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## AN INTRODUCTION TO CULTS

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### *Introduction*

With this article, we begin a mini-series on selected Christian cults and non-Christian religions that are found in Kenya. In this series, we hope to introduce our readers to some of the major cults and non-Christian religions in Kenya and give biblical responses to some of the major teachings of these Christian cults and non-Christian religions. We begin the series with this brief introduction to cults in general as a foundation for the discussions to follow. In this introduction we will present the information in the form of answers to four questions, namely:

1. What is a cult?
2. What are typical characteristics of a cult?
3. What are some basic cultic techniques?
4. Why do people join cults?

### **What is a Cult?**

There are two major ways in which a cult may be defined. The first is sociological, and the second theological. Though we give examples of both definitions here, for the purposes of our article the theological definition will be the focus.

*Sociologically*, a cult may be defined as any group that pulls members from general society and isolates them against that society, often through the use of coercive techniques. Note that, within this framework, Christianity has fallen under the term "cult" in certain places at certain times (e.g., in the first century in Israel).

*Theologically*, a "Christian" cult may be defined as a group which is characterized by major doctrinal differences with orthodox Christianity. More often than not, the primary differences will concern one or more of the four following areas:

1. The person of Christ (denying either His humanity or His deity).
2. The work of Christ (replacing free grace with a system of works and adherence to the cult leader(s)).

3. The teaching of the trinity (usually denying it).
4. The replacing of Christ with some person (often the founder of the cult) as the source of authority and salvation.

The teachings of a "Christian" cult may include any one or a combination of the above. The most crucial element typically seen is a denial of the deity of Christ. For the purposes of this article, the theological understanding of the term "Christian" cult is the one we will use for discussion.

### **What Are Typical Characteristics of a Cult?**

#### **Characteristics of Cults in General**

As widely diversified as they may be in regard to teachings and practices, cults in general still have several commonalities that may be identified. Here we will discuss eleven typical characteristics that are useful "tags" in identifying a cult.

#### **A Strong Charismatic Prophet-Founder**

A cult will almost invariably have a strong charismatic prophet-founder. Often, but not always, this prophet will have some special writings on which he or she bases the authority they wield. Those writings, or at least portions of them, may not be available to the general public, making the "secret" teachings of the leader difficult to document. Often the writings are those of the leader himself, claimed to have been received in revelations in which the leader has a direct "pipeline" to the thoughts of God. The sermons of William Branham, for example, are now called the "spoken Word", implying that they carry the same authority as the Bible.

#### **Society Seen as the Enemy**

Members of cults are often taught that society is an enemy to be confronted and defeated. There is usually a very strong "we versus they" mentality in a cult, with society at large (including family of the cult members, if they have not also joined the cult) as the enemies of truth (or deceived people who need to be shown the "true" way). For example, members of the Unification Church (the "Moonies") are taught that marriages entered into before they joined the Moonies are not valid, and former spouses are to be ignored, especially if they do not also join the group.

#### **Strong Hierarchical Authority Structure**

Cults tend to have a very strong hierarchical authority structure with no room to challenge the authority or teaching of those higher up the "chain of command". In one sense, they may be thought of as an army in which the commander-in-chief's (i.e., the cult leader) orders are to be obeyed without question. The authority structure of the cult serves to prevent rebellion within the ranks and to keep the whole structure under rigid control. Any who dare to

question the authority of those above them may be dealt with quickly and severely.

#### **Emphasis on Isolated Areas of Doctrine**

Cults often place a strong emphasis on a few isolated areas of doctrine. Cult members become experts at disseminating the basic arguments for their particular teachings. Many Christians are completely unprepared for the strength and "logic" of the arguments, and do not know how to adequately refute them. For example, it is difficult to encounter a Branhamite without hearing their arguments against the teaching of the Trinity and for an immersion baptism in the name of Jesus *only*, which they feel is necessary for salvation.

#### **Initiation Rites**

Some form of initiation rite is usually required to join a cult. Such rites help solidify the new convert's identity with that of the group. This initiation, or parts of it, may be kept secret from the general public. For example, it is reported that in the early days of his cult Reverend Moon initiated all marriages within the group by having sex three times with the bride-to-be in form of "blood purification" (see James Bjornstad, *San Myung Moon and the Unification Church*, p. 11, and *Time*, 14 June, 1976).

