

A destructive new 'Christian' cult which
recruits mainly on college campuses is
moving rapidly north, warns Tom Bradby

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(STUDENT SUPPLEMENT)

Sincerity that masks cult trap

A FEW months ago, John's parents decided to take a drastic course of action of which few in this country would approve. Using a group of American specialists, they kidnapped, forcibly held and deprogrammed their son.

John had, for five years, been a member of a new and expanding radical evangelical cult, the Central London Church of Christ. "I lost five years of my life and made no friends. There is a tremendous sense of betrayal. I gave five years of my life to something I believed in, only to find out that it was being mis-used."

The cult originally based itself in London but, targeting campuses, (in its training manual, the chapter on the student ministry is entitled "The Goose that laid the Golden Egg"), it is slowly working its way north. Recruiting mostly through seemingly-innocent Bible study groups, it should appear on Scottish campuses within the next year or two.

John warns: "The worrying thing is that as a cult, it is very new in this country but has very ambitious plans. In the next ten years, it hopes to target every major city in the UK — especially those with large student populations."

The warning is echoed by Graeme Baldwin, the chaplain at King's College in London and an expert on cults. "If parents come to get help in the first few months the success rate is almost 100 per cent. The trouble is that people are not aware that there is a problem."

In fact, most students probably do have some rudimentary knowledge of what cults are and many will have been told at some time that "everyone is vulnerable". Nevertheless, a cult such as this can appear very attractive.

John explains: "On the surface, they were a very sincere and committed group. Socially, there was now way one could distinguish them from normal people. They were a great bunch to be with and it was really great fun — people were very friendly. There was lots of hugging and hand-shaking, which created a sense of family that I liked. At the time, I was very happy."

"I am a bit of an idealist and I saw a lot of the deficiencies in the Churches I was in. It was a close group and it gave me a sense of purpose. They believed they could do great things and I enjoyed the sense of elitism."

But what is dividing — line between an ostensibly Christian cult and the established Church? Baldwin says: "I tend to use the term destructive cult. There are certain criteria; they are totalitarian in structure. They are the only people who are right and salvation is only available through this group. There is an element of coercion — and also deceit. You don't always tell people what they are getting into. They are destructive and don't allow people to grow."

The Central London Church of

Christ is a totalitarian organisation run on similar lines to the Stalinist regimes that used to dominate Eastern Europe. Its aim is to erode the free will and sense of individuality of its members. Personal desires must be subordinated to the achievement of group ends.

The result for John, an intelligent individual and a graduate, was five years without a job or permanent career. "The major legacy is that I will have to explain to any prospective employer what I have been doing for the last five years of my life. It's like having been in prison."

He now realises that he has been in prison, albeit a mental rather than physical one. He explains: "It is like *Alice in the Looking Glass*; you are in a mental trap that you can't see from the inside."

He looks back on the recruitment methods and the distortions of the cult with some bitterness. He points to the way it told him, at a carefully-judged point in his Bible studies class, that he was not really a Christian and would need to be "baptised".

Eventually he found himself cut off from his parents. They were unimpressed by the cult, and he was put under pressure to make a stand. The group gradually became his life. It was a life run by his personal disciple (someone who was more "mature" than him "in the Lord") who stressed the need for obedience.

John explains: "You are taught that obedience is what God wants. You have to trust God that he is not going to allow you to be abused."

This obedience also applied to his personal life. As well as being pressured to cut off all previous ties, he was encouraged to date a different girl each week. Hand-holding and kissing were forbidden and looking on a woman with lust in the heart was a mortal sin that had to be confessed. As he was not engaged, he was only allowed to see any girl he might date once a week.

Baldwin believes this abuse of power by the cult inevitably leads to corruption, and points to the time when Jim Jones of the People's Temple ordered 930 members to kill themselves — which, sadly, they duly did.

He believes these groups should be banned from campuses. "University people believe in freedom of choice. These groups take away people's freedom."

In the meantime, the group, when it arrives, can probably be found recruiting through "Bible studies" or "historical literature groups" (as at the London School of Economics).

Members may be particularly active at the beginning of a new year when they are instructed to introduce themselves to between ten and 20 new people a day.