

MIND & MEDICINE

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Vol. 7, No. 7. September, 1980

TODAY IN
PSYCHIATRY

Cults: why so appealing?



Some seven years ago a friend asked Dr. Stanley Cath what he and his wife should do about a son who had joined a cult. Dr. Cath knew nothing about the cult but did know that the son, a college dropout, had been undergoing a good deal of anxiety. He first told the parents their son had made an "exchange." If he was a lot happier

living a rural, pastoral life, why should they be so unhappy? But when he learned more about the cult he realized that advice was bad.

"The cult was particularly vicious," he said. "One of its practices, for example, was inhaling poison to achieve a high and be more in contact with the 'spiritual.' And when I got to see the son, he looked and talked like a robot. He had what we call a 'thousand mile stare.' A lot of cult members have it; they seem to look through you and talk by you."

Since then, Dr. Cath, an Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Tufts University Medical School in Boston, has worked with many cult members and their families and has lectured widely on the subject. And quite a subject it is. No one knows for sure how many people are in cults; estimates range from a million to as many as five million. About 85 percent are between the ages of 19 and 25; most are from middle- and upper-class families.

"Most of the kids I've talked to are what you'd call 'good' kids; they've often done very well in school, are bright, attrac-

tive, talented. But their anxiety is manifested in such thoughts as, 'I'm never living up to what's expected,' 'Even if I succeed, I feel I'm a fraud,' 'I feel that what I've done isn't important enough to be worthwhile, and I don't think my parents like me anyway.' So, there's a basic self-doubt, self-dislike, and it expands to include other people."

Good cults

"Are there any *good* cults?"

"I was just coming to that. You see, I'm not anticult *per se* be-

cause, yes, there are some benign ones. In all likelihood, every religion started with a group of people gathered around a charismatic leader—someone with an idea."

All cults, like all religions, define good and evil. But the *way* they're defined makes a great difference. The leader of a pernicious cult, for example, might proclaim that non-believers are devils incarnate, to be avoided at all cost; and these people include family, friends, teachers, police. The benign cult, on the other hand, doesn't interfere with its members' relationship with their families, doesn't take over their lives, doesn't censor their mail or forbid them to talk to outsiders unless another cult member is present.

"I can tell you stories about some cults that are almost unbelievable. One cult leader had a fetish for diamonds, and so she had the girls go home and steal diamonds from their mothers. Another would say to the kids, 'If your father gets a heart attack and dies, you'll be wealthy.' In other words, what can we do about it? One girl, according to her mother, actually slapped her father on his pacemaker. Then there's a cult that promotes what it calls 'heavenly deception.' Anything a member does to deceive on behalf of the cult is perfectly justifiable because the ends justify the means. One girl, for instance, stood in an airport in one of our major cities and told everybody her father was dying in California and that she'd lost her ticket. She made several **thousand dollars** a day for a long time."

Paradoxically, though one of the reasons many cult members leave home is that they want no part of "materialism," they actually flee into the very "evil" they're trying to escape. "Materialism," said Dr. Cath, "is one of the strongest, most important characteristics of every cult we know. They're wealthy. One cult, as you may know, has taken over industries in this country. It has gathered its own fleet of ships, does its own fishing, and exports its catch at high rates."

Fast to sue

Which one was it? No, Dr. Cath wasn't about to name any cults, he said, because they are fast to sue and can be dangerous. He's been threatened by cult members, and some of his patients

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have been accosted by them on the street. "One of them also approached one of my secretaries and asked her if she would ever refer a patient to me, or if she herself would come to me if she needed help. She said yes. He called her husband that night and asked him if he trusted his wife alone with me in my office. He said he'd heard of psychiatrists who molest their patients. They also approached the secretary of an internist I work with and asked her if I molested women patients."

