

C. Identifying a Cult

By Jan Groenveld

There has been much confusion about cults and how to identify them. Some have difficulty identifying a cult because it is not so easy to identify something that is not even religious. For this reason, over the years, different definitions of what actually is a cult have developed to make it easier when you know little about their beliefs. The different definitions:

Secular Definition

Cult - From the Latin "cultis" which denotes all that is involved in worship, ritual, emotion, liturgy and attitude. This definition actually denotes what we call denominations and sects and would make all religious movements a cult.

Christian Definition

Cult - Any group which deviates from biblical, orthodox, historical Christianity, i.e.: They deny the Deity of Christ, His physical resurrection, His personal and physical return to earth and salvation by faith alone. This definition only covers those groups that are cults within the Christian religion. It does not cover cults within other world religions such as Islam and Hinduism, nor does it cover psychological, commercial or educational cults which do not recognize the Bible as a source of reality.

Universal Definition

Cult - Any group, which has pyramid-type authoritarian leadership structure with all teaching and guidance coming from the person/persons at the top. The group will claim to be the only way to God, Nirvana, Paradise, Ultimate Reality, Full Potential, Way to Happiness, etc., and will use thought reform or mind control techniques to gain control and keep their members. This definition covers cults within all major world religions, along with those cults which have no obvious religious base such as commercial, educational and psychological cults. Others may define these a little differently, but this is the simplest to work from.

The "Orthodox Bible-based Cult"

A group is called a cult because of their behavior, not their doctrines. Doctrine is an issue in the area of apologetics and heresy. Most religious cults teach what the Christian church would declare to be heresy but some do not. Some cults teach the basics of the Christian faith but have behavioral patterns that are abusive, controlling and cult-like. This occurs in both non-charismatic and charismatic churches. These groups teach the central doctrines of the Christian faith and then add the extra authority of leadership of someone's particular writings. They center around the interpretations of the leadership of good standing. This acceptance includes what we consider non-essential doctrine, i.e. not salvation issues (such as the Person and Work of Christ). The key is they will be using mind control or undue influence on their members. An excellent book on this subject is Churches That Abuse by Dr. Ronald Enroth. Using these guidelines of definition, Bible-based, psychological, educational and commercial aberrations can easily be identified.

Other Identification Marks

The group will have an elitist view of itself in relation to others and a unique cause, i.e., they are the only ones right—everyone else is wrong. They are the only ones doing God's will—everyone else is in apostasy. They will promote their cause actively, and in doing so, abuse God-given personal rights and freedoms. This abuse can be theological, spiritual, social and psychological.

How They Do This

- Their leaders may claim a special, exclusive ministry, revelation or position of authority given by God.
- They believe they are the only true church and take a critical stance regarding the Christian church while at the same time praising and exalting their own group, leaders and work.
- They use intimidation or psychological manipulation to keep members loyal to their ranks. This could be in the form of threats of dire calamity sent by God if they leave, certain death at Armageddon, being shunned by their family and friends, etc. This is a vital part of the mind control process.
- Members will be expected to give substantial financial support to the group. This could be compulsory tithing (which is monitored); signing over all their property on entering the group; coercive methods of instilling guilt on those who have not contributed; selling magazines, flowers or other goods for the group as part of their “ministry.” At the same time “Bible-based” cults may ridicule churches that take up free-will offerings by passing collection plates and/or sell literature and tapes. They usually brag they don't do this. This gives outsiders the intimation they are not interested in money.
- There will be great emphasis on loyalty to the group and its teachings. The lives of members will be totally absorbed into the group's activities. They will have little or no time to think for themselves because of physical and emotional exhaustion. This is also a vital part of the mind control process. There will be total control over almost all aspects of the private lives of members. This control can be direct through communal living or constant and repetitious teaching on “how to be a true Christian” or “being obedient to leadership.” Members will look to their leaders for guidance in everything they do. Bible-based cults may proclaim they have no clergy/laity distinction and no paid ministry class—they are all equal. Any dissent or questioning of the group's teachings is discouraged. Criticism in any form is seen as rebellion.
- There will be an emphasis on authority, unquestioning obedience and submission. This is vigilantly maintained.
- Members are required to demonstrate their loyalty to the group in some way. This could be in the form of “dobbing” on fellow members (including family) under the guise of looking out for their “spiritual welfare.”
- They may be required to deliberately lie (heavenly deception) or give up their lives by refusing some form of medical treatment.
- Attempts to leave or reveal embarrassing facts about the group may be met with threats.
- Some may have taken oaths of loyalty that involve their lives or have signed a “covenant” and feel threatened by this.
- Refugees of the group are usually faced with confrontations by other members with coercion to return to the group.

Some Abuses of Rights and Freedoms

- Abuse of individuality: They adopt a “groupness” mentality. They are not permitted to think for themselves apart from the group and only accept what they are told.
- Abuse of intimacy: Relationships with friends, relatives, spouse, children, parents, etc., are broken or seriously hampered.
- Abuse of finances: Pressure to give all you can to the group. In non-communal groups, members usually live at the lower socio-economic strata, not because of a lower income level, but because they are always giving money to the group for some reason.
- “Us versus them” mentality: Isolation from the community in general. Anyone and everything outside the group is seen as “of the devil” or “unenlightened,” etc. Their enemies now include former friends, the Christian church, governments, education systems, the media — the world in general. Those who are involved with these in any way see such involvement as a “means to an end.”
- Abuse of time and energy: The group controls and uses almost all the members’ time and energy in group activities. They are usually in a constant state of mental and physical exhaustion.
- Abuse of free will: Members must unquestioningly submit to the group’s teachings and directions, and their own free will is broken. Their “will” actually becomes the group’s “will” without their realizing it. This is done either by coercive methods including low protein diets and lack of sleep, or over a period of time through intimidation. Both methods make heavy use of “guilt.”

Results of This Abuse

- Personality changes: Relatives will say they no longer recognize the person. From a warm, loving personality will come heaped abuse, rejection and feelings of hate. The cult members see themselves as “righteous” in comparison and this comes across in their attitude toward all outsiders.
- Loss of identity: They cannot see themselves as individuals apart from the group. Some even change their names as a rejection of their former lives.
- Paranoia: We are being persecuted: Any time you say anything negative about the group, whether justified or not, it is regarded as “persecution.” Any criticism of the individual is also seen as persecution only because they are the “true Christian” or “enlightened” one -- not because they, as individuals, have done the wrong thing. However, at the same time they will feel free to criticize whatever you believe, say and do because they are “the only ones who are right.”
- Social disorientation: They lose their ability to socialize outside the group. This can go so far as to not being able to structure their time or make simple decisions for themselves when they leave. Their worldview alters and they perceive the world through their leaders’ eyes. They become very naive about life in general.

- Severe guilt complexes: They are made to feel guilty of everything they did before entering the group and are to strive to be “good” and “worthy” for “eternal life.” Misdemeanors are made into “mountains” so members are in a constant state of guilt for infringing even the most minor rules. Guilt comes because they are not doing enough, entertaining doubts or questions, even thinking rationally for themselves. This guilt is piled on, with new rules constantly being laid down about what is sinful and what is not. Illness may be seen as lack of faith — more guilt. Emotional illness may be seen as proof of sin in your life — more guilt.

Summary

Not all these points will be found in every cult, but all cults will have some, if not most of them, although these may vary to some degree.

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