#### **Belonging Necessary for "Salvation"**

Cults teach that it is crucial to bring a new convert into the body of "true believers" (for only as a part of that body will he/she be saved). Anyone not in the cult is seen as lost, and so the cult members will do whatever they can to bring members into the group. Women of the Children of God (headquartered in Europe), for example, are encouraged to practice "enticement" prostitution, which they call "flirty fishing" (e.g., "fishing" for men by "flirting" with them sexually, see Josh McDowell and Don Stewart's *Handbook of Today's Religions*, p. 97; and Dave Hunt's *The Cult Explosion*, p. 86). The Moonies allegedly practice a doctrine called "Heavenly Deception" which justifies lying to potential converts or donors. They say that because Satan lied to deceive men, we can use his tactics to try to save them.

#### **Use of Fear and/or Threats**

Cults may use fear and/or threats both to get people to join and to keep present members from leaving the group. Threats to potential deserters range from that of eternal punishment to physical harm (or even death) to the deserter or his family members.

#### **Reliance on Emotionalism**

A tendency to rely more on emotionalism than rational thought is found in many cults. Within this framework, only the leader(s) are allowed to do the "thinking" for the group, and their statements are the final word in doctrinal understanding. Though articles in official magazines which propagate cultic

teaching often appear to appeal to rational thought, there are usually strong emotional appeals (seen in the many references to the lostness of those outside the group, to the eternal rewards which await those who persevere, etc) and the actual scholarship in arguments used is completely lacking.

#### **Sexual Distortion**

There is often some form of sexual distortion in cults. This distortion may range from a teaching of free sex (at least for the leaders, the Children of God being a primary example) to complete abstention even for married couples. The teaching that sex is evil or must be limited to only the purpose of procreation is sometimes justified by trying to "prove" that the original sin was sex between the serpent and Eve (the Branhamites and the Moonies teach this).

#### **Comprehensive Answers to All of Life's Questions**

Cults usually provide a system of thought that serves as a complete guide with the authoritative answer to any problem seen in the world or to any objection the "unbeliever" may raise, though this is often far more shallow than the cult recognizes. While we all recognize the final authority of the Bible in answering questions in regard to faith, we also recognize that the Bible does not always provide easily discernable "pat" answers to every problem we face. The Moonies "Bible", *The Divine Principle*, explains why Jesus' mission "failed" and why a new "messiah" (the Lord of the Second Advent) had to come. It explains why the world is the way it is and claims to provide the answer to all the problems we face (and infers in not-so-veiled language that Moon himself is that answer).

#### **Wealthy Leader(s)**

Finally, while the loyal followers are often poor and destitute, the leaders may be enjoying the fruit of the group's work, including great wealth and a lavish lifestyle that is either hidden from the followers or justified to them in some "theologically" acceptable fashion. The Moonies, for example, are estimated to have an annual intake of a minimum of 2.5 billion shillings (160 million U.S. dollars; *Newsweek*, 2 September, 1985, p. 49)! In addition, Moon himself spent time in jail in 1985 after being convicted of income tax evasion in the United States.

#### **Typical Characteristics of "Christian" Cults**

How are we to identify a "Christian" cult? In addition to the theological definition and the general characteristics of cults given above, we may look for the following additional characteristics which are typical of "Christian" cults (adapted from *Handbook of Today's Religions*, pp. 20-25; see also Dave Breese, *Know the Marks of Cults*).

#### **A New Interpretation (or Translation) of Scripture**

"Christian" cults must substantiate in some way the new teachings that they claim to be truth. If they do not seek to substantiate a new revelation, then they

may justify their teachings by putting forth an "authoritative" guide to understanding the Bible or even new translation of the Bible. For example, Charles Taze Russell (the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses) stated this concerning his commentaries on the Bible:

If the six volumes of "Scripture Studies" are practically the Bible, . . . we might not improperly name the volumes "The Bible in Arranged Form." That is to say, they are not mere comments on the Bible, but they are practically the Bible itself. Furthermore, . . . we see, also, that if anyone lays the "Scripture Studies" aside, even after he has used them, . . . for ten years—if he then lays them aside and ignores them and goes to the Bible alone, though he has understood his Bible for ten years, our experience shows that within two yeears he goes into darkness. On the other hand, if he had merely read the "Scripture Studies" . . . and had not read a page of the Bible as such, he would be in the light at the end of two years, because he would have the light of the Scriptures. (*The Watchtower*, September 15, 1910, p. 298; quoted in Walter Martin *The Kingdom of the Cults*, p. 41).

Thus, no Jehovah's Witness would dare to contradict the teachings of *The Watchtower* or *Awake!* or their official translation, The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures. We should also point out here the Branhamites reliance on the sermons of Branham as prophetic teaching. They have compiled recordings of over 200 of Branham's sermons and made them available on tape or in written form (generally labelled under the title "The Spoken Word").

