

(In press). Cults. *Entry in Encyclopedia of Religion and Violence*. Edited by Jeffrey Ian Ross.
New York: Sharpe. <http://www.schaler.net/cults.pdf>

Cults

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8683 words

A group is here defined as a cult because its members place a high value on sharing a unitary identity. “Cult” is a derogatory term used to criticize the way two or more people gather together and share beliefs about themselves and the world, through the exchange of ideas, philosophy, rituals, tenets to guide one’s daily life, and often through the use of some kind of discipline to strengthen both beliefs and allegiance to the group. Cults may be religious, political, psychotherapeutic, medical, psychiatric—most any kind of group can become a cult. Cults and sects are different, though some people equate the two. A religious sect is not necessarily viewed by others in a derogatory fashion. “Cult” implies something considered bad if not dangerous.

Sometimes a charismatic leader is present in the cult, sometimes not. There is no charismatic leader in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) for example. Yet AA often is considered a cult, and shares many of the characteristics of cults in general. Some psychiatrists and psychologists are very critical of cults, especially those groups they call cults that criticize psychiatry, and tell people that psychiatrists are dangerous. The Church of Scientology and American psychiatrists have long battled one another. People who have been forced into Alcoholics Anonymous often consider it a cult. Mainstream religions often call non-traditional offshoots of their religion, offshoots that are not sanctioned by the mainstream religion, cults. Calling a group a cult is a way of stigmatizing the group and its members, as well as its ideas. Stigma here refers to a deeply discrediting attribute.

According to one expert on the sociology of religion, however, AA is like churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, in that while to outsiders, the whole movement is seen as an entity which does things, within

the movement, nearly everything happens at the local small-scale level. Thus, in any given Southern Baptist church, one may find one or two dominant personalities, but not in the domination as a whole. The same may be true of AA.

The cult occupies a place in a member's life similar to the place that most ordinary religions occupy in their members' lives. The group and the beliefs or ideas that bind them together, become a central focus in a members life, and rituals based on the ideas are a frequent activity in the members' lives. Disagreement with the philosophy of the group is not tolerated well, and is often penalized, if not punished. Individualism, individual differences, and individual identity is discouraged.

The over-arching philosophy of the groups we call cults is similar to that governing gestalt psychology theories of perception: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The group exists because of how members relate to one another and how they relate to the outside world. The rule of cults is this: Thou shalt not disagree. It seems reasonable to associate with others because they share certain beliefs, it is appropriate to exclude those who do not share those beliefs. They should not be accepted as members if they no longer adhere to the common beliefs of the association. However, in the cult the person who does not share the beliefs and ideology is perceived as a threat to the individual. Since the cult seeks to eliminate the difference between the individual and the collective, when an individual is threatened, the group as a whole is threatened. The difference between the cult and a group that would ordinarily not want to affiliate with those who do not share their ideas is that the cult experiences the non-believer as a threat or danger to the group. Thus, they are much more aggressive in alienating the non-believer, once they may realize and accept that he is no longer capable of being brought back into the group. "The Devil has won the battle for the member's soul."

When individual members challenge the group ideology, they may eventually be asked to leave. It is the very opposite of what one might imagine

an ideal academic environment to be – an environment where disagreement is not only well tolerated but encouraged. Within academia there are groups with shared beliefs, such as a Marxist or a Catholic group of professors. However, academic freedom stipulates that different viewpoints are not only to be protected, they are invited and welcomed. Not so for the groups we call cults. Disagreement and individualism threaten the integrity of the group. So there are two primary characteristics of groups considered cults: (1) the group shares a unitary identity and (2) the group eschews individualism.

Toward the end of this essay we see some of the ways cult members hold the group together and deal with someone who dares to question the binding ideology, whether as a member of the group or as an outside intruder. The responses by members of the cult to an intruder may be applied to other cults as well.

Many groups we ordinarily do not think of as cults share the beliefs and behaviors people unhesitatingly criticize as cults. Cults are, on the one hand, everywhere, and on the other hand, nowhere. Since the word “cult” is used as a value judgment, created and applied based on cultural and moral contexts, there is no literal entity as a cult, per se.

The word “cult” is a judgment that people make about how certain people choose to relate among themselves and to the outside world. Examples of cults may include institutional psychiatry, the Church of Scientology, a school of Hindu-based mystical practice called “Sant Mat,” Alcoholics Anonymous, Gestalt Therapy, and many other groups where disagreeing with core ideology is punished. (Cf. *The Ayn Rand Cult* by Jeff Walker, 1998, Open Court, Chicago, which shows its affinities with other cults like General Semantics.) Obviously, these classifications are based on subjective experience. However, they do have one thing in common: A core ideology is not allowed to be criticized or disagreed with.

Some people get upset when a family member or friend gets involved with a cult. Others are content to let them do their own thing, as long as they do not

coerce others in the process. Many times what people say is bad about cults is a projection of feelings and tendencies within themselves. These are projections, and like all projections they are truths uncomfortable for people to own and take responsibility for, as something they think, feel and do themselves, but attribute to others, in this case “evil” cults. A family member who joins a cult is often not viewed as choosing to join the group, that is, joining is considered involuntary, not a voluntary behavior. They are frequently said to have been coerced into joining, tricked, if not forced into joining. The cult alleged casts a spell on its victims. It puts them in a trance where they will do whatever the members of a cult tell them to do. Foremost, they must not disagree with the ideology that binds them. Psychiatry is a cult – its members severely criticize and ostracize others in the “mental health profession” who say that mental illness is a myth.

