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Characteristics of Cults

Introduction

Many groups and individuals have studied cults. As all cults have different beliefs, different cult experts have identified common characteristics which they use to identify new cults. Using these common characteristics, an organization may, or may not, be identified as a cult regardless of specific beliefs. The following lists of characteristics may be used to identify potential cults. A particular group does not need to have all of the characteristics in any one list to qualify as a destructive cult. Groups having more than half of the cult characteristics in any specific list should definitely be a cause for concern. Clicking on the names of the organizations will lead you to further information

International Cultic Studies Association [website] *formerly American Family Foundation*

1. The group is focused on a living leader to whom members seem to display excessively zealous, unquestioning commitment.
2. The group is preoccupied with bringing in new members.
3. The group is preoccupied with making money.
4. Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged or even punished.
5. Mind-numbing techniques (such as meditation, chanting, speaking in tongues, denunciation sessions, debilitating work routines) are used to suppress doubts about the group and its leader(s).
6. The leadership dictates sometimes in great detail how members should think, act, and feel (for example: members must get permission from leaders to date, change jobs, get married; leaders may prescribe what types of clothes to wear, where to live, how to discipline children, and so forth).
7. The group is elitist, claiming a special, exalted status for itself, its leader(s), and members (for example: the leader is considered the Messiah or an avatar; the group and/or the leader has a special mission to save humanity).
8. The group has a polarized us-versus-them mentality, which causes conflict with the wider society.
9. The group's leader is not accountable to any authorities (as are, for example, military commanders and ministers, priests, monks, and rabbis of mainstream denominations).
10. The group teaches or implies that its supposedly exalted ends justify means that members would have considered unethical before joining the group (for example: collecting money for bogus charities).

11. The leadership induces guilt feelings in members in order to control them.
12. Members' subservience to the group causes them to cut ties with family and friends, and to give up personal goals and activities that were of interest before joining the group.
13. Members are expected to devote inordinate amounts of time to the group.
14. Members are encouraged or required to live and/or socialize only with other group members.

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Recruitment

1. **Deception:** Group identity and/or true motives are not revealed. The group leaders tell members to withhold truth from outsiders.
2. **Emotional Leverage/Love Bombing:** Instant friendship, extreme helpfulness, generosity and acceptance ... Group recruiters "lovingly" will not take "no" for an answer - invitations impossible to refuse without feeling guilty and/or ungrateful. "Love", "generosity", "encouragement" are used to lower defenses and create an ever increasing sense of obligation, debt and guilt.
3. **Exploit Personal Crisis:** They use an existing crisis as a means of getting you to participate. They exploit vulnerability arising from:
 - Broken relationships
 - Death in the family
 - Loss of job
 - Move to new location
 - Loneliness/depression
 - Guilt/shame
 - Stress/fear
4. **Crisis Creation:** They employ tactics designed to create or deepen confusion, fear, guilt, or doubt. *i.e.*, "you aren't serving God the way He intended." Questions areas of faith never before examined or explored and attack other faiths specifically.
5. **All the Answers:** Provide simple answers to the confusion they, themselves, create. Support these answers with material produced or "approved" by the group.

Programming

1. **Intense Study:** Focus is on group doctrine and writings. Bible, if used at all, is referred to one verse at time to "prove" group teachings.
2. **"Opposer" Warnings:** Recruiters are told that "Satan" will cause relatives and friend to say bad things about the group to try to "steal

them away from God." Recruits soon believes group members, alone, are truthful/trustworthy.

3. **Guilt and Fear:** Group dwells on members' "sinful nature" (many use public confession). Guilt and fear arising from "failing God" are magnified to manipulate new member.
4. **Schedule Control & Fatigue:** Study and service become mandatory. New member becomes too busy to question. Family, friends, jobs and hobbies are squeezed out, further isolating the new member.
5. **Attack Independent Thought:** Critical thinking is discouraged as prideful and sinful, blind acceptance encouraged.
6. **Divine Commission:** Leader(s) claim new revelation from God, within past 200 years, in which all but their group are rejected by God. They, alone, speak for God.
7. **Absolutism:** They insist on total, unquestioning obedience and submission to the group, both actions AND thoughts. Group "love" and acceptance becomes dependent upon obedience and submission. Unconditional love...isn't.
8. **Totalism:** "Us against them" thinking. Strengthens group identity. Everyone outside of group lumped under one label.

