS

As warriors for Jesus Christ in a world under the dominion of Satan, we are to actively engage in the battle for men's souls. In this battle we must be especially concerned with the enemy's attempts to enslave minds through religious and psychological deceptions.

It isn't enough to be concerned about our own spiritual welfare. That may keep us from falling into a snare, but God has also made us responsible for others—especially those who have not matured in the faith sufficiently to be able to discern some of the more subtle errors of false teachers.

In order to discern which groups present a danger to men's souls, we must recognize certain characteristics most prevalent in the cults. In his book, *The Lure of the Cults and New Religions* (InterVarsity Press, 1979), Ronald Enroth, professor of sociology at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California, lists five basic categories of cults: 1) Eastern Mystical Groups; 2) Psychospiritual or Self-improvement Groups; 3) Eclectic Syncretic Groups; 4) Psychic-Occult-Astral Groups; 5) Aberrational Christian Groups.

For an in-depth understanding of these types of cults I suggest you read Professor Enroth's book. For purposes of brevity the following outline of these five groups is offered:

Eastern Mystical Groups — Stressing a subjective approach to truth, these groups value experience above reason. They teach the essential oneness of the universe—that God, man and nature share the same divine essence. Through meditation, chanting, and other mind-altering disciplines, adherents seek to achieve a state of higher consciousness through which they will enter into complete self-realization of their inherent godhood. This is supposed to result in a happy, productive life and a step up the evolutionary ladder to complete assimilation into the Universal Mind of God (Cosmic Consciousness).

Essential to these types of cults is belief in some form of reincarnation or transmigration through which souls purge their karmas of negative energies. (Karma is the force generated by a person's ethical behavior which determines his destiny in his next incarnation.) As their karma is purged in each succeeding lifetime, they move closer to divine perfection.

Psychospiritual and Self-Improvement Groups — These present a westernized form of self-realization philosophy through which their adherents seek to release their "divine potential." Through a more rational approach—self-improvement seminars rather than religious ritual—psychology is blended with religious fervor in order to break down traditional values and modes of thinking. The intention is to instill a mind set of total assertiveness over one's environment. By learning to control circumstances and people, disciples are taught that they can get what they want out of life and thus actualize—or bring to fruition—their divine potential.

Eclectic-Syncretic Groups — By blending into a single religious expression the most desirable elements from many religious and philosophical movements, these groups seek to achieve total peace and harmony. This in an attempt to instill into the individual human consciousness the realization of their "godhood."

Psychic-Occult-Astral Groups — These groups are characterized by the seeking of contact with "higher intelligences" from "other worlds." Adherents hope that these intelligences will lead them into personal enlightenment and instruction in progress along the evolutionary path to divine perfection. Spiritism, psychic phenomena, trance channeling, astral projection, UFO contact, astrology and other forms of divination typify these groups' activities.

Many cults within the four groups described above find common ground in more than one category. They are all outgrowths of some form of eastern mysticism (primarily Buddhism and Hinduism) or western esotericism (Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, etc.). Philosophically they are linked through belief in the divinity of man, evolution, reincarnation, psychospiritual exercises, and various other beliefs and practices. Together they make up the loose network that has come to be known as the New Age Movement.

Aberrant Christian Groups —

These present extra-biblical or unbiblical teachings a truth, while using the Bible and outwardly Christian practices to lay claim to the name "Christian." Often they blend pagan thought (and even practices) with their teachings. Many adopt the name "Christian" on the basis that, to one degree or another, they claim belief in Jesus Christ as their Savior, and even hold many true doctrines. These groups present the greatest danger to Christians since their teachers truly are wolves in sheep's clothing. Some even find common ground with overtly non-Christian groups.

Aberrant Christian groups may be independent churches or world-wide denominations, or they may develop as sub-movements within the mainstream of Christianity. In the latter case they usually center on a specific doctrine such as "word-faith," "dominion theology," "British-Israelism," "Charismaticism," etc. They view as immature or unspiritual those Christians who do not identify with their exclusive dogma. The followers of some media teachers present good examples of sub-movements within mainstream Christianity.

Like those in eastern mystical groups, some aberrant Christian groups even teach that we are gods, or are exactly like God. Some even teach we should think of ourselves as equal to God. They exalt themselves and look down on those who reject the idea of their intrinsic "godhood."

The degree of aberration characteristic of such groups varies. In some respects many tend toward orthodoxy in the Christian faith while holding false doctrines significantly aberrational as to nullify or distort the Gospel. Their theology centers upon the Bible and the person of Jesus, but certain characteristics of their beliefs and practices set them apart from biblical faith.

CONFUSION, FEAR & GUILT

The dangers of involvement in cults are not always easily discernible. After a carefully programmed initiation it is often too late for one caught to recognize his predicament. This is mainly because he has slowly undergone an alteration in his thinking processes. Even if he eventually comes to realize he might have made a mistake, it becomes difficult to leave because of uncertainty. He may become confused due to guilt placed upon him by the cult; he may worry that he would be falling away from God should he leave the group.

In order to determine whether or not a group is adhering to biblical truth, it is necessary to understand how the group defines its terms. This is a genuine problem because cults often change the meanings of words in order to confuse the thinking of the unwary and re-program them into conformity with the cult's tenets.

Because of this confusion of language it can be extremely difficult to determine the group's actual beliefs and lack of conformity to biblical standards. It is necessary therefore, to not only look at the group's teachings, but also at its practices. Teachings and practices combine to form an overall climate of mind control which is evidenced in certain characteristics.