People who leave a cult often say they were taken advantage of by the cult. They are viewed as victims by themselves and others. Cult members are viewed in contradictory ways: The person involved in a cult is viewed as a victim on the one hand and a pariah on the other. People choose to join an organization, and if they fall out with it, may say they were tricked. Parents and others may turn to cult de-programmers. They don’t like the choices their children have made, and they may also hold the theory that no normal person, or no kin of theirs, would ever make these kinds of choices.

Are cults dangerous?

We should not be asking whether cults are good or bad, safe or dangerous, although most people think that cults are dangerous. There is no objective answer to the question of dangerousness. It all depends on how one uses the group, who uses the group, who stands to benefit or lose because someone joins the cult. Parents intent on making sure their daughter identifies and practices the religion she grew up with are going to be upset if she believes in an ideology that contradicts that of her parents. They may think that being a

member of the cult is going to injure the well-being of their child. They may be right. So a Catholic parent may not mind if their child becomes a totally non-practicing Catholic, or even marries a Protestant, but may be alarmed if their child becomes a Scientologist or a Jehovah's Witness. Their judgment that this affiliation will likely be harmful for their child might be correct: but this comes down to whether the child is old enough and independent enough to make his or her own decisions. People can make foolish choices; it's not entirely a matter of disagreeing with the parents. Being affiliated with an ideology or an organization is like being affiliated with another person. A parent may object to a child's choice of ideology just as the parent may object to the child's choice of romantic partner.

They are going to be upset if she spends more time with the cult, calls it her "family," and acts as though she no longer wants them as her parents. Some cults actually advise that members divorce themselves from their parents, leave their homes and family. Jesus in the gospels says much the same thing. Sometimes they are speaking literally. Other times they are speaking figuratively. Just as there is no such thing as a safe, dangerous, good or bad drug, as if these were chemical or molecular properties, dangerous or safe, good or bad, are relative terms and adjectives varying according to the persons whose lives are touched by someone's involvement with a cult. The accurate answer to the question "Are cults dangerous?" may depend on whether one believes autonomy is more important than obedience, and under what circumstances this is so.

In the military, particularly among elite fighting groups, individual interests endanger the integrity of the group. When the soldier's conscience runs contrary to that of his cohorts, the group integrity is threatened. Those committed to maintaining group cohesiveness consider individual difference a threat to the collective. Much of the hazing that is part of basic training is designed to break down the psychological defenses of the soldier as an individual, so that they function as a group, not as an individual within the

group. This kind of obedience to authority and the anti-individualism that facilitates it is generally considered good and necessary to fight a common enemy. When a self-proclaimed messiah encourages followers to abdicate all individual cares and concerns, sacrificing all for the group that follows his or her teachings about how to live, as represented by the leader of the group and the example he sets, the individual, once broken down from exhaustion, can easily be taken advantage of by self-interested others— physically, financially, sexually, and psychologically. When we express concern about whether a cult is dangerous or not we must ask, “dangerous according to whom?” We must ask what is meant by the terms good, bad, safe and dangerous. To answer the question concerning danger accurately, we have to recognize that people choose to engage in relationships others call cults. This is especially relevant to one’s concern about whether being involved in a cult is dangerous to oneself.

Behavior is a choice

Contrary to conventional wisdom regarding cults, people are not put under a spell or held in some kind of hypnotic trance, where they do things they ordinarily wouldn’t do, or act in ways they do not want to act. Do people in cults do bad things to themselves and others? Sometimes, yes. The “People’s Temple Christian Church,” run by Pastor Jim Jones, engaged in mass suicide in Guyana, years ago. The Heaven’s Gate cult also engaged in group suicide. And allegedly so did the Jews at Masada during the first Jewish-Roman war in the year 66. In other cultures, Japan for example, not committing seppuku (suicide) is considered highly dishonorable in traditional circles, when one has brought shame to self and others.

Do people in cults do bad things to themselves and others more than people who are not in cults? We don’t know. Remember, a “cult” is a judgment, not a discrete variable. We could compare this to the evil done throughout history in the name of religion. We could compare harm committed by governments and in all likelihood the harm caused by cults would pale by

comparison. This is not to say that cults might be harmless. One can warn people of the consequences of their actions. If they're children under one's care, one can forcibly stop them from doing certain things. If they're adults, they make their own choices, and these may often be quite regrettable, judged by their own best long-term interests.

Beyond these considerations, it seems we must recognize and accept that people have a right to self-destruct if they choose to do so, by cults or drugs, really any means possible, provided they don't hurt others, physically, in the process. If we include "harm" in the equation we leave ourselves open for all kinds of ways to interpret harm: A son or daughter announcing that he or she is homosexual "harms" the heterosexual parents through shock and disappointment. A Jewish son marries a gentile woman and his parents sit shiva for a son who is alive. We cannot, in a free society, protect people from themselves, in fact, when we do it appears we create the very thing we are trying to prevent.

