

THE APPEAL OF THE CULTS

By Roger Fleming

When I was contacted to prepare a paper that might serve as a focal point for a discussion concerning the appeal of the modern cults at this conference, I willingly accepted the task for two reasons. The mass suicide and murder of the Jones group and the accounts and commentaries on that atrocity had aroused my own interest in finding out more about a subject concerning which I knew very little. However, even before that I had frequently felt a need to be better informed about the modern cults because of the questions raised by my students at Wisconsin Lutheran College concerning the cults. The questions that had come up in class discussions had been relatively few, but they had indicated a conception of the Modern cults that was really quite different from my own conception of them. In my research for this paper I soon found out why. My conception of what the modern cults were was simply not very accurate.

In my ministry, both in my parish ministry and in my teaching ministry, I had never had a single instance of personal contact with any cult or cult member. I had my own ideas of what the cults were, what they practiced, what they taught, and why some, especially the young, were attracted to them. I'm not even certain where my ideas came from. When I now think about those misconceptions of mine, I would guess that most came from articles in newspapers and magazines dating back at least 10 years ago. Perhaps I could summarize my misconceptions in this way. Most cults were made up of dropouts, school dropouts, family dropouts, society dropouts. They generally were opposed to any kind of authority, Scriptural, family, or society. They were generally dirty, long-haired, poorly dressed hippies, who were alcoholics or drug users or both and who regularly indulged in every type of sexual immorality that can be named. They were found in California living in communes. They were frequently violent and the Manson family was typical of most cults. I was aware of the fact that there were Jesus freaks, Moonies, and others who claimed to be far different from what I had just described, but cults were cults and they were obviously so much the followers of Satan that our young people were really never tempted to join such groups except for a rare exception or two. How could anything so obviously evil be attractive to anyone who recognizes the Ten Commandments as God's moral law? I must confess that until recently all I had read about the modern cults, I understood to be little more than the attempts of those involved with the cults to clean up their public image in order to attract followers and to reduce the widespread disapproval of society. While researching this paper, I became increasingly aware of how wrong I was. I realize now that there is really only one solid connection between the hippie rebellion of the '60's and the cultic success of the '70's and that is this: both were or are the work of the devil, the one as obvious as Cain's murder of Abel, the other as deceitful as Satan's temptation of Eve.

Perhaps most of you are better informed about the cults than I had been when I began to prepare this paper. I do not doubt that some of you, because of personal counseling of those of your members who have become involved with one of the cults, may be better informed about them than I am now in spite of my research in the preparation of this paper. In order that we may all have some common ground upon which to base our discussion to follow this presentation, it is important to accurately define just what we are discussing. In his book, *Know the Marks of Cults* Dave Breese defines a cult in this way, "A cult is a religious perversion. It is a belief and practice in the world or religion which calls for devotion to a religious view or leader centered in false doctrine. It is organized heresy." In a book by Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* he indicates that a cult might be defined in this way, "A group of people gathered about a specific person or person's interpretation of the Bible." Hubert F. Beck, in the first of a series of pamphlets prepared for the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod under the title, *The Response Series*. The first pamphlet, entitled *How to Respond to the Cults*, in attempting to define a cult says, "A cult takes its point of departure from the religious thought of a major religion (not necessarily a Christian religion), but twists and warps that pattern of faith until it has become something essentially new and different from what it was originally." If we are to use these definitions as a guide, the scope

of this paper would be tremendous, for under the term cult would be included every deviation from every major religion in this world. It would include such groups as the Charles Manson family, Black Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Baha'is, and a hundred more. Although there are some similarities in the appeal of all of these cults, there are great similarities in the appeal of certain modern cults especially to the youth of our country. It is my intention to limit the scope of this paper to those appealing features or aspects of this one group of cults.