#### **An Extra-Biblical Source of Final Authority**

Justification for the teachings of the cult may be found in the form of a "new revelation from God", which takes priority over the clear teachings of the Bible, as with the Moonies (*The Divine Principle*) and the Mormons (*The Book of Mormon*).

#### **Distortion on the Humanity or Deity of Christ**

Understanding Scriptural teaching on the person and nature of Christ is crucial in dealing with cults, most of which distort or deny His deity. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, have built up elaborate arguments against the deity of Christ, and substantiate them with their own translation of the Bible. The Moonies teach that Christ failed in His mission to achieve both physical and spiritual salvation for mankind, and thus there is need for a new "Messiah" to come and complete the task that Christ left unfinished. The Branhamites teach that Jesus was the first man to become a god. All of these understandings are contrary to the Bible.

#### **Rejection of Orthodox Christianity**

Virtually all cults reject any "Church" other than their own. Jehovah's

Witnesses think of Christendom as the "whore of Babylon", a feeling echoed by many cults. Professing to despise "organized religion", they often become organized themselves in an intricate web of teachings and authority structures.

#### **Verbal Double-Talk and Shifting of Standard Definitions**

Often, cults will continue to use the same language as Christians, but they have changed many of the definitions to suit their own particular teachings. This is seen in some groups far more than others but is a point to note in talking with a cult member.

#### **Changing Theology**

Many cults slowly change their theology over the years without admitting it to outsiders or even their own members. Such changes in "revelation" are important to note in showing that the cult leader(s) are not as infallible as they generally claim to be. For examples of changes in Jehovah's Witnesses doctrine over the years, see Magnani's *The Watchtower Files*, a book loaded with photocopies of original Jehovah's Witnesses documents which substantiate the changes that have taken in place in their teachings.

#### **Distorted Teaching on Salvation**

All cults distort the biblical teaching on salvation by grace through faith. The distortion can take one of two directions. Either it will be taught that eventually everyone will be saved (universalism) or that only a few select people will be saved. The conditions of salvation for those that teach the latter are inevitably tied up in a system of works and adherence to the group. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, teach that heaven is already fully booked (only 144,000 will be in the New Heaven), and all those left on earth can look forward to is living in the paradise on Earth. Entry to paradise is only secured by full loyalty to Jehovah's Witnesses teaching, and that loyalty is measured by the number of hours each Jehovah's Witness spends per month in calling on people. As a group, the Jehovah's Witnesses spent 590,540,205 hours calling on others in 1985!

#### **False Prophecy and/or Pronouncements**

This is one area in which the careful researcher may reap a goldmine in useful information in combating the teaching of a cult. Many make predictions (usually about the second coming of Christ or some impending disaster, which they use as an evangelistic tool) which do not come to pass. Excellent documentation can be found on the Jehovah's Witnesses predictions in Morey's *How to Answer a Jehovah's Witness*, including photocopies of the original sources of the predictions. Documentation on the Branhamites predictions of the return of Christ in July of 1977 is hard to come by, mainly because the materials in which Branham's prophecy was given are no longer loaned out to the public.

#### **What are Some Basic Cultic Techniques**

Cults utilise a number of techniques which build conformity and ensure loyalty of the cult members. It will be useful for the Christian to be aware of some of these techniques used in order to be better prepared to deal with them in helping a cult member leave the cult. At least thirteen of these techniques have been identified in *Larson's Book of Cults* (pp. 411-12), the most important of which we give here.

#### **Demands for Absolute Loyalty**

Cult leaders demand absolute and unswerving loyalty from every member. They place a high cost on commitment to the cult, emotionally chaining the members to themselves. Such demands also include the area of lifestyle. Members of the cult will often be required to conform in habits and appearance which are contrary to that of society as a whole. Their conformity within the group (and contrasting lack of conformity in regard to the rest of society) serves as a strong emotional weld binding them to the group. This conformity is maintained by a strong sense of peer pressure. Some groups even have members spying on one another to insure strict conformity, with the slightest violations being reported for discipline immediately. All of this builds incredibly strong emotional ties. For a person to leave a cult, he usually has to reject all that he has poured his life into while in the cult (including not only teachings, but also lifestyle, habits, dress, and friends), which often requires more emotional energy than he has in his own strength.

#### **Chanting and Repetitive Phrases as a Way of Preventing Objective, Independent Thinking**

Some groups use continuous repetitive phrases, chanting, and singing as a means of steeping the members in the thinking of the group. When confronted with a crisis or treacherous thoughts, the members are to repeat phrases or ideas as a means of combating those thoughts. Talks and writings of the cult leader will be liberally sprinkled with such phrases, whose design is to generate emotional momentum while maintaining rational submission. This prevents the members from thinking for themselves and builds more emotional loyalty to the teaching of the cult.