Are people forced to join a cult?

Many people seem to believe that cults coerce people into staying in a group, and physically prevent them from leaving. That is considered one way a cult coerces its members into staying. If that is the case, a criminal act has occurred. There is no reason the state would not prosecute members of a cult for kidnapping and violating a person's civil liberties. If such incidents—crimes—do occur, they are few and far between, despite the fact that many people seem to believe that people in cults are held against their will.

A search on the Internet for opinions regarding the Church of Scientology brings thousands of hits. The vituperative attacks on Scientology, a group recognized as a religion by the Department of the Treasury, must be seen to be believed. People claim they were pressured into staying in Scientology, bilked out of thousands of dollars if not life savings, threatened in all kinds of ways if they go against the group ideologies, are multitudinous. But evidence that the

Church of Scientology committed crimes is sorely lacking. People who claim this was the case may bring civil litigation against the Church of Scientology. It is difficult to find cases where the Church was found guilty of committing crimes –especially compared to other religions, the Catholic Church, for example, with the many cases of pedophilia and sexual abuse discovered and prosecuted. There may, of course, have been crimes that were committed, for which people were prosecuted; and crimes for which members of the Church of Scientology were not prosecuted, as is true with any religion or cult. After years of fighting with the Department of the Treasury, the federal government recognized the Church of Scientology as a religion and granted it religious status. If people criticized and attacked the Catholic Church the way they criticize and attack the Church of Scientology they would quickly be accused of religious discrimination. When such criticism is launch towards Jews we call it anti-Semitism (Simon and Schaler, 2007). When criticism is leveled towards Scientology it is considered good and the right thing to do. Germany, for example, is at least one country where the religion of Scientology is outlawed. In part this is because those critical of Scientology believe that people who choose to join the Church were coerced into doing so, as if they could exhibit involuntary behavior.

The confusion regarding coercion in cults is undoubtedly because much of what people call coercion is in fact persuasion. No one is coerced into joining the Church of Scientology. They may be seduced into joining, but that is still a choice to join. They are persuaded into joining. The difference is significant. This has nothing to do with believing, liking, or disliking Scientology and its ideology, rules, tenets for everyday life, rituals, and disciplines. People have a right to try and persuade others to believe what they believe and join their group. They have a right to proselytize. Advertisers try to persuade people to buy their products. Politicians and political parties try to persuade people into donating money for their political cause, which in turn often results in placing key people in governmental positions of power. That is a basis of our free market, and of our democratic and electoral processes.

However, people do not have a right to coerce others into doing anything for any reason. Some people claim they were manipulated by others because they were made to feel guilty. On a psychological level, no one can make another person feel guilty or feel any particular way in order to do or not do something, independent of their choosing. An adult is responsible for his feelings, other people are not responsible for his feelings. While members of a cult may try very hard to keep a person within their group, they have a right to do so and it is important, so it seems, that people take responsibility for their decisions to stay in or leave the group called "cult."

Having said this, certainly people have committed murder and suicide, sexual offenses against minors, rape and kidnap, all in the name of the cult and its survival, because of the wishes of a charismatic leader, or because people genuinely believe in irrational ideas, ideas they learned in the cult. That does not, in my opinion, excuse them, exculpate them, get them off the hook. There is no middle ground here. People are either innocent or guilty of crimes committed in the name of the cult. There may be diminished responsibility if it can be shown that they were in a peculiar mental state.

But their involvement in the cult in no way removes their intention, mens rea, or responsibility for committing a criminal act: Consider here the Jim Jones cult resulting in mass homicide in Guyana; Charles Manson's cult and the Tate murders, the Heaven's Gate suicide, and David Koresh in Waco, Texas.

Come together

People come together and form groups for at least two reasons: They share ideas or ideologies about themselves and others, and they enjoy the company of like-minded souls. Birds of a feather flock together. There is safety in numbers. If a person feels different from others because of how he thinks about himself and the world, he is less likely to be picked off by others, that is, criticized, penalized, humiliated, or ostracized when he is part of a group.

Something similar happens in groups called cults. People bind together in various ways and maintain a sense of the herd to avoid being picked off by metaphorical lions. Whenever a group is threatened, it huddles closer together. During a crisis, people forget or set aside their differences and work together to face a common enemy. Individuals form and join groups when their integrity as individuals is threatened. They might just join a group because they agree with it and want to help, too.

“Sharing an identity” means that the members of the group try to think, speak, feel, and behave in a uniform, homogeneous manner. They use the same “thought-terminating clichés,” a phrase coined by Robert Jay Lifton in his famous book of case studies entitled *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of “Brainwashing” in China* (UNC Press, 1989). There are often ritual ways of greeting and leaving people that those in cults abide by as ritual. In the Radha Soami cult, based in Beas, India, disciples greet and say goodbye to each other by holding their hands together in prayer, bowing, and saying “Radha Soami.” It is always expected that the persons present who did not say “Radha Soami” first will say it in response. If he does not respond with “Radha Soami,” something peculiar in the interaction has occurred. Those who do not say it may be treated with suspicion.

