

Introduction to When Cultists Ask

A Popular Handbook
on Cultic Misinterpretations

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Understanding the Cults

Cults and new religions are exploding in unprecedented proportions on the American horizon. As the light of Christianity fades, darkness is flooding in from every side. Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and New Age religions galore are all seeking the souls of human beings. Each professes to have the latest way to enlightenment, the prophet for our time, or the sure way to universal peace.

Some experts say there are about 700 cults, while others say there are as many as 3,000. Cults of one form or another involve more than 20 million people in the United States, and they are multiplying at an alarming rate. Worldwide there are now over 5 million Jehovah's Witnesses (who spend over one billion man-hours per year proselytizing), almost 9 million Mormons (presently growing at a rate of 1,500 new members per day), and tens of millions of New Agers.

World religions that are diametrically opposed to Christianity are also growing at a frightening rate. For example, there are nearly one billion Muslims in the world. That is about one out of every 5 persons on earth! In North America alone it is estimated that there are between 4 and 8 million Muslims. And there are more than 1,100 Muslim mosques in the United States.

Clearly, Christians must take the cultic threat seriously and learn to defend Christianity in the face of the onslaught. This book will help you accomplish that goal. But first, it is important that we understand some of the common traits of the cults.

What Is a Cult?

There is no universally agreed-upon definition of a cult; there are only some generally recognizable traits. Actually, there are three different dimensions of a cult—*doctrinal*, *sociological*, and *moral*. Below we take a brief look at these. Keep in mind, though, that not every cult manifests every single trait we discuss.

Doctrinal Characteristics of a Cult

There are a number of doctrinal characteristics of cults. One will typically find an emphasis on new revelation from God, a denial of the sole authority of the Bible, a denial of the Trinity, a distorted view of God and Jesus, or a denial of salvation by grace.

New Revelation. Many cult leaders claim to have a direct pipeline to God. The teachings of the cult often change and, hence, they need new “revelations” to justify such changes. Mormons, for example, once excluded African Americans from the priesthood. When social pressure was exerted against the Mormon church for this blatant form of racism, the Mormon president received a new “revelation” reversing the previous decree. Jehovah’s Witnesses engaged in the same kind of change regarding the earlier Watchtower teaching that vaccinations and organ transplants were prohibited by Jehovah.

Denial of the Sole Authority of the Bible. Many cults deny the sole authority of the Bible. The Mormons, for example, believe the Book of Mormon is higher Scripture than the Bible. Jim Jones, founder and leader of Jonestown, placed himself in authority over the Bible. Christian Scientists elevate Mary Baker Eddy’s book *Science and Health* to supreme authority. Reverend Moon placed his book *The Divine Principle* in authority over all his followers. New Agers believe in many modern forms of authoritative revelation, such as *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*.

A Distorted View of God and Jesus. Many cults set forth a distorted view of God and Jesus. The “Jesus Only” Oneness Pentecostals, for example, deny the Trinity and hold to a form of modalism, claiming that Jesus is God, and that “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” are simply singular names for Jesus. The Jehovah’s Witnesses deny both the Trinity and the absolute deity of Christ, saying that Christ is a lesser god than the Father (who is God Almighty). The Mormons say Jesus was “procreated” (by a heavenly father and a heavenly mother) at a point in time, and was the spirit–brother of Lucifer.

Mormons do speak of a “Trinity,” but redefine it into Tritheism (i.e., three gods). The Baha’is say Jesus was just one of many prophets of God. The Jesus of the spiritists is just an advanced medium. The Jesus of the Theosophists is a mere reincarnation of the so-called World Teacher (who is said to periodically reincarnate in the body of a human disciple). The Jesus of psychic Edgar Cayce is a being who in his first incarnation was Adam and in his thirtieth reincarnation was “the Christ.”

Related to the above, cults also typically deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, say that Jesus was raised from the dead as an invisible spirit creature. Herbert W. Armstrong, founder of the Worldwide Church of God, also denied the physical, bodily resurrection of Christ. (Note that in recent years the Worldwide Church of God has repudiated many of Armstrong’s teachings and has taken significant steps toward orthodoxy.)