Included in this one group of cults are the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) or Hare Krishna, the Children of God (COG), the Alamo Christian Foundation, the Love Family, the Unification Church (Moonies), The Way, and the Divine Light Mission. Some of these operate under a variety of names, e.g. the Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon has many names, including One World Crusade, International Cultural Foundation, Creative Community Project, D.C. Striders Track Club, Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles (CARP), Korean Folk Ballet, Unification Thought Institute, Council for Unified Research and Education, and the New Hope Singers International. There are a number of reasons that I have chosen to concentrate on this particular group of cults. They all have some striking similarities; the appeal of this group is to one special segment of society, namely, youth between the ages of 18 and 25; these cults are the ones I knew the least about before I began preparing this paper; and these are the ones discussed in the one book I found most informative in researching this subject. The title of this book is *Youth, Brainwashing, and the Extremist Cults*, by Ronald Enroth. Dr. Enroth is Chairman of the Department of Sociology of Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California. In the first half of this book Dr. Enroth examines the basic teachings of the seven cults listed previously chiefly on the basis of personal interview with former members of each of the seven cults. All of the former members look at former membership in these cults as a type of imprisonment from which they have now escaped. Most of them were physically kidnapped from the cult in which they were involved and then deprogrammed. All of them indicated a sincerely thankful attitude towards those who cared enough about them to go to the trouble and expense of such kidnapping. Before we take up the subject of what is appealing about membership in these modern cults, let's look at the people who appear to be the most vulnerable to the appeal of the cults. Are there any background factors which characterize the people who are joining these cults in such alarming numbers?

The majority of those who join the modern cults are between the ages of 18 and 22 when first contacted. Although some as young as fourteen have come under the influence of these cults, the immediate post-high school period is when a potential cult member seems to be the most vulnerable. A typical cult member is white (although color or race restrictions are not characteristic of the cults); he or she is from the middle or upper-middle class of society in this country-, he or she usually has at least some college education or is a potential college student, and he or she has had at least a nominally religious upbringing. Naturally there are some young people in the cults who have come from the margins of society or have experienced very unstable or nonexistent family relationships, but these do not constitute the norm. Most have grown up in typical American homes. Many have had some communication problems with their parents. One ex-member of the "Moonies" feels that there are basically two kinds of young people who enter the Moonie indoctrination camps. One is the successful, idealistic, very secure kind of person who represents the most promising prospect as far as the leadership of that cult is concerned. On the other hand there are those with problem backgrounds, youth who have experienced "failure" according to the standards of middle-class America. They have dropped out of school, been involved with drugs, come from broken homes, or have a history of emotional problem and unresolved personal problems. Many of these don't last in the cults either, because they have difficulty in making a commitment to anyone or anything and total commitment is a vital part of the modern cults. We will say more about this a little later.

Perhaps the two factors most common among the young people finding their way toward the cults today are a search for identity and a quest for spiritual reality that provides clear cut answers to their questions. Sociologists such as Dr. Enroth tend to list a lot of reasons for the identity search being conducted by so many young people today. Knowing who I am and why am I here have always been a problem for the adolescent, but

the problem has been compounded in recent years in our country by the rejection of most traditional virtues and values. Alternate life styles and value systems are being proposed in today's society which simply were not options available or acceptable a few short years ago. Youth today is frequently separated from the familiar. There is a tendency to drift in and out of jobs, college, and sexual relationships, and as a result patterns of living, life styles are seldom ever established and this results in a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety about the future. Because of the great mobility of people in this country all people, but especially youth, are often among the unfamiliar and are therefore lonely. This is especially true if he has become separated from whatever religious training he received as a child. No one thing brings about such separation as completely as obvious failure of parents or other older acquaintances who live a life in direct conflict to the religious morals they give lip service to. Hypocritical behavior in regard to moral principles tends to destroy a youth's ties with his church faster and more completely than any other one single thing. Disenchantment with other social, economic, or political structures tends to follow. And all of this contributes to a feeling of isolation and loneliness. Such a young man or woman is a prime target for the modern cults and is frequently susceptible to their seduction. In many cases these young men and women have simply refused to accept the answers to their questions given by parents and their church because apparently their parents don't really believe them, or at least they don't live according to them. They are looking for simple black and white answers concerning God and their own relation to Him. And this is what the cults give them. They offer a world where you have direct, clear, simple rules to tell you how to find salvation. No unanswered questions, no confusion, and together with clear answers a set of promises that appeal to those who need assurance, and confidence, these are all appealing to the cult recruit. Add to these things the obvious devotion of the recruiters to the cult and cultic leader and their total commitment to the cult and its teachings and you have a recruit who believes he has found the answer to his spiritual questions. So often it is the lack of devotion or commitment to Christianity within the established Christian churches that has sent the recruit looking for answers elsewhere. One former cultist told Dr. Enroth, "Looking at Christianity, I didn't see the devotion there that I did in the Hare Krishna movement."