He went on to say that at the 1978 APA meeting all the members of a panel on cults received a letter saying they'd be sued if they said anything "wrong" or misrepresented certain cults. "So

you had to get up on the platform fully aware there were people in that audience ready to sue if you said the wrong thing. And you didn't know what the wrong thing was." He also knew of a mental hospital that refused to accept a young cult member even though he was diagnosed as psychotic. The director was afraid the cult would picket the hospital and "interfere with the care of other patients."

Why are some youngsters vulnerable to cults? Dr. Cath feels that the roots go back into childhood, that the most vulnerable are those who, by the age of two or three—a critical period in child development—failed to separate from the mother with comfort and security. "A certain kind of mother, when her child first begins showing some initiative, lets him or her know subtly or directly that she doesn't approve, that the boy or girl must always do what mother wants. She doesn't give her son, say, the feeling she forgives him or that she's always there to refuel him emotionally. So he fails to incorporate a 'good, loving image' that could become a building block that helps him get through the stresses of life. Failing to internalize a loving presence, these children stand every chance of growing up constantly looking for someone more powerful and wise, who can tell them what to do to feel secure, to bring order to the chaos they feel their lives are in."

New pressures

Adolescence itself brings new pressures. Dr. Cath said it's the "second time around to separate and individuate"; and the adolescent who still can't do it may drop out of school, feel purposeless, lonely, and bewildered. These feelings are reinforced if the culture itself is going through similar chaos, perhaps because of war or a loss of faith in national leaders.

Many young people avoid becoming victims of cults because they've modeled themselves on an older person they respect, or because they've had a "religious conversion." Dr. Cath men-

tioned a girl who felt greatly upset because she'd done extremely well in high school but was having a difficult time in college. She wandered through the streets of Boston, unable to make herself get in touch with her family. Jewish, and not religious at all, she walked into a church, where she suddenly proclaimed to herself, "I know the presence of God. Christ is real, He's with me, He loves me." Said Dr. Cath, "That's not an infrequent occurrence when an ego faces disintegration and annihilation. This girl then looked for other Christians who would help her read the New Testament so she could further discover Christ. She didn't need a cult to have the conversion phenomenon take place. Unfortunately, though, the group she found was a fringe cult, and soon she went into a typical state of cult bondage."

The cults, however, do help satisfy young people's needs in a number of ways. They represent the good, loving family. They also organize their members' chaotic lives and, consequently, reduce their level of anxiety. Even if members have to beg or the girls sometimes have to sell their bodies, they're doing it for "divine" reasons.

Recruiting techniques

"How do cults go about recruiting people?"

"Well, as you probably know, the college campuses are prime places for proselytizing. If a college student comes from a high school where the cultural values are pretty much the same as at college, he might not have a hard time adjusting. But those who come from a traditional background and find that their roommates are sleeping around or are on drugs may not only be shocked, but also feel very alienated and alone. The cults also know that there are three times during the college year that kids are the most anxious—when they first leave home, right before exams, and right before graduation."

When they approach prospective members, the cult's recruiters usually don't tell them the cult's name. Instead they might say they're an organization for peaceful democracy or the reform of political parties or prison systems.

"It's really gobbledygook. Young people I've spoken to after they've left a cult say that the content of what they were told really meant nothing to them. As one man put it to me, 'They talked about the atomic bomb. But I wasn't afraid of the atomic bomb. All I felt was that I was falling apart. And what I saw was a look of contentment and happiness in their faces.'"

The proselytizers, continued Dr. Cath, are trained to look directly into the eyes of the people they approach and to be "happy" as they talk to them. This can have a tremendous impact on someone who feels in tumult and alone. It takes away his feeling of doom and disaster. He says to himself, "These people know where they're coming from. I want what they've got."

"Love bombing"

If the prospect agrees to come to one of their meetings, or perhaps just to have a meal with them, he's then subjected to a "love bombing." Said Dr. Cath, "Very often they enter a room that's dimly lit, where people are singing or chanting or dancing. The rhythmical vibrations soothe them and lull them. And because cult leaders study what people need, they may assign a pretty girl to a boy, a handsome young man to a girl. Or if they sense that you want power and prestige, they'll tell you how you can become this or that in the hierarchy."