Denial of Salvation by Grace. Cults typically deny salvation by grace, thus distorting the purity of the gospel. The Mormons, for example, emphasize the necessity of becoming more and more perfect in this life. The Jehovah’s Witnesses emphasize the importance of distributing Watchtower literature door–to–door as a part of “working out” their salvation. Herbert W. Armstrong said that the idea that works are not required for salvation is rooted in Satan.

From the brief survey above, it is clear that all cults deny one or more of the fundamental, essential doctrines of Christianity.

Sociological Characteristics of a Cult

In addition to the doctrinal characteristics of cults, many (not all) cults also have sociological traits. These include authoritarianism, exclusivism, dogmatism, close-mindedness, susceptibility, compartmentalization, isolation, and even antagonism. Let us take a brief look at these.

Authoritarianism. Authoritarianism involves the acceptance of an authority figure who often uses mind-control techniques on group members. As prophet and/or founder, this leader's word is considered ultimate. The late David Koresh of the Branch Davidian cult in Waco, Texas, is a tragic example. Other cults that involve authoritarianism include the Children of God (now called "The Family"), the Unification Church, and Jonestown (headed by Jim Jones).

Cult prophets/founders should not be confused with legitimate reformers/revivalists, such as Martin Luther and John Wesley. The differences are significant. A reformer, in contrast to a cult founder, leads people by love, not by fear. He influences by love, not by hate. He tries to motivate the heart but makes no attempt to control the mind. He leads his followers like a shepherd leads sheep; he does not drive them like goats.

Exclusivism. Another characteristic of cults is an exclusivism that says, "We alone have the truth." The Mormons believe they are the exclusive community of the saved on earth. The Jehovah's Witnesses believe they are the exclusive community of the saved. Some groups manifest exclusivism in their practice of communal living. Under such conditions it is easier to maintain control over cult members. Examples of this kind of cult include the Children of God and the Branch Davidians.

It is important to note that there are some religious groups that practice communal living that are not cults. The Jesus People USA in Chicago are an example of a good Christian group that lives communally.

Dogmatism. Closely related to the above, many cults are dogmatic—and this dogmatism is often expressed institutionally. For example, Mormons claim to be the only true church on earth. The Jehovah's Witnesses claim that the Watchtower Society is the sole voice of Jehovah on earth. David Koresh said he alone could interpret the Bible. Many cults believe they have the truth in a suitcase, as it were. They alone are in possession of the divine oracles.

Close-mindedness. Hand in hand with dogmatism is the characteristic of close-mindedness. This unwillingness to even consider any other point of view often has radical manifestations. One educated Mormon we encountered said he did not care if it could be proved that Joseph Smith was a false prophet; he still would remain a Mormon.

A Jehovah's Witness we met once refused to finish reading an article that proved the deity of Christ because, said he, "It is disturbing my faith."

Susceptibility. The psychological profile of many individuals who are sucked into cults is not flattering. All too often, though not always, people who join cults are highly gullible. Sometimes they are even psychologically vulnerable. But above all, the cultic mentality is characterized by an unhealthy compartmentalization (that is, they "compartmentalize" conflicting facts and ignore anything that contradicts their claims). Many Mormons have a "burning in the bosom" which makes it nearly impossible to reason with them about their faith. Cultists often accept teachings by a kind of blind faith that is impervious to sound reasoning. One Mormon missionary said he would believe the Book of Mormon even if it said there were square circles!

Isolationism. The more extreme cults sometimes create fortified boundaries, often precipitating tragic endings, such as the disaster in Waco, Texas, with the Branch Davidian cult. Deserters are considered traitors, and their lives are sometimes put in jeopardy by more zealous members of the cult. In many cases cult members are told that if they leave the group, they will be attacked and destroyed by Satan. The erection of such barriers, whether physical or psychological, creates an environment of isolation, which in turn often leads to antagonism.

Antagonism. In a context of isolation, both fear and antagonism toward the outside world is often generated. All other groups are considered apostate. They are considered "the enemy" and "tools of Satan." In extreme cases this may lead to an armed conflict, as in Jonestown and Waco.

Moral Characteristics of a Cult

On top of the doctrinal and sociological traits of cults, there are also some moral dimensions to be considered. Among those that crop up most often are legalism, sexual perversion, intolerance, and psychological or even physical abuse. Again, though, not every cult manifests every one of these traits.

