

The Culture of Cults

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Introduction

Some religions won't be confused with Christianity. For example, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Animism are clearly *not* Christian. Their adherents aren't trying to mislead anyone into believing that they *are* Christian. The gospel sufficiently refutes such beliefs. What we're going to focus on are belief systems that *do* portray themselves as Christian.

Now, other religions are *outside* Christianity; and heresies are found *inside* Christianity – they contradict established doctrines. **Cults** are *outside* Christianity, but they **claim** to be *inside* Christianity. And CULTS share a common trait of subduing their practitioners through fear – fear of outsiders, fear of harm if they disobey, fear of the cult's leaders, fear of retribution by other followers, or an irrational fear of the very gods they worship.

VOODOO is a cult. ISLAM is a cult (as well as a political creed). Such cults won't easily be confused with Christianity. But *some* cults use Christian terms, and mention Jesus in their beliefs. And yet, their beliefs contradict the gospel truth. They lure the unwary into thinking that they're Christian, by misusing or distorting biblical truth, or by mixing the truth of Scripture with other beliefs and practices (they *add* to Scripture).

Cults offer “another gospel.” They offer a different salvation. They offer a different God, a different Savior, a different heaven, and a different way of life. And as we said, they misuse Christian terms. They twist what the Bible reveals about the person and work of Jesus Christ. Their distortions and deceits tend to be subtle. Any Christian not grounded in sound doctrine and practice, may be misled into joining such cults, or be ill-equipped to refute their errors.

Cults and sects which claim to be Christian — those that might be perceived as being part of the church — present a special challenge. We need *specialized knowledge to withstand them*, because we need a deeper understanding of what the Christian cult or sect is really teaching, and how it departs from biblical truth.

Their beliefs are so far from the gospel, that they put the cult or sect outside the bounds of Christianity. And yet the leaders of such organizations have convinced their followers (and they try to convince *Christians*) that they're not wolves in sheep's clothing.

There are many definitions of cults. Some are so loose that they can be applied to other religions, or to corporate cultures, or to zealotry and fanaticism of any kind. We need to be careful in defining what we mean by a cult, so we don't misapply the term.

A cult is not defined just by external appearances or practices. It isn't defined by haircuts, dress, speech, or slogans — but by how the followers are governed by the organization's leaders. Its leaders claim to be prophets of God. They claim to be the sole source of authority for their people, or to speak on behalf of God to them. They claim to be Mediators and Intercessors before God, **in place of Christ** (this contradicts 1Tim 2.5).

For our purposes, cults involve some form of *worship* of God. We need to distinguish “CHRISTIAN” CULTS and SECTS from reformed Christianity. This approach was used by Walter Martin in his classic book, “Kingdom of the Cults.”¹

¹ Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults* (Bethany House Pub., Minn. MN, 1965, updated 2003), ed. Ravi Zacharias. See also Ron Rhodes' book, *The Challenge of the Cults and New Religions* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids MI, 2001).

As we said, CULTS use *fear* or *coercion* in one form or another ² to get their followers to submit to the organization's leaders. Its leaders are the sole authority for the beliefs and practices of their organization, *not the Bible*.

Some cults portray themselves as Christian, e.g., JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES and MORMONS. Other cults, like ISLAM, *oppose* Christianity. Their teachings refer to the Bible and to Christians, and yet their adherents claim that the cult is the only path to salvation. They say that all other religions, including Christianity, are false. Both types must be *refuted*.

Some (e.g., the Christian Research Institute) don't believe Roman Catholicism is a cult, despite its use of fear and superstition, and despite its unbiblical beliefs. Most reformers did believe Roman Catholicism is outside the bounds of Biblical Christianity. They put the Eastern Orthodox Church in the same category. The Reformers went so far as to call the pope, the ANTICHRIST. Are there Roman and Orthodox Catholics who are biblical Christians in their personal beliefs? *Yes*. But the clergy of those churches reject salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. They teach another gospel.

What is a cult?