People also tend to come together and form groups for at least two reasons: ideology and affiliation. They value the ideology of people in the group and affiliation with people in the group. People may join a religious group because they are attracted to the ideology and shy away from social intimacy and affiliation. Still, they socialize in the most minimal ways to enjoy and derive meaning from shared ideology. Some people may join a group because they want to end their feelings of isolation in the world and cultivate social relations and intimacy. They may eschew the ideology and as long as there are minimal demands for agreeing with the ideology, people may enjoy the affiliation without much regard for the ideology.

There are many people who go to church or synagogue purely for affiliation purposes. When it comes to ideology, they are devout atheists. People enjoy the social rewards of affiliation independent of ideology. They enjoy the affiliation to celebrate important transitions in life, for example, births and weddings, and to give support during times of crisis and stress, when a member of the group or someone in the member's family dies; the group can also offer important support when a member is struggling with a serious disease or physical disability.

There are people who enjoy ideology over affiliation, though it is obviously more difficult to avoid social contact if one is learning about ideology from a person, as opposed to a book. Still, the person focused on ideology eschews affiliation and intimacy, is ideology-oriented, and if he is not shy and awkward when it comes to social contact, lacking confidence, he is curmudgeonly, cold and aloof, if not plain antisocial. The point is that when people are involved with ideas and groups they may get involved because they like both the ideas and the affiliation, they may shun the ideology and find a sense of family if not community in the social interaction, or vice versa, reject the social interaction and focus as much on ideology and as little on social contact as possible for any number of reasons.

In a group that is labeled or judged as a cult, however, the emphasis is more on both ideology and affiliation. Overt or covert rules stipulate that members cannot take one (ideology) and leave the other (affiliation). Affiliation stems from ideology and ideology drives affiliation, if not in the form of proselytizing, that is, trying to recruit new members and converts to both the ideology and the group, then in the process of excluding those who question and doubt the ideology. Ideologically speaking, members of the cult are "yes" men and women. Affiliation-wise, the group is the only group. The rule of cults when it comes to ideology is this: Thou shalt not disagree. The rule when it comes to socialization is affiliate only with "us," avoid "them."

Identity and contact – I am that

The word “identity” has its roots in the Latin “idem” meaning “same.” Identity refers to that represented by the pronoun “I.” Normally, when we speak of consciousness or awareness we mean the extent to which a person is aware of himself and others: we are referring to awareness of his thoughts, emotions, and his body. The phrase “that represented by the pronoun ‘I,’” is about as close to describing oneself and one’s awareness of self, as one can get.

A personal identity means that a person is the same over time and space. It also refers to how a person differs from others. The quality of social contact we have with others involves appreciation of our respective differences. “I” am who “I” was yesterday, today, and who “I” will be tomorrow. I am who I am here in Maryland, when I was in Nigeria, and tomorrow in London. While people obviously change over time, they mature physically, emotionally and psychologically, their comprehension of themselves deepens and their identity remains constant. I know more about myself now than I did back then; but that represented by the pronoun “I” remains constant. I still go by the same name.

When people change their names – not because of marriage – meaning when they change their first names, it is usually to try to get away from who they were: it is a primitive way of trying to become a new person by trying to change one’s identity. “I am no longer ‘Ted’ I am ‘Jor-el.’” “I am no longer ‘Susannah’ I am ‘Rachel’.” “I am no longer ‘Richard Alpert’, I am “Baba Ram Dass” – as if one could die and be reborn, become a new person, and escape what was bothersome and become someone new. Sometimes a daughter may do this to get away from her parents psychologically, if not physically. This can be a way of creating distance if not separation. Like it or not, we are each the same person from our birth until our death. We may try to avoid that fact by changing our name and thus our identity, a practice that is more popular than one might imagine. Changing one’s name doesn’t necessarily mean that one is denying he is the same person as he was before, but sometimes it does. Someone may just

feel that he doesn't like his original name. John Cheese changed his name to John Cleese. When people join cults they may try to take on a similar new name, a new identity, and try to become a new and different person from who they were prior to their cult life.

When people come together to share an identity as a cult, their personal identity extends to others, and vice versa. This is a major difference from the way people normally relate to one another. Normally, people recognize and respect similarities and differences in personality. There are likes and dislikes, values shared and differences acknowledged and accepted. Identifying ourselves as individuals is important to good social contact, personal growth and development. The constancy and clarity of identity, the recognition of differences and similarities, is a key part of maturation and the development of personhood.

Something different happens in the groups that are labeled as cults. Here, people come together seeking to reinforce and strengthen their personal identity through the homogeneity or sameness of identity in the group – everyone in the group strives to be the same, to abolish differences from one another, to think the same way, to speak the same way, to engage in similar behaviors. The cult is decidedly different from other groups in this way. Other groups place a high value on diversity and heterogeneity. The cult is decidedly anti-individualist. When people strive to emphasize their differences, this striving is usually attacked as “egoism,” hubris, arrogance, or narcissism – and most importantly, it is antithetical to the ideological goals of the cult, be that obedience to the leader, or some state of enlightenment or salvation requiring group cohesiveness.