Legalism. Setting down a rigid set of rules by which the devotees must live is common to many cults. These standards are usually extrabiblical. The Mormon teaching forbidding the use of coffee, tea, or any drink with caffeine is a case in point. The requirement of the Watchtower Society for Jehovah's Witnesses to distribute literature door to door is another example. Monastic-type asceticism, with its rigorous rule-keeping, is often seen as a means of gaining favor with God. As such, it is a manifestation of the common cultic rejection of God's grace.

Sexual Perversion. Along with legalism, the twin vice of moral perversion is often found in the cults. Joseph Smith (and other Mormon leaders) had many wives. David Koresh claimed to own all the women in his group, even the young girls. According to a 1989 revelation, this reportedly included girls as young as ten. The Children of God cult

throughout its history has used “flirty fishing” techniques to sexually lure people into the cult. Sex between adults and children has been reported in this cult.

Physical Abuse. Tragically, some cults engage in forms of physical abuse. Ex-cult members often accuse their former leaders of engaging in beatings, sleep deprivation, severe food deprivation, and beating children until they are bruised and bleeding. Sometimes there are charges of satanic ritualistic abuse, though these seem to be much more rare than advertised. However, psychological abuse, such as fear, intimidation, and isolation, is more common. The ultimate physical abuse is illustrated in the person of cult leader Jim Jones, who led all the members of Jonestown to drink poisoned punch.

Intolerance toward Others. Toleration is not one of the virtues of the cultic mentality. Intolerance is often manifest in antagonism and sometimes culminates in killings. Both Mormon and Branch Davidian history have examples of this kind of violent intolerance. Of course, other religious groups, such as radical Muslims, are known for the same. Closer to home, the Spanish Inquisition is a manifestation of Christian cultic zeal.

Cultic Methodology

Cults are well known for their questionable methods. For example, cults often engage in moral deception and aggressive proselytizing. Let’s take a brief look at these.

Moral Deception. Moonies are known for their so-called heavenly deception. Duplicity and lies are used to win converts into the movement. Mormon founder Joseph Smith also engaged in fraudulent tactics which, on occasion, even landed him in court, where he was once found guilty and fined. Modern leaders of Transcendental Meditation have also been deceptive in trying to further their cause.

Far more common is the cults’ use of Christian terms infused with new meanings, thus deceiving untrained Christians into believing the cult is Christian. For example, New Age cults sometimes use the Christian terms “resurrection” and “ascension” when they really mean the “rise” of Christ-consciousness in the world. The familiar Christian term “born again” is often employed by New Agers to support the doctrine of reincarnation. The term “the Christ” is used by New Agers to seek Christian approval when to them it actually means an occult office held by various gurus throughout history.

Aggressive Proselytizing. There is, of course, a good sense in which every missionary religion proselytizes. That is, they attempt to win converts for their faith. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and even forms of Hinduism and Buddhism attempt to convert people to their beliefs.

Cults, however, carry proselytizing activities to an extreme. Often their excessive proselytizing is an attempt to gain God’s approval. They work *for* grace rather than *from* grace as the Bible teaches (2 Cor. 5:14). Sometimes their efforts are exerted in satisfaction of their own egos. Many times their overzealous proselytizing involves impersonal evangelism or buttonholing people. Followers of the Boston Church of Christ are known for overzealous attempts to make converts on college campuses throughout the

United States. Both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have extensive door-to-door programs of proselytizing, though they are usually less obnoxious in their approach.

Of course, it is important to note that while almost all cults are aggressive evangelizers, not all aggressive evangelizers are cults. Campus Crusade for Christ and Jews for Jesus are ministries that are zealous in evangelism, but they are not cults. Indeed, if the Christian church were more zealous in true evangelism, the world would have less cultic proselytizing.

Why Are the Cults Growing?

One noted cult researcher observed that the cults are "the unpaid bills of the church." The church has failed to doctrinally train its members; it has failed to make a real moral difference in the lives of its members; it has failed to meet people's deepest needs; and it has failed to provide people with a sense of belonging. The failure of the church is wide and deep, and this has made it easy for the cults to flourish.