A cult can be generally defined as any group of people holding to a common belief system. But in practice, the term *cult* is often used to refer specifically to,

'a quasi-religious organization using devious psychological techniques to gain and *control* adherents.' (Collins English Dictionary)

A cult controls its members primarily through promoting and instilling a hierarchical belief system in a person's own mind, rather than by using external, physical restraints. The belief system itself is the primary active agent in cult mind-control. ³ They market a product, like any commercial enterprise.

Because of the nature of their product — which is *a belief system* — cults do not really operate in the public domain. They operate in a private world, within an individual's personal religious framework or set of beliefs, and within an individual's own subjective world of self-esteem and self-confidence. *They operate within a person's mind*.

Cult belief systems

Cult belief systems differ from conventional belief systems in several subtle but significant ways, which may not be apparent to an outsider. Cult belief systems typically are:

- *Independent and not accountable* – believers follow their own self-justifying moral codes: e.g. Moonies may, in their own mind, justify deceptive recruiting as 'deceiving evil into goodness'.
- *Aspirational* – they appeal to ambitious, idealistic people. The assumption that only weak, gullible people join cults, is not necessarily true.

² It can be economic, physical, or mental. There may not be outright intimidation, but it goes beyond mere persuasion. There is typically manipulation of the facts, or of the circumstances in which its followers find themselves. They freely "choose" to follow the cult leader(s) — but cults convince their followers that they have no other choice. This is further explained below.

³ Its desirability to the individual is a type of *self*-persuasion. It enables others to control or manipulate that individual's thoughts and behaviors as the person relinquishes *self*-control, in order to obtain what is so deeply desired. The person will not have God rule over them by His word; therefore, they *choose* to be ruled by another. The concept is used by more than just cults. It's the basis of advertising, corporate culture, military boot camp, and even public education. The issue is whether the belief system contradicts God's order or His commands. We must not relinquish control to another, even as we *submit* to another. We must choose whom to serve, and what to gratify, as against serving Christ and gratifying Him alone. (Jos 24.15; Act 4.19; Rom 8.13-14; 1Cor 6.12; 10.23; Col 3.23; 1Pet 2.11)

- *Personal and experiential* – it is not possible to exercise informed free choice *in advance*, about whether a belief system is valid or not; nor what the benefits are of following the study and training opportunities offered by the group. The benefits of group involvement, if any, can only be evaluated *after* a “suitable” period of time is spent with the group. How long a suitable period of time might be, depends on the individual; it can’t be determined in advance. ⁴
- *Hierarchical and dualistic* – cult belief systems revolve around ideas about higher and lower levels of understanding. There is a hierarchy of awareness, and a path from lower to higher levels. Believers tend to divide the world into the saved and the fallen, the awakened and the deluded, etc.
- *Bi-polar* – believers experience alternating episodes of faith and doubt, confidence and anxiety, self-righteousness and guilt, depending on how well or how badly they feel they are progressing along the cult’s specified path of progress.
- *Addictive* – believers may become intoxicated with the ideals of the belief system, and feel a vicarious pride in being associated with these ideals. Cults tend to be cliquish and elitist; and believers can become dependent on the approval of the group’s elite to maintain their own self-esteem. At an extreme, believers fear they will fall into hell if they leave the group.
- *Psychologically damaging* – when established members leave or are expelled, they may develop a particular kind of cult-induced mental disorder, marked by anxiety and difficulty in making decisions. The disorder exhibits similarities to (but is not identical with) post-traumatic stress disorder, and other types of adjustment disorders.
- *Non-falsifiable* – a cult belief system can never be shown to be invalid or wrong. This is partly why critics have low credibility, and why it can be difficult to warn people about the dangers of a particular cult.

Utopianism

In general, cult organizations promote utopian ideals ⁵ of self-awareness or self-transcendence, ostensibly for the benefit both of the individual and of the world at large. Cult belief systems present a vision in which any individual, through following the group’s teachings, can begin to realize their own higher potential. Believers begin to aspire to a ‘new life’ or a ‘new self’, based on these ideals. As they begin to aspire to this improved new self, believers begin to see their old self, their pre-cult personality, as having fallen short of the ideal. An old-self / new-self dichotomy can grow up within a cult member’s mind, as they gradually discard beliefs and behaviors associated with their old self, and adopt attitudes and affiliations that seem appropriate for their new self. They may come to see their unreformed old self as the enemy of their emerging new self. ⁶

In a sense, a cult uses a person’s own energy and aspirations against them. There is a “Demand for Purity” (see page 7 below). It creates a culture of guilt and shame by holding up standards of perfection that no human being can accomplish. People are punished, and learn to punish themselves, for not living up to the group’s ideals. ⁷

⁴ You have to participate in order to become familiar enough with its teachings to reject it; but by participating, you become susceptible to its teachings, and are less likely to reject it. It’s like taking narcotics to know if they’re addictive.