Even in the most heterogeneous of groups, there still has to be some basis for coming together, some shared ideology – for example, truthfulness and personal responsibility for what people say may be a requirement for affiliation or membership. The difference between a cult and a normal group that is important to note is that in those groups labeled as cults, the extent to which

uniformity exists – both personal and group identity – is much stronger. People are not allowed to question authority if there is a leader. People are not allowed to question the status quo if there is no leader (although some sociologists believe that there is always a leader.) They are not allowed to affiliate with those outside of the group. Some groups lay down rules about who members may associate with; others don't. This is a matter of degree. In the cult we are speaking of the extreme. There is strong inclusiveness in the cult—members are deeply committed to both their ideology and the group– and exclusiveness – members are deeply committed to excluding and avoiding those who disagree with or challenge their ideology, unless they see an opportunity to convert others. The attempt to bring in new members strengthens the cultists' resolve regarding the value of the group. This is a balancing act. While this is frequently a characteristic of many normal groups, in the cult it is much stronger.

Too legit to quit

When a charismatic leader holds the group together, the leader “lives life for the members.” This way he suffers the difficulties of interaction with the outside world, something that his followers may find intolerable, and is paid in return with devotion and worship of him. People in the cult begin to believe and claim that he has super powers and is more than human. When people think of cult members as in a “trance,” they usually mean that cult members have been “brainwashed” or hypnotized, tricked, by a charismatic leader, someone who is often exceptionally insightful about human nature, behavior, and experience. Because cult members are said to be in a trance, most people believe that it is very difficult for them to break out of the cult, to free themselves and act independent of the group or leader that seeks to control them. This is why deprogrammers kidnap the cult member and try to turn him around through deprogramming messages. The process is not unlike what goes on in the cult itself.

When we use the word “brainwashed,” for those who are old enough to remember, we may think of the movie called *The Manchurian Candidate*, starring Frank Sinatra, among others. In that movie people were captured and hypnotized by the Communist Chinese to assassinate American political leaders at a later date – post hypnotic suggestion.

Obviously, “brainwash” is a metaphor. The term refers to a trance-like, hypnotic state of consciousness where a person is allegedly awake but simultaneously asleep. The movie was fiction, but it lent itself to the idea that the Communists could infiltrate America by hypnotizing Americans. The movie came out at the time of the “Red Scare” in American politics: Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy had launched a pogrom of sorts accusing anyone he disliked of being a communist in ways reminiscent of accusations concerned witchcraft (See especially Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*). Robert Jay Lifton’s book *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China* was highly influential in terms of popular beliefs concerning trance states and cults. He identifies personality characteristics of people who did not recover well from thought reform. The book also became popular as the deprogrammer’s bible. The locus classicus for this kind of thing is *Trilby* by George du Maurier (1894), though in that case there was no “organization.” A love affair with an ideology is much like a love affair with a person.

Cult busting

Cults serve diverse purposes for individuals, the foremost of which can be a positive sense of community where values are focused, affirmed, and reinforced. The relationship among individuals in a cult is hypnotic (Freud 1959; Becker 1973). There is frequently a sing-song rhythm to the cult leader’s voice and speech and the appeal of philosophical generalities is comforting to those in periods of identity crisis. People disagreeing with an ideology binding individuals together in a group are likely to be criticized, punished, and

eventually excluded or shunned by the group. This rule reads "thou shalt not disagree," for affiliation and membership in the cult rests on ideological consensus. In order for the cult to maintain its singular identity, the rule must be obeyed. Break the rule and break the spell. In order for a singular group identity to exist, individual identities must be minimized.

The flip-side of this phenomenon concerns the impact of individual autonomy on the cult experience--a kind of "psychological capitalism" in a psychologically-socialist world. The stronger an individual's confidence in self, the less likely an individual will succumb to demands for cult conformity.

At least three dimensions to these ideas are worth considering here: (a) Individuals with a strong sense of personal autonomy are less likely to become involved in cults. (b) If they do become involved in a cult, they are more likely to recover from the cult experience in a way that preserves a strong sense of self (compared to those whose self-concept was considerably weaker prior to the cult experience). (c) What is also likely to be true is that individuals with a strong sense of self are less likely to feel threatened when cult members attack them. Moreover, individuals eschewing cult affiliation may elicit resentment from true believers (Kaufmann 1973). (1)

Individuals with backgrounds involving chronic identity confusion, excessive guilt, and "totalistic" or dichotomous thinking, appear to experience more difficulty in re-establishing themselves in their post-cult life, compared to those individuals with a clearer sense of identity, less guilt, and more accurate sense of psychological perspective. Individuals exhibiting a strong sense of personal autonomy appear more resistant to criticism directed at them by a group of individuals at odds with their particular ideology. (2)

In clinical hypnosis, the will of the subject becomes confluent with the will of the hypnotist. The subject does not have a say in the process. The sense of ego separateness between the two is purposely obscured by the hypnotist. In psychotherapy this experience is called "transference." As long as the client in

either hypnosis or psychotherapy maintains an acute awareness of self, that is, he or she persists in appreciating the difference between self and environment, a point referred to as the "ego boundary" by Perls (1947), the hypnosis will fail. Some schools of psychotherapy may view this as an obstruction to good therapy, others view it as a means to achieving success (Szasz 1965).

