



Notes about living as a Christian

## continuous conversion

### CULTS

BY SARA TUSEK

In my university studies, I majored in Sociology. We studied the social aspects of human groups and institutions, including the Sociology of Religion.

Unlike Marx, who defined religion as “the opiate of the masses,” sociologists respect the role of religion in the social lives of individuals. They do, however, acknowledge that “religion” can be badly misused, becoming a cult. Some cults are relatively benign; some are simply after your money; some are deadly.

#### WHAT IS A CULT?

**“CULT** - Any group which has a pyramid type authoritarian leadership structure with all teaching and guidance coming from the person/persons at the top. The group will claim to be the only way to God; Nirvana; Paradise; Ultimate Reality; Full Potential, Way to Happiness etc, and will use thought reform or mind control techniques to gain control and keep their members.

**A group is called a cult because of their behavior - not their doctrines.** Most religious cults do teach what the Christian church would declare to be heresy but some do not. Some cults teach the basics of the Christian faith but have behavioral patterns that are abusive, controlling and cultic.”

(from www.religio.de)

Cults demand obedience. They manipulate their members’ loyalty through guilt (if the members don’t obey, they are sinful) and intimidation (punishment and “shunning” of disobedient members).

Very often cults require new members to cut off all ties with their previous life. They can’t communicate with family members or friends, and may be required to live in the cult’s housing. New members must make a financial contribution, sometimes all the money they have, in order to be admitted.

Complete and unquestioning obedience to all the rules, regulations and dictates of the cult is mandatory. There is no room for criticism or any free expression of ideas. The leader is infallible, often receiving his or her authority (according to the cult) from God or another spiritual being.

In return for obedience, cult members gain the security of total acceptance, support and protection by the cult. People who join cults are often afraid of the bigger world and want the protection of a strong authority figure who can shelter them from difficult decisions/

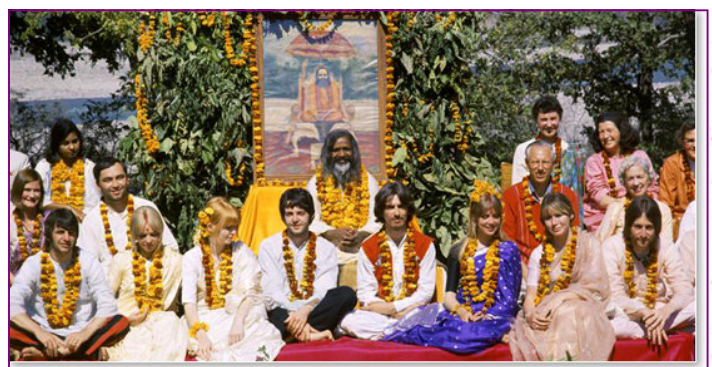
#### RELATIVELY HARMLESS CULTS

Cults built around Hindu gurus such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who introduced Transcendental Meditation to the Western world, are usually not deadly.

Here’s information from his website:

**The Science of Creative Intelligence Course**  
*“Maharishi’s Science of Creative Intelligence, which connects modern science with ancient Vedic science, is the foundation of all knowledge -- complete knowledge -- and therefore is the basis of complete fulfillment. Introducing the Science of Creative Intelligence and the Maharishi Technology of the Unified Field into education is the one way for all mankind to stop violation of Natural Law and end the long tradition of problems and suffering in life individually and globally.”*

--Maharishi Mahesh Yogi



Gurus usually offer a plan to achieve complete fulfillment and world peace. The plan includes exercise, diet and living conditions that reach deep into a follower’s life. Followers are asked for money and the sacrifice of personal opinion in exchange for fulfillment and peace. These cults are usually not violent; members can come and go with some freedom, and complete obedience is not enforced with weapons.



## CULTS THAT ARE AFTER YOUR MONEY

*Time* magazine published an article (May 6, 1991) about Scientology, a cult that is notorious for stripping people of their financial assets:

*The Church of Scientology, started by science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard to "clear" people of unhappiness, portrays itself as a religion.*

*In reality the church is a hugely profitable global racket that survives by intimidating members and critics in a Mafia-like manner. At times during the past decade, prosecutions against Scientology seemed to be curbing its menace. **Eleven top Scientologists, including Hubbard's wife, were sent to prison in the early 1980s for infiltrating, burglarizing and wire-tapping more than 100 private and government agencies in attempts to block their investigations.***

Another "money-grabbing cult" is the Japanese Foot-cult, a scam in which the guru told your future by reading your feet—you paid for this privilege.

## DEADLY CULTS

"We define Doomsday/Destructive/Apocalyptic cults to be religiously based, very high intensity, controlling groups that have caused or are liable to cause loss of life among their membership or the general public." ([www.religioustolerance.org](http://www.religioustolerance.org)).

Jim Jones in Guyana led one of the most deadly cults, the People's Temple. Jones, an ordained minister, started an interracial mission outreach in Indiana, helping poor people of all races. He moved his group to California, where he engaged in practices that got him in trouble with the law. He then moved the group to Jonestown, Guyana, in the South American jungle, where they established an agricultural commune.

In Jonestown, Jones' dictatorial, paranoid behavior attracted the attention of a US Congressman, Leo Ryan. In 1978, Ryan visited Jonestown; as he tried to leave, Ryan and four other people were shot and killed by member of the cult. Jones and his followers then enacted their much-practiced mass suicide, drinking Kool-aid laced with cyanide and tranquilizers.

Nearly 1000 cult members died, including Jones.

Other deadly cults include Heaven's Gate (which combined elements of Christianity with belief in UFO's and unusual sexual practices) and the Branch Davidian cult. Heaven's Gate members committed mass suicide in 1997—40 people died in a communal house in California. The Branch Davidian cult, a group that split from the Seventh-Day Adventists, had a compound in Waco, Texas; this compound was put under siege by ATF and FBI agents in 1993. At least 75 people died in the subsequent shoot-out.

## HOW TO RECOGNIZE A CULT

Obviously all religions have some of these cultic characteristics, but not all are cults. Here are four key characteristic of a cult:

1. The members can't easily leave it—and if they do, they are held up as examples of evil.
2. The social norms are very unusual, and hard to learn. Cults have secret rules that are know shared with newcomers, or even all cult members. Knowing the secret rules is exclusive to a small inner core of cult members. Newcomers have to fit in by observing and imitating members, even when the behavior seems odd.
3. The cult maintains total control over every part of its members' lives: financial, sexual and familial.
4. The leader is charismatic and all-powerful.

Cults may start with a sincere longing to find the truth or make people's lives better, but they end with totalitarian practices and the extinguishing of individual freedom.

Cult members exchange their own will for that of the group or group leader. Most religions don't ask for this exchange—instead, they encourage the believer to give his or her will to God. The key difference between a cult and a religion is the degree of freedom of the individual. Cults destroy freedom; religion makes true freedom possible.