⁵ Characterized by or aspiring to impracticable perfection; it ignores the fallen nature of man.

⁶ This is very much the approach of Buddhism, a religion of self-control. Notice how this terminology appropriates and then corrupts the description of the old and new self in the bible. “Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge **according to the image of Him who created him...**” (Col 3:9-10 NKJ) The cult offers a *different image* than Christ to aspire to.

⁷ “Demand for Purity” – from Dr. R. J. Lifton’s, ‘Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism’ (W.W. Norton & Co., 1961). This is now reprinted by the University of North Carolina Press, 1989. **Jonathan Haidt’s** book, *The Righteous*

A cult belief system ‘guilt-trips’ aspiring individuals, by first holding up a utopian goal, and then encouraging aspirants to feel ashamed when they are unable to fully realize it. Aspirants are encouraged to see their recalcitrant old self as an obstacle and a hindrance, preventing them from realizing their full potential. This type of dichotomy is implicit in cult-type belief systems.

Marketing a Cult

No one is forced to join a cult. No one is forced to adopt a new belief system, in whole or in part. Equally true, no one can make an informed assessment of a belief system in advance; there must be some personal experience of it. Cults compete to market their belief systems and gain adherents; just as commercial organizations have to compete to market their products or services and gain customers. Some of the marketing techniques are similar. But **cults** have *two advantages over commercial organizations*.

(1) As a quasi-religious organization, a cult is protected from outside investigation by a legal system which protects freedom of religion and freedom of belief. There are no consumer protection laws to regulate the marketing of personal or religious beliefs, and no independent quality control of the product.

(2) Because the belief system operates within the subjective realm of a person’s own mind, both the product marketed by a cult, and any consequences resulting from the purchase or use of that product, are largely subjective and intangible in nature. No claims of a harmful effect on a member’s mind or behavior by a cult’s belief system, can be proved *objectively*. Therefore, the burden of proof remains with the *critic*, not the *cult*.

What makes a Cult un-Christian?

Alan Gomes, in his 1995 book ‘Unmasking the Cults,’ gives the following definition of a Christian-based cult:

‘A *cult* of Christianity is a group of people which, claiming to be Christian, embraces a particular doctrine system taught by an individual leader, group of leaders, or organization, which denies (either explicitly or implicitly) one or more of the central doctrines of the Christian Faith as taught in the sixty-six books of the Bible.’

Denial implies a distinctly *different belief system*. A theological definition of *cult* provides a means to broadly differentiate between cults, sects, and mainstream religious or secular belief systems. This is done by considering the degree to which a particular group’s belief system and culture originates from *within* the group, and is separate and distinct from the relevant mainstream belief system and culture.

From this perspective, **sects** can be characterized as tending to disagree with some *details* of the relevant mainstream belief system; while **cults** tend to deny and outright reject *significant parts* of the relevant mainstream belief system.

A cult tends to invent completely new scriptures or tenets of belief — or at least to radically reinterpret existing scriptures and tenets. Cult leaders may claim some special revelation or insight which is accessible to *them*, but not to those outside the group. They may claim a special ability to go back to first principles and to practice a purer version of the tradition, or claim a special ability to reinterpret traditional teachings in a way which is more appropriate for the modern world. As mentioned, cults tend to be cliquish, elitist, and hierarchical — *that’s the attraction*. And there’s usually a distinct difference in status (in the eyes of cult leaders and their

Mind, suggests that “purity” is one of the five moral foundations of all human beings. In other words, demanding purity is not what *defines* a cult; a cult *uses* purity as one part of its persuasive methodology.

followers) between believers and unbelievers, between the committed and the uncommitted, and between the saved and the fallen.