Any person experiencing an identity crisis or involved in a serious spiritual search for answers is theoretically vulnerable to the seduction of the cults, but some are obviously more vulnerable than others. Loneliness or lack of really close friends, such as freshmen on a large college campus far from home and family and church so often experience contribute to that vulnerability. Any personal or family crisis can also contribute, such as the divorce of parents, the knowledge of parental infidelity to each other, a break up with a girlfriend or boyfriend, poor academic performance or failure, unpleasant experiences with drugs or sex. Any of these plus a host of other things may leave a young man or woman man feeling anxious, uncertain, hurt, lonely, unloved, confused or guilty and a prime target for the cults. There are cultic recruiters who make it a regular practice to always station recruiters in or outside of the waiting rooms of college counselors' offices offering their remedies to those students who are seeking personal counseling from authorized college counselors.

Perhaps we would do well to stop here a moment and ask if the youth of our church fit into that group which we have just described. Are they vulnerable to the appeal of the cults? I am sure that we would all have to agree that they often are, all too often. Apparent lack of devotion or commitment to Christianity does exist among Lutherans in and out of WELS. Divorce, marital infidelity, broken homes do occur among our numbers. Our young people get lonely, search for spiritual answers in other places than in God's Word. They do experiment with drugs and sex and feel guilty and alone and miserable. All too often they consider church membership a formality of hypocrites who do not believe nor practice what is taught in its truth and purity by us. They see so little devotion or commitment to Christian teaching among our members that they become convinced that it doesn't exist. I do not mean to say that all of our youth are in this category, but some are and the number appears to be growing. If we can't see it, I believe we are simply closing our eyes to the facts.

Now having identified those to whom the cults are appealing, let's turn our attention to the actual appeals. What is it that the cultic recruiter offers? In the seven cults that Dr. Enroth discusses in his book, there are striking similarities in the methods of the recruiters. All of them offer friendship to the lonely. The constant companionship and apparent personal concern by the recruiter for the recruit fills the need for a friend when

