

DESTRUCTIVE RELIGIOUS GROUPS

HOW TO RECOGNIZE THEM, AND HOW TO HELP THEIR ADHERENTS

How do I know if a religion is dangerous or destructive?

Although cults have often been defined as religious protest movements because of their deliberate departure from the beliefs of the dominant culture (Hexham/Poewe 6), in a multicultural society such as ours this definition is inadequate.

For this reason we do well to note Stephen Hassan's definition: "Any group that engages in outright deception to pursue its ends, whether religious or secular in its apparent orientation, I define as a destructive cult." (Hassan 5) Any religion that will not tolerate criticism (whether from members or outsiders) is engaging in a form of mind control. That is, it is attempting to control the flow of information that reaches its members. This is essential if the recruiting process upon which such groups depend (numeric growth is 'God's blessing') is to succeed. Stephen Hassan points out that he would never have joined the Moonies (Unification Church) had he known their underworld and political connections. Most Jehovah's Witnesses who finally leave do so because they find out the truth about The Watchtower's past, and discover 'God's organization' is capable of coverup like any 'worldly' organization. A coverup does not necessitate outright lying -- merely selective memory. One-fifth of the press directives issued by Hitler's propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels between 1939 and 1944 were orders to keep silent on one subject or another (Ellul 56).

As Hassan sees it, George Orwell's *1984* already exists in many of these destructive groups. Orwell gives us a society where the main character's occupation is rewriting history for the 'Ministry of Truth'. 'Big Brother' knows that he who controls the present controls the past, and he who controls the past controls the future. However, this tendency to rewrite the past is not limited to totalitarian regimes like the Nazis and Stalinist Russia. Jacques Ellul points out in his brilliant *Propaganda* that it is inherent in propaganda itself to rewrite history (Ellul 14). The group must minimize its own errors or flaws, and magnify those of all other groups outside. Thus, Ellul says, "Propaganda tends to make the individual live in a separate world; he must not have outside points of reference." (17)

But what if they say their recruiting is merely an educational work – everyone is free to choose & members are free to leave?

People under mind control have no real right to choose, nor freedom to leave the group. That right has been taken away from them by the refusal of the group to make full disclosure of relevant facts (Passantino 25; Hassan 65,109). Until such disclosure has been made, the cult member is a victim of **religious fraud**. The line between education and propaganda is sometimes vague. Lenin actually insisted that Soviet citizens needed a certain level of literacy - the illiterate are not susceptible to propaganda! (Ellul 109) However, a useful means to distinguish **true** education from mind control is the group's capacity for receiving other points of view, and better still, the group's creating internal checks and balances to ensure the spirit of self-criticism is kept alive. Where internal dissent is squashed and external critics ignored or worse slandered, we can be sure mind control is at work. In such an environment, a phobia or fear of ALL outside groups and critics is created. Is one who has caught this phobia likely to leave the group - even if he or she has doubts about the group? (Hassan 65, 84, 104). In addition, there is NEVER a legitimate reason to leave a cult. One's motives are challenged, and those who have already left are characterized as traitors to God. The key for any group relying on propaganda to keep members is to maintain a 'closed society/environment' (Qualter xiii). In such a society, however, where all information reaching the members is sanitized, often committee-composed propaganda (as in Orwell's *Oceania* and *The Watchtower*), authoritarian leaders must often face a continuing crisis of boredom (Qualter 141).

How do we know that the member is under a form of mind-control?

Those under mind control will NEVER acknowledge that they are. The most ridiculous rationalizations, which may appear to be evidence of insincerity or even insanity to the outsider, become possible when one is under mind control. This phenomenon is akin to *1984*'s **doublethink**: "*Oceanic society rests ultimately on the belief that Big Brother is infallible. But since in reality Big Brother is not omnipotent and the Party is not infallible, there is need for an unwearying, moment-to-moment flexibility in the treatment of facts. The key word here is blackwhite.*" (Orwell 213). As Ronald Enroth points out, cult leaders must continually 'adjust their masks' for good public relations, as well as failed expectations (Enroth 12).

Stephen Hassan suggests we ask the person questions, such as "Could you tell me 2 or 3 things you DON'T like about [the group or leader]?", or "Have you talked to or read criticisms by ex-members?". Such questions will quickly bring into focus whether the mind we are dealing with has totally closed (Hassan 110). Uncritical acceptance of the leaders or group ensures an unhealthy dependence on the 'spiritual diet' spooned from the top. But Hitler's 'big lie' is only possible in a closed or authoritarian society, where censorship is enforced. Other groups must rely on selective omissions to accomplish the same effect (Qualter 60).

One simple test of a destructive religious group – does it practice unconditional love?

Because members must be prepared to cast off 'disloyal', 'unfaithful' friends, even family, at any time, cultic groups cannot possibly carry through on Christ's command to *love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that persecute you* (Matthew 5:44). Members of destructive groups must therefore be prepared to shut down their natural affections at any time (Enroth 96; Hassan 122,173)

What do you know about the group's leader(s)?