Group-defined Morality apart from the Law

If the belief system originates primarily from the group's leadership, then the group's leaders are also the ethical definers and moral arbiters. They act as both law-maker and judge, and can therefore make up the rules as they go along. The danger is that their ethical standards may become expendable if they adjust definitions of right and wrong to put themselves in the right. If the moral arbiters are unwilling to modify their behavior, they can instead modify their moral codes to justify their behavior. Freedom of belief can become freedom without responsibility or accountability.

Many organized groups holding wholly or partly to self-originated belief systems, are keen to defend religious freedom. For example, a lawsuit filed in 1999 by a coalition of plaintiffs, including the Seventh-day Adventists and the 'International Coalition for Religious Freedom' (Moonies) claimed that the State of Maryland's task force studying religious cults on college campuses was violating constitutional rights, and conducting a 'religious inquisition'. Representing the plaintiffs, attorney Kendrick Moxon (believed to be a Scientologist) was quoted as saying: 'The government cannot, absolutely cannot, get involved in adjudicating what's a *right* religion and what's a *wrong* religion.'

The Process of Persuasion by a Cult

Some cults promote an overtly religious type of belief system. Others, such as so-called *therapy* cults, promote a secular type of belief system, based on quasi-scientific or quasi-psychological principles. Some New Age cults combine religious and secular elements in their belief system. Again, cult organizations promote utopian ideals of self-awareness or self-transcendence, ostensibly for the benefit both of the individual and of the world at large. For example:

'The central teaching of the Buddha is that we can change our lives. Buddhism offers clear and practical guidelines as to how men and women can realize their full potential for understanding and kindness. Meditation is a direct way of working on ourselves, to bring about positive transformation. We teach two simple and complementary meditations. One helps us develop a calm, clear, focused mind; the other transforms our emotional life, enabling us to enjoy greater self-confidence and positivity towards others.'⁸

The type of belief system implied above is not unique to cults. Many belief systems could be described as aspirational and soteriological (purifying or saving), and even utopian, in the sense that they proclaim an ideal to be realized, and propose a path or a lifestyle for believers that leads towards realization of that ideal.

However, **cult belief systems** have *two additional characteristics*.

(1) They tend to be *strongly hierarchical* in perspective, revolving around ideas about lower and higher levels of personal insight.

(2) Cult belief systems also tend to be *dualistic* and bi-polar, in the sense that they make a clear distinction between lower and higher, and between the mundane and the ultimate.

Recruitment by Cults

By no means will everyone who encounters a cult be drawn in. So clearly, mind control 'techniques' are not all-powerful. In general, less than 10%, and probably closer to 1% of people

⁸ FWBO Norwich Buddhist Centre leaflet and program of classes, Autumn 1999.

who attend a cult's introductory talk or a short course, might go on to become full members of the group.

The process of recruitment involves *befriending* and then *mentoring* or disciplining a newcomer, and this takes time. An established member may only be able to effectively befriend and mentor two or three newcomers at a time. So there's an arithmetical limit to the rate at which a cult can recruit new members, however many people may attend their introductory events.

There is often an element of *deception* or *disingenuousness* in the way that cults present themselves to the public. Someone encountering a group such as 'Sterling Management' (Scientologists) or 'Women's Federation for World Peace' (Moonies) may have no particular reason to be cautious of the group. Initial contact is usually through an apparently neutral agency which has no visible cult associations, such as a meditation center, or a stress management course. Once initial contact has been established, selected individuals are targeted by the group's recruiters. In that sense, a person doesn't choose a cult; the cult chooses them.

Established members acting as recruiters don't want to feel that their efforts have been wasted. They tend to target individuals who appear more open to the ideals of the group. Recruiters are instinctively able to spot people who are similar in outlook and temperament to themselves, and with whom they can simply re-enact the same processes by which they themselves were originally drawn into the group. Of course, recruiters are unlikely to consciously think of themselves as 'recruiters.' They're more likely to see themselves as altruists, reaching out to share their aspirations and beliefs with others. It acts like a chain letter, or pyramid sales scheme.