Retention

1. **Motive Questioning:** When sound evidence against the group is presented, members are taught to question the motivation of the presenter. The verifiable (sound documentation) is ignored because of doubts over the unverifiable (presenter's motives). See Opposer Warnings (#2 above).
2. **Information Control:** Group controls what convert may read or hear. They discourage (forbid) contact with ex-members or anything critical of the group. May say it is the same as pornography making it not only sinful and dangerous but shameful as well. Ex-members become feared and avoidance of them becomes a "survival issue."
3. **Isolation, Separation & Alienation:** Group becomes substitute family. Members encouraged to drop worldly (non-members) friends. May be told to change jobs, quit school, give up sports, hobbies, etc.
4. **Coercion:** Disobedience, including even minor disagreement with group doctrine, may result in expulsion and shunning.
5. **Phobias:** The idea is planted that anyone who leaves goes into a life of depravity and sin, loses their sanity, dies, or will have children die, etc. Constant rumors of bad things happening to people who leave. No one ever leaves for "legitimate reasons".
6. **Striving for the Unreachable:** Group membership and service are essential for salvation ... "Work your way into God's favor." NO matter what you do, it is never enough.

Cult Information Centre [\[website\]](#)

Every cult can be defined as a group having all of the following five characteristics:

1. It uses psychological coercion to recruit, indoctrinate and retain its members.
2. It forms an elitist totalitarian society.
3. Its founder leader is self-appointed, dogmatic, messianic, not accountable and has charisma.
4. It believes "the end justifies the means" in order to solicit funds recruit people.
5. Its wealth does not benefit its members or society.

Mind Control techniques include:

1. **Hypnosis:** Inducing a state of high suggestibility by hypnosis, often thinly disguised as relaxation or meditation.
2. **Peer Group Pressure:** Suppressing doubt and resistance to new ideas by exploiting the need to belong.
3. **Love Bombing:** Creating a sense of family and belonging through hugging, kissing, touching and flattery.
4. **Rejection of Old Values:** Accelerating acceptance of new life style by constantly denouncing former values and beliefs.
5. **Confusing Doctrine:** Encouraging blind acceptance and rejection of logic through complex lectures on incomprehensible doctrine.
6. **Metacommunication:** Implanting subliminal messages by stressing certain key words of phrases in long, confusing lectures.
7. **Removal of Privacy:** Achieving loss of ability to evaluate logically by preventing private contemplation.
8. **Time Sense Deprivation:** Destroying the ability to evaluate information, personal reactions, and body functions in relation to passage of time by removing all clocks and watches.
9. **Disinhibition:** Encouraging child-like obedience by orchestrating child-like behavior.
10. **Uncompromising Rules:** Inducing regression and disorientation by soliciting agreement to seemingly simple rules which regulate mealtimes, bathroom breaks and use of medications.

11. **Verbal Abuse:** Desensitizing through bombardment with foul and abusive language.
12. **Sleep Deprivation and Fatigue:** Creating disorientation and vulnerability by prolonging mental and physical activity and withholding adequate rest and sleep.
13. **Dress Codes:** Removing individuality by demanding conformity to the group dress code.
14. **Chanting and Singing:** Eliminating non-cult ideas through group repetition of mind-narrowing chants or phrases.
15. **Confession:** Encouraging the destruction of individual ego through confession of personal weaknesses and innermost feelings of doubt.
16. **Financial Commitment:** Achieving increased dependence on the group by "burning bridges" to the past, through the donation of assets.
17. **Finger Pointing:** Creating a false sense of righteousness by pointing to the shortcomings of the outside world and other cults.
18. **Flaunting Hierarchy:** Promoting acceptance of cult authority by promising advancement, power and salvation.
19. **Isolation:** Inducing loss of reality by physical separation from family, friends, society and rational references.
20. **Controlled Approval:** Maintaining vulnerability and confusion by alternately rewarding and punishing similar actions.
21. **Change of Diet:** Creating disorientation and increased susceptibility to emotional arousal by depriving the nervous system of necessary nutrients through the use of special diets and/or fasting.
22. **Games:** Inducing dependence on the group by introducing games with obscure rules.
23. **No Questions:** Accomplishing automatic acceptance of beliefs by discouraging questions.
24. **Guilt:** Reinforcing the need for "salvation" by exaggerating the sins of the former lifestyles.
25. **Fear:** Maintaining loyalty and obedience to the group by threatening soul, life or limb for the slightest "negative" thought, word or deed.
26. **Replacement of Relationships:** Destroying pre-cult families by arranging cult marriages and "families".