But, of course, the growth of the cults is attributable to many other factors as well. Among other things, the cults are multiplying because of the growth of relativism, selfism, subjectivism, and mysticism. Further, moral rebellion and the breakdown of families have contributed to the increase in cults worldwide. Consider the following:

Doctrinal Failure. Walter Martin once said that the rise of the cults is "directly proportional to the fluctuating emphasis which the Christian church has placed on the teaching of biblical doctrine to Christian laymen. To be sure, a few pastors, teachers, and evangelists defend adequately their beliefs, but most of them—and most of the average Christian laymen—are hard put to confront and refute a well-trained cultist of almost any variety" (*The Rise of the Cults*, 24). The failure of the church to teach sound doctrine leads to the acceptance of false doctrine. One cannot recognize error unless one first understands the truth. Counterfeits are known only by comparison with the genuine.

Increase in Relativism. The growth of relativism in our culture has also contributed to the rise of cults. The statements, "That may be true for you but not for me" and "Everything is relative to the situation," are almost proverbial today. This plague of relativism has nearly inundated the land. Along with the "Do your own thing" mentality has come the "Have your own religion" syndrome. Secular humanism's denial of all God-given absolutes has led to a God-sized vacuum in our society into which Eastern mysticism has rapidly moved.

Mystical Turn East. "The Turn East," as Harvey Cox of Harvard University titled his book, has been as natural as it is phenomenal. Once American society rejected its Judeo-Christian roots for secular humanism, which cannot satisfy the heart-desires of people, the only major force left was Eastern mysticism. Christian theism affirms that God created all. Secularistic atheism declares there is no God at all. Both of these being found unsatisfactory, our culture has now turned to Eastern cults that proclaim that God is all and all is God.

This turn Eastward has been accompanied by a turn inward. The mystical cults, stressing as they do subjective experience and inner feeling, have grown rapidly in the wake of mysticism. We have turned as a culture from exploring the universe out there to exploring the universe *in here*—inside of us. The focus is not so much on *outer space* as on *inner space*. This, of course, is what the Eastern mystics have always taught, and it plays right into the hands of New Age cults.

Emphasis on Self. The growth of selfishness has also contributed to the proliferation of the cults. The “Do your own thing” mentality leads naturally to the “Start your own cult” movement. We might say the cults are religious freedom gone to seed. The humanistic “Every man for himself” philosophy is a perfect fertilizer for the growth of new religions that cater to the felt needs, rather than the real needs, of the individual.

Stress on Feelings. Another factor leading to the rise of cults is the growth of subjectivism and existentialism. Granted the seemingly insatiable appetite for religion, the “If it feels good, do it” syndrome leads naturally to seeking out religions that feel good. While some still seek the psychedelic shortcut to Nirvana through mind-expanding drugs, others seek a subjective mystical experience that transcends the routines of daily life. This accounts in large part for the growth of New Age cults, such as Transcendental Meditation.

Moral Rebellion. Beneath all the sociological and psychological factors giving rise to cults is moral depravity. The Bible makes it very clear that human beings are in rebellion against the God who is there (Rom. 1:18f.). One dimension of this rebellion is moral. People turn to more comfortable religions when their chosen lifestyle is contrary to the moral imperatives of a transcendent and sovereign God. The moral perversion existing in many cults is ample testimony to the depravity found in the world of the cults. The followers of the Hindu guru Rajneesh engaged in orgies in Oregon. David Berg’s Children of God cult is well known for its sexual perversions. In fact, moral perversion is characteristic of many cults. This moral rebelliousness was manifest in the antiestablishment, antigovernment, and antifamily movement growing out of the 60s, and its inertia has carried it into the 90s.

Social Breakdown of Families. Walter Martin once said, “We see a generation without a sense of history—cut off from the past, alienated from the present, and having a fragmented concept of the future. The ‘now’ generation is in reality a lost generation” (*The New Cults*, 28). Many cults have capitalized on the breakdown of families in our society and have become surrogate families for the “lost generation.”

It is not without significance that many cult members address the leaders of their cult in parental terms. For example, New Ager Elizabeth Clare Prophet, who heads the Church Universal and Triumphant, is affectionately known among her followers as “Guru Ma.” David “Moses” Berg, founder of the Children of God, was often called “Father David” by cult members. Likewise, Reverend Moon is often called “Father Moon” by members of the Unification Church.