A cult recruiter's role is essentially to make a newcomer feel welcome and appreciated, and to encourage them to feel an affinity for the idealistic belief system of the group. If this can be achieved, the belief system itself will largely do the rest. Again, it is the belief system itself which is the primary active agent in cult mind-control.

Successful recruitment tends to enhance a recruiter's status within the group, and also confirms their own faith and confidence in the group's belief system. This ego-utopian feedback loop provides cults with a well-motivated sales force that would be the envy of many conventional businesses.

The young and idealistic may be vulnerable to recruitment, as may individuals who are undergoing some change, uncertainty, or re-evaluation in their lives — for example, when leaving home to begin college, leaving college to enter the job market, changing jobs, or after a bereavement. This kind of situation can present a chance for a cult recruiter. People who maintain an established career and circle of friends are less likely to be drawn in.

Distinguishing Churches from Cults

If this description of cult culture is a bit disconcerting, that's understandable, because it sounds like what Christians do in their churches. On Sunday morning, greeters engage newcomers, like recruiters do. They evangelize, celebrating new converts, and praising those who proclaim the gospel. They emphasize *transformation* — how the gospel changes our life. They talk about *sanctification*, putting away sin to become more Christlike — it's an ideal towards which we strive daily.

It's not that *we* act like a cult. It's that *cults* act like us. Satan masquerades as an angel of light (2Cor 11.14). Cults mimic Christian beliefs, values, and fellowship. But there are important differences between what we teach and practice, and the sort of fellowship we enjoy in the church, and what is taught, practiced, and enjoyed in a cult.

By the same token, there are things that cults do, which churches also do, but *shouldn't do*. By understanding the sinful habits of cults, we can avoid such habits ourselves. We want to avoid

lording it over one another in our churches (Mat 20.25-26), putting others down, creating rankings of believers (2Cor 10.12), judging one another (Rom 14.4), shaming one another, etc.

Christ has set us all free *by grace*. He has paid the debt of *every* sin. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8.1).

Next, we’ll learn the methods used by Cults, to lure the unaware into their ranks, and keep them there.

Tribalism: The Need to Belong and Conform

Societies have an identifiable culture.⁹ It can be ethnic, linguistic, religious, or ideological. Individuals identify with it by believing in and adopting its culture. We each have a natural desire to belong to a “tribe,” and to participate in a glorious enterprise. Cults, gangs, sports teams, and even corporations, use this desire to gain members and loyal followers.

Philip G. Zimbardo, PhD, professor of psychology at Stanford University and a former American Psychiatric Association president writes this:

A remarkable thing about cult mind control is that it’s so *ordinary* in the tactics and strategies of social influence employed. They are variants of well-known social psychological principles of compliance, conformity, persuasion, dissonance, reactance, framing, emotional manipulation, and others that are used on all of us daily to entice us: to buy, to try, to donate, to vote, to join, to change, to believe, to love, to hate the enemy.

Culture and personal beliefs are complex and inter-related. Each culture has a set of shared beliefs, and each individual has a set of personal beliefs. Cults either try to convince an individual to change his beliefs to those of the cult; or else they try to convince him that his beliefs and the beliefs of the cult are closely aligned — that they share the same goals and/or values. “We’re your tribe. We’re like-minded. Join us.” That means we need to be sure that *their* beliefs, and *our* beliefs, are *biblical* beliefs.

“Brain-Washing”

Dr. R.J. Lifton’s book on thought-reform programs,¹⁰ was the outgrowth of his studies for military intelligence of Mao Tse-Tung’s “thought-reform programs,” commonly known as “brainwashing.” In Chapter 22, Lifton outlines eight indicators of an environment that exercises “thought-reform” or mind control. Lifton wrote that any group has some aspects of these indicators. However, if an environment exhibits *all eight* of these indicators, *and* implements them in the extreme, then there is the possibility of unhealthy thought reform taking place.

1. Information Control – Environment control and the control of human communication. Not just communication between people but communication within people’s minds to themselves.

2. Mystical Manipulation – Everyone is manipulating everyone, under the belief that it advances the “ultimate purpose.” Experiences are engineered to appear to be spontaneous, when, in fact, they are contrived to have a deliberate effect. People misattribute their experiences to spiritual causes when, in fact, they are concocted by human beings.