The love-in, as Dr. Cath prefers to call it, can take a day or weekend. Indeed, the "love," young people tell him, "pours like

lava." People might say over and over again, "Has the spirit come? Does God love you? Do you want God to love you? We are your friends." There may be repetitious chanting, dancing, clapping, incantations. Some cults might not feed the participants properly, to weaken them emotionally. "The youngsters at an altered level of consciousness; they suddenly feel only pleasure and ecstasy. They're no longer able to use reason or logic, so the indoctrination begins to take place on almost a subliminal level." The youngsters become easy targets for whatever the cult's "truth" is. One cult, for instance, tells them that though the Son of God was to have brought a reign of peace on earth, He obviously didn't, that *their* leader is the new Messiah, who not only will bring peace but protect believers from illness, problems, and yes, even death.

Brain change

Dr. Cath's studies of how meditation and other relaxation techniques can alleviate stress by bringing about physiological changes in the body led him to believe that the techniques the cults use—the monotonous, hypnotic clapping and so on—alter the workings of the brain. He feels that the left hemisphere, the reasoning, logical side of the brain, may lose dominance or otherwise change its relationship to the right. "The members have these great, glorious impressions of love. They'll point to a friend and, ignoring his being all mixed up and hooked on drugs, will say, 'I see him happy and smiling all the time and he loves me.' The parents will take a look at this grubby addict and say, 'What do you mean he loves you? We've done this for you, we've done that for you, and you're telling us *this* is your best friend?' It's a great mystery until you begin to realize they're no longer really thinking."

Despite the gushings of love from the cult, however, woe to people who, as some do, become psychotic. The cult might try telling them the voices they hear prove they're superior beings, or that their fears of a plot simply confirm that people "out there" are plotting against the cult. But because the cult has no way of treating them, once they become a nuisance it gets rid of them, sometimes just leaving them to wander on the street.

Some people, of course, drop out of cults on their own. Among the more common reasons are pain and disease, which seem to cause some kind of psychophysiological shift. One man, for example, was in an automobile accident and came to in a hospital with a broken leg. He couldn't explain why, but he suddenly called his parents whom he hadn't spoken to for many months. Then there was a girl who broke her arm in another country. Cult members told her to pray and it would heal. When it didn't she suddenly found herself at the airport phoning her family and saying she was coming home. But just about anything can act as the reason. One cult leader, a woman, had young boys bathe and dress her in a ritualistic way. One of the girls watching this ritual suddenly realized, "This is incredible, it's crazy."

Significant click

One other reason is, of course, deprogramming—a technique in which someone isolates a cult member and rapidly "bombards" him in much the same way the cult did. "It's a strange thing, but all defectors tell you they hear a snapping or clicking in their head when they go in and then again when they come out. That's another indication to me that something happens to them psychophysiologicaly."

Dr. Cath doesn't do deprogramming when he works with cult members, but it is one way of salvaging them. His own work

proves it isn't the only way. It also suggests that, by comparison, the ordinary techniques psychiatrists use are inadequate and inappropriate.

You can't help these people, he explains, "if you do it from the usual psychiatric point of view of a neutral viewing a pathological condition—saying, for example, 'This is a borderline, narcissistic primary disorder of self. . . .' Rather, you've got to start off with the premise that these people are searching for a better world. The only way you can build an empathic relationship with them is to try putting yourself in their shoes and assume they've been looking for such things as peace, a better world, happiness, God, love. Later, if you're lucky, you'll reach a phase when they'll feel free to tell you *why*, to reveal the lack of self-regulation they feel, their fragile sense of self-esteem, et cetera."