#### **Financial Demands**

Often members will have to give all they own as proof of their commitment to the group, which (as with the other techniques above) deepens their emotional investment in the cult. Some cults have even had members obtain their inheritance from their parents before the parents die so that they can give those proceeds to the group. One result of this is a total dependence of the members on the leadership to provide for their monetary needs (food, a place to stay, clothing, etc.)

#### **Isolation from the Outside World**

Cult members are usually isolated from society as a whole and kept closely within the reach of the cultic leadership. Such isolation can be seen in two forms:



isolation from *people* and isolation from *ideas*.

#### **Isolation from People**

Isolation from people includes not only old friends and acquaintances, but even relatives (parents, children, and spouse may be included in the "taboo" group, especially if they refuse to join the cult). For some cults this isolation even extends to not having time to yourself. No privacy may be allowed; a member may be required to have a partner for everything they do.

#### **Isolation from Ideas**

Isolation from ideas involves demanding a total rejection of the old way of thinking. "Worldly" values are strongly condemned, and anyone thinking in worldly terms is in danger of losing his "salvation". The old values which are rejected are then replaced with values which the cult leadership considers important.

#### **Behaviour Modification by Means of Rewards and Punishments.**

The final technique to be discussed here is that of modifying the behaviour of the members of the cult by means of rewards and punishments. Rewards may include high praise from the leader, special privileges, or rise in rank within the organization. Punishments may include group or self derision, extra duties, or threats of Hell. When the cult member's personal and emotional security is coming entirely from his understanding of the leader's and the group's approval, he will bend many traditional inhibitions and rules in seeking to gain that approval.

#### **Why Do People Join Cults?**

One sociologist notes five reasons why people join cults (Ronald Enroth, "Five Reasons to Join a Cult", HIS, May, 1984, pp. 1-4). Each of these reasons centre around a concept that is *appealing* to all of us because in some way it meets a need we have as a human-being. All of these needs appear to be part of the God-given personalities which each person has. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, cults take advantage of these needs and use them to enlist people to join in their cause.

#### **The Appeal of Authority**

Many today are looking for an authoritative source to answer the questions they have about life and their purpose in living. Often this source will be a person to whom we give the power to wield authority over us. In the church the leaders serve the congregation by God's authority vested in them. In cults the leaders take the place of God and command complete authority. Many people to escape assuming responsibility are willing to put themselves under the complete authority of another and submit to his demands.

### **The Appeal of Community**

In traditional Africa, the ultimate in punishment was ostracism or banishment from the tribe. Everyone needs to be associated in some way with a community. For Christians that community was intended by God to be found in the Church. For cults, it is the cult community. Community ties are extremely strong and provide a source of identity and security for the members.

### **The Appeal of Commitment**

Cults require much of their members. Their emotions, minds, and bodies are given over in complete service to the cult. This type of commitment causes a person to invest so much of himself that he is often too frightened to consider reversing his investment. Christ Himself called for total and complete commitment to Him, and such commitment is a virtue in the Christian life. Cult leaders steer the desire to make that commitment to the Living Lord in the direction of themselves.

### **The Appeal of Idealism**

Many of us (especially the youth) are easily swayed by causes that promise to "change the world". Indeed Christ *has* called us to be world-changers. We would all like to see the problems of our world solved, and many will listen to someone who claims to have the solution. Cult leaders often make this claim, appealing to those who are ready for solutions to the problems they face.

### **The Appeal of Experience**

All too often people mistakenly equate good experiences with truth. Many non-Christian cults and religions offer good (even supernatural) experiences to their adherents and use testimonies of those who have had such experiences to draw people to join them. The Word of God specifically states that Satan is able to do many counterfeit miracles (2 Thess. 2:9-10), and nowhere is this more easily seen than in the miracles claimed by cults.

### **Conclusion**

Cults are many and varied and are found universally. Generally, however, they follow certain patterns which make identification possible. As seen above members have invested heavily of themselves in that cult. It is highly unlikely that a mere doctrinal argument will cause them to leave, though that is certainly possible. If we seek to minister effectively in helping those in cults see the error of their ways, then we need to be willing to understand the emotional dynamics involved in their membership and potential defections. Generally if we do not provide emotional substitutes for a cult member, either he will not leave or he will eventually return to the cult.

Additionally, the cult member is convinced that we are the ones who are deceived. The vast majority of cults teach that they have the only hold on truth, and that the rest of the world is going to Hell. They want us to join them not

because they want to deceive or trick us, but because they want us to be "saved" as they are. We should respect them for their desire to help us, but lovingly and gently show them the truth (2 Tim. 2:24-26).