loneliness is present. Free food and lodging among loving, caring people often brings those who are lonely to the indoctrination camps of the cults. For those seeking spiritual answers to life's questions, the recruiters have a ready supply of simple answers usually based on memorized passages of the Bible. Although the passages are frequently taken out of context or twisted to mean something totally contrary to Scriptural teaching, they are Bible passages used in much the same way as proof passages are used in catechetical instruction classes. In many cases such catechetical instruction in God's Word is the only type of instruction in God's Word with which the recruit is familiar. This use of a stock set of proof passages is appealing to the recruit. The recruiter is also trained to use the name of Jesus or God frequently in his conversation, using phrases like "Praise God", "Thank you Jesus" repeatedly so that it becomes in some case a truly hypnotic incantation. Such familiarity with using God's name gives the impression of sincere devotion to God which to many is an outstanding indication of real devotion to God. Early in the indoctrination of new recruits or potential recruits the absolute devotion to a living prophet, teacher, or leader of some kind becomes very apparent. Each of these "leaders" is some kind of self-styled Messiah or Elijah who has been sent by God with new revelations for modern man. His message is always more relevant than any "old-time" religion. He or she or they are always strong personalities who demand absolute devotion and commitment from their followers, an absolute devotion and commitment which most recruits feel is lacking in established Christian churches. In Hare Krishna (ISKCON) his name is Prabhupada, a Spiritual Master or guru who came to the United States in 1965 to spread the pure love of God (Krishna) throughout Western society. He demands total commitment to four basic rules. These rules as discussed in the book by Francine Daner, *The American Children of Krana* are appended to this paper. In the Children of God (COG) cult the leader is David Berg who since 1970 has been known as Moses David or just plain 110. He issues 110 letters containing direct revelations from God concerning present and future world events. Many of these are extremely controversial and have caused COG real problems. (cf. appended quotes.) In the Alamo Christian Foundation the leaders are a pair, Tony and Susan Alamo, a husband and wife who began teaching hippies and became involved in the Jesus movement in Hollywood. In 1970 they began their own group in Sanguis, California. The Love Family is led by Paul Erdman a salesman from California who came to Seattle in 1969 and adopted the name Love Israel. (Love Is Real) He claims to be Christ's representative whose noble purpose is to gather together God's true family. I am sure that you have all heard about Sun Myung Moon, the Korean-born evangelist, millionaire, industrialist and founder of the Unification Church to whom Jesus Christ appeared on Easter morning in 1936 and selected him to carry out an important mission. He was to complete Christ's unfinished work. He was 16 years old at the time and spent the next 9 years in prayer and deep study, receiving while meditating a complete series of principles through spiritual communication with such persons as Jesus, Moses and Buddha and occasionally even direct communication with God. In 1973 he moved his headquarters to the United States. Within his "church" he is regarded as "the Messiah, the Lord of the Second Advent." As such he demands total devotion to himself and absolute obedience to all he says and reveals to his people. The founder, president, and prophet of The Way is Victor Paul Wierwille, a former Evangelical & Reformed minister. In 1953 he began teaching a class called Power for Abundant Living (PFAL). In the fall of 1974 he bought the campus of a Presbyterian college in Emporia, Kansas, now known as The Way College of Emporia which offers a curriculum of biblical studies "found nowhere else in our country" to a student body of over 400. He claims to have received direct audible communication from God Himself and claims to be in fact the only true apostle of God on earth. His classes teach a 3-week course in S.I.T. (speaking in tongues) during lesson number 12. Graduates are sent out as WOW (Word over the World) Ambassadors after successfully completing 3 series of classes called Foundational, Intermediate, and Advanced. Graduates could all speak in tongues, interpret, and prophesy, which one ex-member says, "means no more than repeating things I had heard over and over in fellowship groups." The leader of the Divine Light Mission assumed that position at the age of eight when his father died in 1966. His name is Guru Maharaj Ji. In the DLM magazine "And It Is Divine" his ascension to leadership was reported in this way:

On August 1, 1966 Guru Maharaj Ji stood up in front of thousands of devotees present at his father's funeral to speak: "Dear children of God, why are you weeping? Haven't you learned the lesson that your Master taught you? The Perfect Master never dies. Maharaj Ji is here, amongst you now. Recognize Him, obey Him, and worship Him. (November 1972)

He claims to be a satguru. In Hindi sat means truth, gu means darkness, ru means light. He is therefore one who by dispensing truth leads men from darkness to light. He dispenses this truth by giving knowledge to recruits through specially designated disciples called mahatmas. This is accomplished through meditation, as one former devotee explained it, "The mind had to be controlled. The mind was controlled by meditation."

The brief sketch of the leaders of these seven modern cults was given here to point out the strong claims they make about themselves. In every case they have assumed a position of direct relationship with God that dare not be questioned by their followers. They are God's authority on earth. There is no salvation for anyone outside of their own cult or in any other way than through the programs and principles which they outline for their followers. To many of our youth who are victims of weak or hypocritical leadership within their own families, they offer the strength of leadership which is appealing, even if that leadership makes astounding demands upon them. And in fact that is what does happen.

The demands that are made upon the recruits in all cases are truly astounding. Let me list just a few of the most common ones: Work-days of 14-20 hours with sleeping or rest time limited to no more than 5 hours; goals for witnessing or litnessing (selling cult literature) both numerical and monetary that would seem impossible; frequent fasting or a severely restricted diet, a strict separation of men and women with marriage permitted only by leader approval; a removal of all privacy with many restrictions against ever being alone; a denial of one's self among and for the good of the group or "family"; the removal of all mirrors so that personalities may be lost; the total rejection of all former family ties, especially with parents who are to be considered as agents of Satan; the demand for each recruit to prove his allegiance by assigning all personal possessions to the cult or its leader; the acceptance of living conditions that would be considered totally impossible outside of the cult, sleeping on floors, no hot water, a shower once a week limited to five minutes in cold water, used clothing shared with ten or more others, and on and on.