Good contact and a hypnotic trance are opposing states of consciousness. Thus, good contact antidotes hypnosis. Moreover, good contact between therapist and client is not contingent upon cultivating transference. (3) Therapy fails when the client chooses to see the therapist as someone other than he or she really is, and when therapists encourage clients to see them as someone other than who they really are.

An extreme example of this ability to resist hypnosis and brainwashing is seen in the movie of a few years ago entitled *The Ipcress File*. By deliberately pressing a metal nail into his hand actor Michael Caine used his experience of pain to force an awareness of self. He avoided listening to the hypnotic voice of an "other," an "other" seeking to make Caine's will confluent with his own -- against Caine's will. Caine's character found a way to maintain autonomy in the face of that psychological coercion. He was able to fight the psychological influence of an other intent on dictating a particular self concept. The point intended here is that by focusing on himself in such a way, he was able to resist the attempt by the other to force a psychological merge -- a merge that is coerced by one onto another. The force intent on hypnotizing Caine is not dissimilar to the persuasion tactics of proselytizing cult members.

Falsifying the hypothesis

There are ways of applying this idea to individuals under the "spell cast by others" (Becker 1973). One way of testing the cult nature of a group is by challenging the ideology binding the group together. We can discover something about the nature of a group by how well its members tolerate opposition to the

ideology that holds the group together. How well do members tolerate difference of opinion, opinion that challenges the very ideological heart of the group? Members of the cult are like a colony of insects when disturbed. A frenzy of activity and protective measures are executed when core ideologies are challenged. The stronger the evidence challenging the truthfulness of the group ideology, the more likely members of the cult are to either lash out in a more or less predictable fashion, fall apart, or disband into separate cult colonies.

There are certain characteristic responses to "cult busting," or, the challenging of ideology that assists in binding members of a particular cult together. That cult is Alcoholics Anonymous, (AA), (Kurtz 1988; Antze 1987; Leach and Norris 1977).

Over the years the writer has been involved in investigating claims made by politicians, drug users, people in "recovery," members of the addiction-treatment industry, and addiction-research field regarding the disease model of addiction, particularly the alleged role of involuntariness in explaining addiction. Extensive research supports the idea that addiction is a voluntary process, a behavior that is better explained by individual psychological and environmental factors, than physiology and the chemical properties of drugs, (Alexander 1987, 1990).

Presenting those findings to people holding opposing points of view, i.e., addiction is a disease characterized by "loss of control" (Jellinek 1960), often elicits a vituperative response. That response aroused the writer's curiosity as to the cult-like nature certain groups within the addiction field hold dearly. The bolder the presentation of ideas in opposition to the prevailing disease-model ideology, the clearer the characterizations of criticism directed back in return. Patterns of response are clear.

Encounters between those who consider AA a cult and those who do not, as well as whether addiction is a choice versus a disease, occur over the years can become heated at times(e.g., Madsen et al., 1990; Goodwin and Gordis

1988). Exchanges documented here occurred on the editorial pages of large and small newspapers, live radio-talk shows, scientific journals, local political settings, and in the past ten years or so in discussion groups on the Internet.

Conceding a confrontational style, it is a mistake to attribute the nature of critical response solely to a personal way of delivering the bad news. Colleagues present their ideas regarding similar issues in what are perhaps at times more sensitive and tactful ways, and they have met with similar forms of denunciation and character assassination, the typical form of rebuttal. Ad hominem rebuttals are the standard, (Fingarette 1989; Peele 1992; Searles 1993; Madsen 1989; Wallace 1993a, 1993b).

Is AA a cult? There's plenty of evidence supporting the idea that it is. Greil and Rudy (1983) studied conversion to the world view of AA and reported that

[t]he process by which individuals affiliate with A.A. entails a radical transformation of personal identity in that A.A. provides the prospective affiliate not merely with a solution to problems related to drinking, but also with an overarching world view with which the convert can and must reinterpret his or her past experience....Our analysis suggests that the central dynamic in the conversion process is coming to accept the opinions of reference others, (p. 6).

[I]t appears...that contact with A.A. is more likely to be accompanied by a greater degree of coercion than...most cases of religious conversion (Greil and Rudy 1983, p. 23).

Alexander and Rollins (1984) described how Lifton's (1961) eight brainwashing techniques used by the Communist Chinese operate in AA. "[T]he

authors contend that AA uses all the methods of brain washing, which are also the methods employed by cults," (Alexander & Rollins, 1984, p. 45).