What can physicians do to help keep young people from join-



"When I talk to parents I try to explain who the most vulnerable children are."

ing a cult in the first place? "What I say to young people when I talk to them—even young medical students and residents—is that the cults attract a lot of intelligent, able people. I tell them to be careful, that cults hunt for the cream of the crop. When I talk to parents I try to explain who the most vulnerable children are. I tell them if they have a child who's doing well in school but isn't getting any satisfaction out of it, who feels he's not achieving enough, who seems in chaos and can't talk about it—even though everything seems fine on the outside—then they've got a vulnerable child who needs evaluation."

It saddens him that the exploitive cults deprive young people of years of education, careers, and intimacy. "The usual advice parents get when their youngster joins a cult is to keep in touch with him and try not to upset him. It's good advice in a way, but it doesn't change anything. Someone has said, and I agree, that freedom of religion means freedom of thought. Coercing young people by techniques involving starvation, fatigue, and indoctrination, and monitoring their mail and isolating them from their families, are not religious actions, are not actions we should condone. Cults that do these things keep young people from growing, from living, and from interacting with people who don't think the way the cult leader decrees. I know if I had a youngster in a cult, I'd fight for him. I'd do *something*."

Seymour Shubin

Typical Daily Schedule for the Krishna Devotee

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|-----------|---|
| 3:45 A.M. | Rise and shower, put on white clay marks that signify the body is engaged in Krishna's service; personal reading of scripture, counting of prayer beads |
| 4:30 | Chanting ceremony |
| 5:00 | Straighten up room and temple |
| 5:50 | Chanting and prayers until 8:00 |
| 8:00-9:00 | Preparation of food and eating |

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| 9:00-12:00 | Chanting in the streets and selling of magazine; invite others to eat lunch and hear about Krishna |
| 12:00-2:00 P.M. | Eating, cleanup, and conversation |
| 2:00-5:00 | Back to the streets |
| 5:00-6:30 | Private chanting, talking to guests about Krishna |
| 6:30-9:00 | Discuss books of devotion, worship ceremony, lecture |
| 9:00-10:00 | Free time, preparations for sleep |

Statement of a Female Devotee of Krishna

Well, spiritually we have an equal position . . . We're subordinate now . . . but it doesn't mean we're inferior necessarily. Actually we are . . . I can see that women tend to flip out a lot more than men. They [the women] are more emotional. Women's lib tries to gloss over all of the very obvious differences . . . and it's nonsense . . . On the whole we are less intelligent, our attention is not so good . . . So we take our orders from the men and it's nice. They're very nice. It's no problem. You're protected and you're given instruction, and you don't have to make the decisions; it's really pleasant . . . The boys really have propensities for administration . . . that we just don't have. So it must be my female body, but I'm very pleased not to have to make very many decisions anymore.

From *Hare Krishna and the Counterculture*, by J. Stillson Judah. John Wiley and Sons. 1974.

The Conversion Process

The following statement was given by a devotee describing his conversion experience when he attended a Hare Krishna devotional service:

Because of certain feelings, I did not join in—at first. However, I saw the devotees chanting, and those magic words, magic words, "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare, Hare!" So I finally gave in and joined them, repeating over and over again. It certainly felt good afterwards.

Two days later I went to *kīrtana* [ceremonial chanting of Krishna's holy names] at the devotees' private house. This time it hit me! I was lost in bliss, divine bliss! Soon, I learned all the devotees' names . . . They invited me back again, and after only four days since I first experienced chanting, they invited me to perform with them. I was overwhelmed! Now Krishna Consciousness really had a hold on me, and I can't believe it's all happening so fast! Tomorrow I am going to move in with them, as Mukunda told me. So for someone just entering into Krishna Consciousness, association with devotees is very important. I have shaved my head so I am complete with *śikhā* [tuft of hair remaining after the head is shaved], and I hope you can understand how happy I am feeling at this moment. *Although I know very little about Krishna or His life, I am so eager to learn.* (Italics added.)

From an untitled paper of an unknown date by Gregory Johnson.