It is almost inevitable that cultic groups develop from a single charismatic 'prophet' or founder, although after they have grown to become institutions their leadership, conversely, often becomes almost invisible. As Heather and Gary Botting point out, the eyes of the faithful are more easily focused on an **invisible** figurehead, in Jehovah's Witnesses' case, the ubiquitous (but NOT omnipresent) Jehovah (Botting xxx). As George Orwell ominously tells us, "Big Brother is the guise in which the Party chooses to exhibit itself to the world. His function is to act as a focusing point for love, fear, and reverence, emotions which are more easily felt towards an individual than towards an organization" (Orwell 209).

Stephen Hassan points out that very few, if any, leaders of cults have credentials demanded to accredit religious leaders in the outside world (97). Werner Erhard, founder of EST (now The Forum), sold used cars and encyclopedias. Charles Taze Russell, founder of The Watchtower, had a haberdashery business. L. Ron Hubbard, founder of Scientology, was a science fiction writer. Even one cult founder who HAD a theological degree, Victor Paul Wierwille of The Way International, obtained it from a mail-order degree mill. The fact that God **can** use simple, illiterate souls (Matt.11:25.26) is not to be taken as a guiding principle for selecting spiritual leaders. Men MOST used of God, especially in great 'international' work -- Moses, Daniel and Paul, for example -- were deeply skilled in the areas they needed most for their respective tasks -- foreign languages, local culture and religion, as well as the traditions of their own faith (Acts 7:22; Daniel 1:4; Galatians 1:14). The Watchtower, while claiming to have **sole** possession of truth on earth, refuses to divulge the identity of the translators of its own Bible. Would you trust a doctor who couldn't present his credentials? A dentist? A lawyer? Then why trust a religious leader who has not bothered to acquire the requisite skills for correct Bible interpretation?

But shouldn't 'spiritual' men be accountable only to God?

It is ironic that cult leaders who refuse to be accountable to any outside body or even internal checks and balances (though they sometimes have 'stacked' boards of directors) more often than not exert extreme forms of control on their followers. The Boston Church of Christ is a classic example of this tendency, with members making daily reports to 'disciplers', who in turn must give account to those above them in the vertical checking system. This **pyramid power structure** is a characteristic of cultic groups. Contrast the power structure in ancient Israel, where the 'divine right' of the king was held in check by TWO other divine institutions, the Levitical priesthood and the office of the prophet. The western democratic institutions, through hundreds of years of trial and error, have learned the advantage of such checks and balances. The cults, however, will never conform to the Old Testament model. (Hassan 98)

Why are the cults successful in keeping their followers despite their failures?

By a steady barrage of propagandistic indoctrination cultic groups manage to persuade their adherents that they have nowhere to go should they leave. By blackening all outsiders and 'whiting out' their own 'mistakes' or 'adjustments' (never 'sins!'), they hang on to their paranoid followers (Hassan 79). As Ellul shows, once the myth of 'The Party', 'God's organization', is accepted, almost anything can be offered as 'Truth' - even manifest changes in direction and doctrine. If the group is extremely active -- 'alive' -- this is even more true (Ellul 44,50,155). The true believer must KNOW he is right NOW, yet he is able to rationalize the most drastic alterations in the group's teachings. C.T. Russell explained HIS changes of doctrine by misrepresenting the meaning of a Bible verse to refer to "present truth", which presumably contrasts with "past truth". When 'truth' is this malleable, does it deserve the name? Nevertheless, *Whatever the Party holds to be truth IS truth* (Orwell 252, Enroth 79-80).

How is it that so many destructive religious groups flourish today, in comparison to the past?

The dominant myth of our time is the religion of progress. Ever since the Enlightenment of the 17th century, modern man has assumed that knowledge, science and society will inevitably progress upward. It is the acceptance of this notion -- unique to modernity -- that has made it easy for non-believers AND believers to disregard the heritage of the past. For Christians too have caught the spirit of the world, which says the new is always better than the old (Hexham/Poewe 52). The Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are but two of the cults which have their peculiar take on this mistaken idea.

Why should I care, and what can I do anyway?

Even if you have NO loved ones captive to a destructive religious group, you should lament the loss of millions of dedicated, self-sacrificing people to cults. What would be the immeasurable benefit to society at large if these captive millions, slaving to no ultimate benefit for counterfeit Christs, were freed to reach their potential? Stephen Hassan points out that it is the strong-minded idealists who are most often the prey of such groups (52,66,76-77). He concludes by expressing the hope that every high school and college would teach its students about mind control and destructive cults, which end can only be realized if people are first taught the God-given right of every human to think for himself (Hassan 198). Ronald Enroth suggests that halfway houses are needed, in that cult members, just as much as alcoholics, drug addicts, need special rehabilitation related to their situation (Enroth 116).

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