To help Christians determine if they (or someone they know) may be under cultic influence, we present the following questionnaire. Check the appropriate boxes.

DOES THE CHURCH OR ORGANIZATION:

- Have at its head a single person or group of persons who claim to be exclusive apostles to the universal Church?
 - Claim to be the only truth Church?
 - Teach that all other Christian churches or denominations are under Satan's control?
 - Operate in a secret or semi-secret manner, shunning outsiders unless they are invited by members? (Many times such organizations will seclude themselves in rural areas or, if in cities, will enclose their grounds with high walls, hedges or iron fences and gates.)
 - Teach that no other church has the special revelation from God that they have?
 - Teach that you should not attempt to understand the deep spiritual truths they impart, but rather learn to "experience" the reality of God or Jesus through certain techniques?
 - Tell you that, rather than seek truth from the Bible, you should earnestly pray that if the things they tell you are true you will receive an "inner witness" or assurance within yourself that they are true?
- Tell you that you should not question your leaders' teachings, but that you must trust that they have received special revelation from God as well as unquestionable authority to teach the church?
 - Require, or at least strongly urge you to enter into the "flow" of things through exclusive contact with your group?
 - Require that all members have a "covering," or be "discipled" or "shepherded" to the degree that they must answer for all personal actions and decisions that are not clearly delineated in the Bible?
 - Tell you that should you leave their fellowship you will backslide, fall into Satan's hands, become ill, suffer divorce, or have some other evil befall you as part of God's judgment?
 - Teach that you must love each other but that you must hate God's enemies (defined as your enemies because only you, as part of the group, are on God's side)?
 - Teach that there may be other true believers, but since they are not part of your group they are in "darkness," "confusion," "Babylon," "sin," etc.?
 - Have its own teachings, traditions, teaching aids or books that it tells you are equal with the Bible in establishing truth?
 - Teach that its authority and traditions are equal to Scripture?
 - Teach that if you are faithful to this "true church" you will find special favor with God so as to be spared from the Great Tribulation or from other forms of harm while He pours out His wrath upon all others, including other Christians?
 - Teach that if you remain faithful to the group you will one day be like God and will possess His nature—that you will be exactly as He is, or that you will be equal with God?
 - Teach that you should discard your own opinions and assume the opinions of your leaders because they are more learned in spiritual matters, and their opinions are given in your best interests?

- Require that you donate your time and talent as free labor to the group in order to be considered a member in good standing?
- Require that you tithe or give any substantial portion of your income to the group or to its leaders in order to be in good standing?
- Keep tabs on your attendance and financial giving in order to determine if you are "doing your part" in supporting the group?
- Teach that you must stop thinking as an individual and begin thinking corporately, assigning your will to the will of the leaders, or to the will of God as defined by your leaders?
- Teach that everyone is "out to get" you, your leader or your group, and that you must be willing to sacrifice everything, including your life, for your leader or for the group?
- Shun those who have left the group and label them "reprobate," "dogs," "heathen," "publicans," or other derogatory terms?
- Cover up or ignore the sins of its leaders or its leaders' families? (Often the members are harshly disciplined for their sins or even minor indiscretions, and are made examples of while the leaders and their families are allowed to act as they will.)
- Have a reporting system that suggests you reveal the faults or discontentment of others? (The excuse is often given that this is necessary in order that they may be "protected" from error and kept on the right path.)
- Engage in public fights against its detractors and (sometimes) employ non-Christians to fight its battles through lawsuits or harrassment?
- Teach that the true Church has not functioned or been in existence since the first century and that it must be "restored" through your leaders' revealed truths.
- Claim that its leader is the second coming of Christ, and that he will usher in the Kingdom of God for all who follow him?

- Stress the entering into of covenants through which you must remain loyal to your group, and that if you break that covenant you are out of covenant with God?
- Teach that the Church is Christ or that believers are some sort of "ongoing" or "continual" incarnation of God?
- Concentrate on teaching within a narrow scope while generally ignoring the greater counsel of God revealed in the whole Bible?
- Have a "clergy-laity" mentality that relegates the congregation to dependence upon the leaders effectively operating as a "priesthood" through whom God speaks?
- Have a leader or pastor who is not in submission to a generally recognized group of elders within the congregation?
- Have a "board" of elders who essentially function as little more than rubber stamps for the pastor's vision or programs?
- Employ the euphemism, "Thou shalt not touch God's anointed" when its leaders are challenged on the basis of biblical truth?
- Teach that Jesus was just a man like any other, but that He had a special anointing—being "Christed"—just as anyone else can be?
- Teach that Jesus was or is an angel or anyone other than God incarnate?
- Teach that you are God or "a god"?

- Teach that there are other "scriptures" besides the Bible in which God's truth has been revealed?
- Induce an atmosphere of fear and/or guilt among the members for reasons that are not biblical?

CONCLUSION

The above are by no means the only indicators of cultic activity. Nor do one or two yes answers mean that you are dealing with a cult (depending upon the gravity of the questions). But even one yes answer can indicate that there is a cult mentality at work. If you find any of these characteristics in your church or organization it would benefit you to seek counsel from a church or organization that is qualified to assist you in determining whether there are any serious dangers present.

If you do not know where you can place your trust, but you believe this message is relevant to your situation, you may contact Media Spotlight and we will attempt to direct you to someone in your area, or to a qualified cult-watching organization that may be able to help you.

Finally, we should heed Paul's words of warning "that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ." (Ephesians 4:14-15) ♦

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