How can such demands be appealing? They are appealing because they represent a total commitment to a leader or to the principles that leader proposes. The demands themselves might be anything at all. It is the fact of a very real and strong commitment that provides the appeal to a person who has never known a true commitment or who has been disillusioned by those who claim a commitment but don't live it. Commitment to the cults is generally achieved through one or more of the following mechanisms, (1) sacrifice, (2) investment, (3) renunciation, (4) communion, (5) mortification, and (6) transcendence. An example of each of these mechanisms might be in place here.

As a test of his faith or loyalty, all cult programs demand that a recruit give up something for joining. It might be a college education, a promising career, a marriage or a potential husband or wife, or anything else that a recruit has considered worthwhile before. An austere life style, without the comforts and affluence of middle class America is an effective sacrifice mechanism. Sacrificing fine clothes, make-up, and personal adornment is common among the young women.

By investing in the cult, commitment is strengthened. Cars, bank accounts, stock as well as time and energy are turned over to the cult to promote its objectives.

Commitment is also built by renunciation of any and all relationships that are potentially disruptive toward cult cohesiveness. The world outside the cult is taught to be a changing, turbulent, seductive place not safe for any cult member except as a place for witnessing and gathering funds to support the cult. Renunciation of that outside world is often accomplished by distinctive dress such as the saffron robes of the Hare Krishna cult members. We have already mentioned that former family members are to be considered Satanic enemies. Even within the cults any two-persons-only relationships are discouraged, especially between members of the opposite

sex because such relationships, especially sexual relationships, tend to divide energies and loyalties that are to be given to the cult family only.

Communion is a term used to describe to the fellowship within a cult “family,” a belonging, a participation in a group and the mingling of the self within the group. A strong sense of we as opposed to they is fostered, the we being God’s people within the cult and they being the Satanic enemies outside of the cult. Team effort and the importance of each member on that team is stressed no matter how degrading or menial the task might be. Group ritual and constantly repeated incantations are a part of this communion mechanism. Terms that are significant or hold special meaning for one particular cult are used almost like a code to accent the oneness of the members of the cult.

Mortification refers to those attempts of the cults to strip away a previous identity, to make a person dependent upon a new authority for direction. Recruits are often given new names. The lack of mirrors keeps a recruit from being reminded of his former identity. Fasting and lack of sufficient sleep are ways of mortifying the body. A part of the mortification mechanism is the distinctive ranks within the hierarchical setup of the cults. The high levels of the hierarchy provide promises of riches and affluent living to those who are going through mortification processes as a recruit or neophyte member of a cult. The lack of privacy, the censoring of all mail, both incoming and outgoing, communal sleeping and eating, segregated by sex is all a part of this degradation mechanism.

Finally commitment is built through transcendence. Transcendence refers to the fact that a member of the cult finds himself involved in something larger or greater or more important than anything he had known before. That idea is strengthened by the authoritarian leader and the ideological principles which he outlines for his cult. Every aspect of the totalistic life style of the cultists, including free time and recreation, is directed by comprehensive guidelines laid down by the leader. His members are totally controlled.

In all six of these mechanisms for gaining commitment one focal theme appears to be present. That theme is discipline, or perhaps discipline and regimentation. There is certainly nothing wrong with commitment in itself, in fact it is a commendable trait and we speak highly of an individual’s commitment to Christ or to his work in the service of Christ. But the commitment of the cult member is not to Christ but to a false prophet, an agent of Satan, who through such a commitment leads a great many of the youth of our country to eternal damnation. If we wish to very briefly summarize the appeal of the cults, we can do so in this way. They offer friendship, love, and a sense of belonging to the lonely; they offer answers, simple, clear, black on white answers, to those seeking answers to life’s basic questions, they offer a sense of direction through total commitment to those who are unsure about where their life is headed; they promise glorious rewards both spiritual and material to those who are willing to make a strong commitment.