3. Loading the Language – Controlling *words* helps to control people’s *thoughts*. A totalist group uses totalist language to make reality compressed into black or white - “thought-

⁹ Society or culture is defined as a group of people with shared beliefs, values, and behaviors. Social norms are generally understood and accepted. As social norms change, or where sub-cultures have grown so large or influential that mainstream norms are no longer widely accepted, confusion arises. Mutual expectations conflict, because there is no longer a single standard of right and wrong. Society no longer “makes sense.” Polarization and even civil war result.

¹⁰ See earlier footnote, p. 11, on “Demand for Purity.”

terminating clichés.” Non-members cannot simply understand what believers are talking about. The words constrict rather than expand human understanding.

4. Doctrine Over Person – No matter what a person experiences, it is the belief of the dogma which is important. Group belief supersedes conscience and integrity.

5. Sacred Science – The group’s belief is that their dogma is absolutely scientific and morally true. No alternative viewpoint is allowed. No questions of the dogma are permitted.

6. The Cult of Confession – The environment demands that personal boundaries are destroyed and that every thought, feeling, or action that does not conform with the group’s rules be confessed; little or no privacy.

7. The Demand for Purity – The creation of a guilt and shame milieu by holding up standards of perfection that no human being can accomplish. People are punished and learn to punish themselves for not living up to the group’s ideals.

“The demand for purity can create a Manichean quality in cults, as in some other religious and political groups. Such a demand calls for radical separation of pure and impure, of good and evil, within an environment and within oneself. Absolute purification is a continuing process. It is often institutionalized; and, as a source of stimulation of guilt and shame, it ties in with the confession process. Ideological movements... take hold of an individual’s guilt and shame mechanisms to achieve intense influence over the changes he or she undergoes. This is done within a confession process that has its own structure. Sessions in which one confesses to one’s sins are accompanied by patterns of criticism and self-criticism, generally transpiring within small groups and with an active and dynamic thrust toward personal change.’¹¹

8. The Dispensing of Existence – The group decides who has a right to exist and who does not. There is no other legitimate alternative to the group. In political regimes, this permits state executions.

It could be argued that all eight of Lifton’s criteria are applicable to society at large. They can be observed in operation within both cults and non-cults. They reflect the nature and interior dynamics of *any* hierarchical belief system, which inculcates beliefs about higher and lower levels of personal awareness and understanding, and ideas about rejecting the old self and developing a new self. From this perspective, Lifton’s “Demand for Purity” could be broadly interpreted as the desire of a believer for the purification of their old self, and the creation of a pure new self. This, in fact, is a biblical command, and it is therefore a *Christian* desire (Rom 6.6; Eph 4.22; Col 3.9-10). It is not restricted to cultist methods.

Focus on Content, not Methods

Our concern, therefore, is not the *methodology* of cults, but their *beliefs, values, and behaviors*. How they instill these in their followers, is how *any* social institution, including the Church, may instill such things in its members. We are not commanded to take captive some methodology of instruction, but to take captive our own thoughts:

For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. (2Cor 10:4-5)

As we deal with cults, whether in apologetics and evangelism, or in order to protect our members from their influence, lies, and deceits, we must keep in mind that not all those involved in a cult, know and accept all the beliefs of that cult. The language of Christian cults, as we said in the

¹¹ Robert J. Lifton, “The demand for purity” in the essay “Cults: Religious Totalism and Civil Liberties,” in *The Future of Immortality and Other Essays for a Nuclear Age* (New York, Basic Books, 1987).

Introduction, is often deceptive. What they mean by the terms they use, can mislead a faithful Christian into thinking they are dealing with a fellow Christian, or a Christian church – when indeed they are *not*.

Mormons don't know everything that Mormonism teaches. JWs don't know everything that true Christianity teaches. Their followers have limited information, controlled by the hierarchy. We need to be able to explain *Christianity* to them, simply and accurately. Our aim is to expose them to what they don't know or understand – not to put them down – not to win a debate – but to draw them to Christ, who alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.