What Makes Cults Dangerous?

Cults present many dangers both to the church and to individuals. These dangers are spiritual, psychological, and even physical. Consider the following:

Spiritual Dangers of Cults

Cults are involved in serious error, and error is always dangerous because it misleads people. The Bible declares that the devil is the father of lies: “He was a murderer from the beginning, and has not stood in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks falsehood, he speaks of what is his own; for he is a liar and its father” (John 8:44). Ultimately all error is inspired of the devil. As the apostle Paul put it, “Now the Spirit speaks expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1).

Those who believe lies are already deceived. And if they act on these lies they are in danger. Some everyday examples make the point well. If you believe a railroad flashing sign is just stuck when it isn't, you are in serious danger of being hit by a train. If you believe ice on a lake is very thick when it is thin, you are in danger of drowning. If you think you are on a two-way street when it is one-way, you are in dire danger of a head-on collision.

The spiritual danger of believing a lie is even more serious—it has eternal consequences! To die while believing in the Jesus of the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Jesus of Mormonism is to die believing in a counterfeit Jesus who preaches a counterfeit gospel which yields a counterfeit salvation (which, in fact, is no salvation at all).

Psychological Dangers of Cults

The psychological damage done by cults can be immense. Cults often prey on vulnerable people. Many cults seek out “loners” and lavish affection upon them (sometimes called “love bombings”) until they become “hooked.” Cult leaders become the absolute authority for weak individuals who have had little or no authority in their family background. In some cases this authority can extend to every area of life—how long you sleep, what you eat, what kinds of clothes you wear, and so forth. Such individuals become psychologically enslaved to the whims of the cult leader.

Physical Dangers of Cults

In view of recent occurrences, every cult should have a warning label: “WARNING: This religion may be dangerous to your health and life.” In 1983, Hobart Freeman, leader of the Faith Assembly in Fort Wayne, Indiana, died having thrown away his heart medicine. Some 52 other members of his group died, many of them babies and children. Jim Jones led 900 of his followers in an alleged suicide pact. Likewise David Koresh led some 80 of his followers in a fiery suicide in Waco, Texas, in 1992.

Little wonder the Bible constantly warns against false doctrine. Jesus said, “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Matt. 7:14).

Scripture–Twisting and the Cults

In view of this deluge of counterfeits, believers have an unparalleled need for a deeper understanding of authentic Christianity. For it is impossible to recognize a fraud unless we have an understanding of the genuine. Error can only be correctly measured over against the truth of God’s inerrant Word.

The fact is, the cults are notorious *Scripture–twisters*. When dealing with cults, one must keep in mind that they are always built not upon what the Bible teaches but upon what the founders or leaders of the respective cults say the Bible teaches.

The present book was written to help you, the reader, lovingly turn the tables on the cultist and “untwist” the Scriptures so the cultist can see what the Scriptures really teach. Remember—Jesus said his words lead to eternal life (John 6:63). But for us to receive eternal life through his words, they must be taken as he intended them to be taken. A cultic reinterpretation of Scripture that yields another Jesus and another gospel (2 Cor. 11:3–4; Gal. 1:6–9) will yield only eternal death (Rev. 20:11–15).

This book was also written to help you “untwist” the faulty interpretations of *aberrant* groups that fall short of the definition of a cult. The Roman Catholic Church is an example. Though it is essentially a Christian church and *not* technically a cult (at least not in its official teachings), there are nevertheless many aberrant doctrines that are taught within Roman Catholicism. These doctrinal aberrations are so serious that aspects of orthodoxy are undermined, thus warranting the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and the continued separation of present–day Protestantism from Catholicism. You will find that this book will help you answer Roman Catholic aberrations from Scripture.

We must remember that one way we can shine as lights in our world (Matt. 5:16) is to set a consistent example before others of what it means to correctly handle the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). By so doing, others may come to imitate us in this regard. And as others learn to imitate us in correctly handling Scripture, so they too can be used of God to set an example before still others.

The process begins with a single person—you! *Together* we can curb the growth of the cults and aberrant groups.¹

¹Geisler, N. L., & Rhodes, R. (1997). *When cultists ask : A popular handbook on cultic misinterpretations*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.