Carol Giambalvo [\[website\]](#)

1. Authoritarian in their power structure.
2. Totalitarian in their control of the behavior of their members.

3. Pyramidal structure.
 4. Uses thought reform techniques.
 5. Isolation of members (physical and/or psychological isolation) from society.
 6. Uses deception in recruiting and/or fund raising.
 7. Promotes dependence of the members on the group.
 8. Totalitarian in their world view.
 9. Uses mind altering techniques (chanting, meditation, hypnosis and various forms of repetitive actions) to stop normal critical thinking.
 10. Appear exclusive and innovative.
 11. Charismatic or messianic leader who is self-appointed and has a special mission in life.
 12. Controls the flow of information.
 13. Instills a fear of leaving the group.
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Rick Ross [\[website\]](#)

Ten warning signs of a potentially unsafe group/leader:

1. Absolute authoritarianism without meaningful accountability.
2. No tolerance for questions or critical inquiry.
3. No meaningful financial disclosure regarding budget, expenses such as an independently audited financial statement.
4. Unreasonable fear about the outside world, such as impending catastrophe, evil conspiracies and persecutions.
5. There is no legitimate reason to leave, former followers are always wrong in leaving, negative or even evil.
6. Former members often relate the same stories of abuse and reflect a similar pattern of grievances.
7. There are records, books, news articles, or television programs that document the abuses of the group/leader.
8. Followers feel they can never be "good enough".
9. The group/leader is always right.
10. The group/leader is the exclusive means of knowing "truth" or receiving validation, no other process of discovery is really acceptable or credible.

Ten warning signs regarding people involved in/with a potentially unsafe group/leader:

1. Extreme obsessiveness regarding the group/leader resulting in the exclusion of almost every practical consideration.
 2. Individual identity, the group, the leader and/or God as distinct and separate categories of existence become increasingly blurred. Instead, in the follower's mind these identities become substantially and increasingly fused--as that person's involvement with the group/leader continues and deepens.
 3. Whenever the group/leader is criticized or questioned it is characterized as "persecution".
 4. Uncharacteristically stilted and seemingly programmed conversation and mannerisms, cloning of the group/leader in personal behavior.
 5. Dependency upon the group/leader for problem solving, solutions, and definitions without meaningful reflective thought. A seeming inability to think independently or analyze situations without group/leader involvement.
 6. Hyperactivity centered on the group/leader agenda, which seems to supercede any personal goals or individual interests.
 7. A dramatic loss of spontaneity and sense of humor.
 8. Increasing isolation from family and old friends unless they demonstrate an interest in the group/leader.
 9. Anything the group/leader does can be justified no matter how harsh or harmful.
 10. Former followers are at best considered negative or worse evil and under bad influences. They can not be trusted and personal contact is avoided.
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Steven Hassan [\[website\]](#)**I. Behavior Control**

1. Regulation of individual's physical reality.
 - a. Where, how and with whom the member lives and associates with
 - b. What clothes, colors, hairstyles the person wears
 - c. What food the person eats, drinks, adopts, and rejects
 - d. How much sleep the person is able to have

- e. Financial dependence
 - f. Little or no time spent on leisure, entertainment, vacations
2. Major time commitment required for indoctrination sessions and group rituals.
 3. Need to ask permission for major decisions.
 4. Need to report thoughts, feelings and activities to superiors.
 5. Rewards and punishments (behavior modification techniques- positive and negative).
 6. Individualism discouraged; group think prevails.
 7. Rigid rules and regulations.
 8. Need for obedience and dependency.

II. Information Control

1. Use of deception.
 - a. Deliberately holding back information.
 - b. Distorting information to make it acceptable.
 - c. Outright lying.
2. Access to non-cult sources of information minimized or discouraged.
 - a. Books, articles, newspapers, magazines, TV, radio.
 - b. Critical information.
 - c. Former members.
 - d. Keep members so busy they don't have time to think.
3. Compartmentalization of information; Outsider vs. Insider doctrines.
 - a. Information is not freely accessible.
 - b. Information varies at different levels and missions within pyramid.
 - c. Leadership decides who "needs to know" what.
4. Spying on other members is encouraged.
 - a. Pairing up with "buddy" system to monitor and control.
 - b. Reporting deviant thoughts, feelings, and actions to leadership.
5. Extensive use of cult generated information and propaganda.
 - a. Newsletters, magazines, journals, audio tapes, videotapes, etc.
 - b. Misquotations, statements taken out of context from non-cult sources.