How do we as pastors or teachers fight such appeals? There can be only one answer. We begin by identifying those to whom the appeals are made, the lonely, those seeking answers and sense of direction and we provide them with the comfort and the answers which the Lord has given us in His holy Word. To the young man or woman in whose heart the Holy Spirit has worked saving faith, the cults have no appeal. To protect our youth from the appealing features of the cults the Lord has given us that which St. Paul calls the power of God unto salvation. Each of us has been called to use it. May we be as committed to our calling as the cultist is to his cult.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Daner, Francine Jeanne. *The American Children of Krsna*. New York. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976.
- Enroth, Ronald M. *Youth, Brainwashing, and the Extremist Cults*. Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan Corporation, 1977.
- Beck, Hubert F. *How to Respond to the Cults*. St. Louis, MO Concordia Publishing House, 1977.
- Gruss, Edmund C. *Cults and the Occult in the Age of Aquarius*. Grand Rapids, MI. Baker Book House, 1974.

ARTICLES AND PERIODICALS

- Ericson, Edward E. and Mac Pherson, Paul. "The Deceptions of the Children of the God." *Christianity Today*, 20 July 1973, pp 14-20.
- Rasmussen, Mark. "How Sun Myung Moon Lures America's Children." *McCalls*, September 1976, pp 102ff
- Rice, Berkeley. "Honor Thy Father Moon." *Psychology Today*, January 1976 pp. 36ff.

APPENDIX A

There are four basic rules of conduct which all new members must observe. These rules are crucial to the Hare Krishna life style, as discussed by anthropologist Francine Daner in her book "The American Children of Krsna:

1. No gambling. This rule also excludes frivolous sports and games. In addition, devotees are advised not to engage in any conversation that is not connected with the teachings of Krsna Consciousness or with the execution of duties. All other speech or reading is called mental speculation and is a luxury in which the devotees do not engage.
2. No intoxicants. This rule includes all narcotics, alcoholic beverages, tobacco, coffee and tea. ISKCON's efficiency in getting its members to abandon the use of drugs such as marijuana, LSD, and others, has drawn commendation from the mayors of New York and San Francisco. Medicines may be taken when absolutely necessary, but whenever possible medicines containing narcotic substances should be avoided. In actual practice, the devotees will see a doctor and take medicine, but chanting the Hare Krsna mantra is considered to be a better remedy for bodily ills. The devotees feel that bodily ills are Krsna's mercy because the illness reminds them "that they are not this body."
3. No illicit sex. Sexual relations are permitted only between individuals married by a qualified devotee in Krsna Consciousness. There is no dating or courtship allowed. Marriage is an arrangement for two devotees of Krsna to serve and worship in this way. A swami stated it succinctly: "If a devotee believes he can serve Krsna better by being married, then he gets married. Marriage is primarily for the purpose of raising children in Krsna Consciousness."
4. No eating of meat, fish, or eggs. The only food that can be eaten by devotees is food prepared under strict dietary regulations, and offered by prescribed ceremony to Krsna. When traveling or under unusual circumstances, devotees may eat foods such as fruit or milk which can easily be offered and which do not necessarily require preparation; under no circumstances may unoffered food be eaten. In ISKCON, eating is an act of worship and must be conducted accordingly.

APPENDIX B

Some of Mo's so-called sex letters - complete with suggestive artwork - have caused problems for the COG who attempt to peddle them to the public for a donation. Titles like "Sex Works!" "In the Beginning - Sex!" and "Come on, Ma! Burn Your Bra!" have led many to conclude that Berg is preoccupied with sex. Moses David responds to this charge by quoting Scripture: "To the pure, all things are pure." And he adds: "May God damn every self-righteous sex-condemning truth-hiding hypocrite who would hide the truths and beauties of God's creation from his holy pureminded children." Berg observes: "We have a sexy God, and a sexy religion, and a very sexy leader with an extremely sexy young following. So, if you don't like sex, you'd better get out while you can."

Other Mo letters are far less controversial and much more mundane. Jan describes one such letter, entitled "The Health Revolution," as "absolutely absurd." She relates an incident involving this particular Mo letter that illustrates the significance attached to the words of Moses David by his followers. "In 'The Health Revolution' he was telling us how we didn't need to brush our teeth. We only needed to rinse our mouth out with water and rub our finger over our teeth every day. It was only necessary to brush your teeth with toothpaste

every three or four days. Toothpaste was something that you didn't really need. He also said that dental floss was bad for your teeth and advised us not to use dental floss.

Roger W. Fleming