Galanter (1989) has written:

As in the Unification Church workshops, most of those attending AA chapter meetings are deeply involved in the group ethos, and the expression of views opposed to the group's model of treatment is subtly or expressly discouraged. A good example is the fellowship's response to the concept of controlled drinking, an approach to alcoholism treatment based on limiting alcohol intake rather than totally abstaining. Some investigators and clinicians have reported success with this alternative to treatment. The approach, however, is unacceptable within the AA tradition, and the option is therefore anathema to active members. It is rarely brought up by speakers at meetings and suppressed when it is raised. As an inductee becomes involved in the group, the sponsor monitors the person's views carefully, assuring that the recruit adheres to the perspective into which the sponsor was drawn; any hint of an interest in controlled drinking is discouraged. Similar constraints would be applied if a recruit questioned the importance of any of the Steps or the need to attend meetings regularly. The issue here is not the relative merit of controlled drinking...it is the way communications are managed in AA. As a charismatic group, AA is able to suppress attitudes that could undermine its traditions, (Galanter 1989, p. 185). (4)

Sadler (1977) writes to that effect when she stated that

AAers seek a relationship with the supernatural in order to cease managing their own lives....The AA concept of control differs significantly from the concept of control presented to drunkards by the rest of society....AA...tells the newcomer that his life is unmanageable and that it is ridiculous for him to try to manage it....By deliberately denying the

ability to control their lives, AAers' former drunken situations are brought under control....Most importantly, abstinence is not considered a kind of control. The individual who comes to AA in order to control his drinking will be disappointed. AAers insist that abstinence is possible only when powerlessness is conceded. AA offers supportive interaction in which powerlessness comes to be positively valued (Sadler 1977, p.208).

When ideas regarding voluntariness, responsibility, and addiction are introduced to members of AA and devout adherents to the disease concept of addiction, people who are usually involved with AA in some way, the following responses are likely to occur (in no particular order):

NAME-CALLING

The person introducing the taboo ideas (the heretic) is belittled and laughed at. Mocking occurs. Derogatory comments are leveled. Name calling often ensues, e.g., the writer was recently called a "thoughtless dweeb," told "you are your own worst enemy," that the writer was a "crackpot psychologist, the kind that can't get tenure because they are always bullying peers and students," a "fascist," "doctor baby," an "arrogant son of a bitch," "contemptible," "immature for a guy with a Dr. before his name," and a person engaging in "highly unscientific behavior," who has embarked on a "personal vendetta."

This is behavior common to other cults as well as AA.

ACCUSATIONS OF MURDER

After the initial mocking and belittling, the criticism appears to take a more serious turn. The ideas presented by the heretic are considered potentially dangerous. People who do not know better will misuse them and kill themselves or others. Thus, the heretic should be held accountable for murder, or the death of another.

The accusation of heretic-as-murderer or potential murderer can be leveled as an unintended result of the ideas presented by the heretic, in which case forgiveness by some cult members is still possible; or it can evolve into rhetoric in which the heretic is described, or alluded to, as someone who has a deliberate interest in endangering the lives of cult members in this way. The heretic then personifies evil in the eyes of cult members. It is at this point that the exchange could become physically dangerous.

YOU'RE ONLY IN IT FOR THE MONEY

The heretic may also be accused at this point of having an economic investment in his particular point of view. For example, the writer has been accused of trying to pirate potential psychotherapy clients away from AA on more than one occasion in order to make money off of them.

DIAGNOSIS OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Another tangent the cult members often take is to accuse the heretic of being "mentally ill." Psychiatric diagnosis is frequently used as a weapon. When people are very angry with others they often resort to diagnosing them with some kind of mental illness. The taboo ideas are alleged to stem from personal trauma the heretic has not dealt with, and his statements in opposition to the group ideology are considered "projections," the function of "denial," an "unconscious" process that is said to be a "symptom" of his mental illness. The heretic may be accused of expressing an emotional need to receive negative attention in order to feel good about himself.

Here, the heretic may be confronted on a paternalistic basis: "He is sick. He needs help." At times, cultists may yield and take a more compassionate posture in relation to the heretic at this point, trying to convince the heretic that he is sick, and that he needs to come to his senses.

IT TAKES ONE TO KNOW ONE

There is often an attack on the validity of the heretic's ideas. The heretic's ideas are termed invalid because he or she is not a drug addict. Frequently, the heretic is asked, "have you ever had a drug problem?" Whereas in the DIAGNOSIS OF MENTAL ILLNESS case the motive driving apparent concern is that the heretic's inappropriate behavior is likely to stem from a mental illness, in this case, if the heretic has not had a drug problem or shared in the problems-of-living experienced by cult members, he or she is said to be incapable of speaking from legitimate experience, as it is only by this experience that someone can "know" what the truth is regarding their cult ideology. (6)

INVOKING AUTHORITY

A demand for scientific evidence to support the heretical ideas always emerges. In AA, members often cite scientific findings to support their claims regarding involuntariness. That certain medical organizations have endorsed their ideology is brought forth as evidence of the veracity of their ideas. When scientific evidence to the contrary is presented by the heretic, the research is said to be too old to be valid, not extensive enough, subject to diverse interpretations, and ultimately no match for personal experience. At times, when scientific information is brought into the discussion by the heretic, other scientists will accuse the heretic of unethical use of knowledge and influence, and threaten to report him or her to some professional association in hopes that he or she may become professionally censored.

When the demand for scientific evidence is met by the heretic, a retreat to IT TAKES ONE TO KNOW ONE may occur. One person wrote recently: "You sight [sic] science. I sight experience, strength, hope." A favorite demand is "don't criticize what is unless you can propose a better way." Another is "your sources are not scientific enough," and "your understanding of science is not sophisticated enough."