6. Unethical use of confession.
 - a. Information about "sins" used to abolish identity boundaries.
 - b. Past "sins" used to manipulate and control; no forgiveness or absolution.

III. Thought Control

1. Need to internalize the group's doctrine as "Truth".
 - a. Map = Reality.
 - b. Black and White thinking.
 - c. Good vs. evil.
 - d. Us vs. them (inside vs. outside).
2. Adopt "loaded" language (characterized by "thought-terminating clichés"). Words are the tools we use to think with. These "special" words constrict rather than expand understanding. They function to reduce complexities of experience into trite, platitudinous "buzz words".
3. Only "good" and "proper" thoughts are encouraged.
4. Thought-stopping techniques (to shut down "reality testing" by stopping "negative" thoughts and allowing only "good" thoughts); rejection of rational analysis, critical thinking, constructive criticism.
 - a. Denial, rationalization, justification, wishful thinking.
 - b. Chanting.
 - c. Meditating.
 - d. Praying.
 - e. Speaking in "tongues".
 - f. Singing or humming.
5. No critical questions about leader, doctrine, or policy seen as legitimate.
6. No alternative belief systems viewed as legitimate, good, or useful.

IV. Emotional Control

1. Manipulate and narrow the range of a person's feelings.
2. Make the person feel like if there are ever any problems it is always their fault, never the leader's or the group's.
3. Excessive use of guilt.
 - a. Identity guilt.
 1. Who you are (not living up to your potential).
 2. Your family.
 3. Your past.

4. Your affiliations.
 5. Your thoughts, feelings, actions.
 - b. Social guilt.
 - c. Historical guilt.
 4. Excessive use of fear.
 - a. Fear of thinking independently.
 - b. Fear of the "outside" world.
 - c. Fear of enemies.
 - d. Fear of losing one's "salvation".
 - e. Fear of leaving the group or being shunned by group.
 - f. Fear of disapproval.
 5. Extremes of emotional highs and lows.
 6. Ritual and often public confession of "sins".
 7. Phobia indoctrination: programming of irrational fears of ever leaving the group or even questioning the leader's authority. The person under mind control cannot visualize a positive, fulfilled future without being in the group.
 - a. No happiness or fulfillment "outside" of the group.
 - b. Terrible consequences will take place if you leave: "hell"; "demon possession"; "incurable diseases"; "accidents"; "suicide"; "insanity"; "10,000 reincarnations"; etc.
 - c. Shunning of leave takers. Fear of being rejected by friends, peers, and family.
 - d. Never a legitimate reason to leave. From the group's perspective, people who leave are: "weak"; "undisciplined"; "unspiritual"; "worldly"; "brainwashed by family, counselors"; seduced by money, sex, rock and roll.
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John Hochman

What Cults Want:

Cults want wealth and power for the leadership, to be supplied by members.

1. Wealth may include:
 - a. transfer of cash, real estate, and cars,
 - b. profits, from exploitation of members' labor in cult-owned businesses, and
 - c. funds raised deceptively from relatives and other non-members.
2. Power may include:

- a. manipulation of all relationships, work, or schooling to solely the needs of the cult,
 - b. assignment of city and country of residence,
 - c. regulation of pregnancy and sexual favors,
 - d. behavioral/ideologic controls via group punishments, or threatened expulsions, and
 - e. limitation of members' opportunities to sleep, to pursue individual interests, or simply to reflect.
3. Leaders exhort members to proselytize; predictably, more members mean more wealth and power for the leaders.

What Cults Don't Want:

1. Cults are uninterested in altruism as a moral imperative. Most have self-serving moralities to benefit the organization and its leadership in particular. Individual fulfillment is irrelevant. Pseudoaltruistic activity helps image building.
2. Cults don't want high overhead. Members in cult enterprises may be underpaid or unpaid, work in unsafe environments, or have no provision for medical care.
3. No cult wants its inner workings exposed, although sophisticated cults may curry media interest or even employ public relations consultants and ad agencies to manage their image.
4. Cults do not want to be called "cults." Thus, a definition is proposed to clarify the discussion in this article.