SHAMING

The assault on the heretic is based on the idea that facts are cruel and insensitive to people who have done him no harm. "Is this the way you treat your friends, (or patients)?"

REDUCTIONISM, TAUTOLOGY, CONTRADICTION, AND NON SEQUITUR

The counter-argument to the heretic involves scientific and philosophical reductionism to the point that few, if any, conclusions regarding the issues at hand can ever be reached. Circuitous arguments evolve. Blatant contradictions emerge, e.g., "the alcoholic cannot willfully control his drinking, therefore, he must be abstinent." Yet, people choose to abstain from drinking alcoholic beverage. The alcoholic allegedly cannot choose to control his drinking, therefore, he should choose to control his drinking. (7)

Using analogies that don't work is a favorite tactic of cultists. The analogies are often not reciprocal. For example, the alcoholic is seen as like a diabetic. Yet diabetics are not like alcoholics.

Here is a particularly graphic account of the illogical analogy, often employed as non sequitur, by a psychotherapist attempting to "counter resistance to acceptance of the disease concept in alcoholic families," (Henderson, 1984). This is behavior common to other cults as well as AA, however, the illogic is particularly telling. If one were to try to carefully show this therapist how her logic doesn't make sense, the resistance would be futile. It is worth remembering, though, that this therapist is being paid to help a family. She does represent the thinking of a disease model cult:

Counselor: We are dealing here with an illness. We know it is an illness because it is predictable (it follows a course which we can describe in advance), it is progressive (it gets worse unless it can be brought into remission), and, if untreated, alcoholism is 100% fatal.

Family: All he has to do to straighten up is to want to do it. He just

doesn't want to stop drinking. I don't buy that he has a disease.

Counselor: So you see him as just weak-willed. And when he chooses the bottle instead of his family, you feel he doesn't care about you.

Family: Yeah, [t]hat's right. He'll step all over you. He makes promises he doesn't keep, and I don't believe he means to keep them when he makes them.

[Illogical transition occurs here.]

Counselor: Have you ever had diarrhea?

Family: (Laughing a little and looking at the counselor rather strangely), of course. Counselor: Did you ever try to control it with willpower?

Family: No. I mean...you can't (still chuckling). Counselor: Why not?

Family: Well, its a bacteria or something. There's nothing you can do about it...Oh...

Counselor: You have the idea. Your Dad has an illness he can't fix with willpower because that doesn't stop it. There are things you can do to get diarrhea to stop, just as there are things you can do to stop the active part of alcoholism. But all you can do for both is to set up the conditions under which getting well is possible. It depends on what disease you have. There is a specific treatment for alcoholism...[.] (Henderson, 1984, pp. 118-119)

For some, those confrontations are enough to shake them out of their hypnotic daze, arouse their curiosity, and assist in getting them to leave the group. Occasionally, a member of the cult may yield suddenly to the heretic, attempting to practice a "turn the other cheek" portion of the ideological doctrine. If a personal dialogue can be achieved and continued between a cult member and the heretic an emotional catharsis may occur for the cultist and this can become a major event in breaking the hypnotic spell.

Humor is useful in further diffusing volatile contacts, along with divulging of personal information on the part of the heretic. Those intent on preserving the

cult will often go underground and avoid any contact with the heretic whatsoever.

CONCLUSION

These patterns of response may be useful in analyzing and interpreting exchanges involving vituperation directed at one or several individuals who have either intentionally or not stepped into a nest of vipers, that is, the cult, a volatile experience, to say the very least.

Many psychologists regard AA as no more cult-like than numerous other organizations. They consider that it does more good than harm. The purpose of this analysis is not to gather evidence that AA serves a destructive rather than constructive purpose in the lives of its adherents, but rather that as a cult, good or bad, there are certain characteristics of its members that may be drawn out when they are confronted with incompatible ideology.

This essay is a commentary based principally on the writer's personal (rather than clinical) experiences. It has not considered the individual's need for cult conformity, an issue that may be explored further. The defensiveness of cult members should also be considered in light of these needs, (see also Berger, 1991). The important point to remember is that the difference between a group labeled as a cult and one considered "normal" is socially constructed, (although some people maintain that nothing is socially constructed.) The characteristics of a unifying ideology, heavy emphasis on anti-individualism, and varying degrees of criticism, penalty, and censorship for disagreeing with or criticizing the unifying ideology may be present in both groups, one judged as bad, that is, a cult, and one judged as good, that is a "normal" religion of socially-sanctioned group.

NOTES

1. Some members are definitely split in their involvement with the cult. They may value the ideology and not the affiliation, or vice versa. In the former case they hold fast to the ideology, yet do not attend cult functions. In the latter case they hold fast to the affiliation and know very little about the ideology, nor do they seem to care to.
2. These ideas are from Lifton's (1961) study of "brainwashing" in Communist China.
3. Clearly, psychoanalysts have established a cult around the ideas of transference and the mythical "unconscious."
4. The idea of controlled drinking is anathema to members of AA because it completely undermines the role of involuntariness, the cornerstone upon which the disease model of addiction rests.
5. The research on vicarious or observational learning shows that people learn through the experience of others. As one psychotherapist describes this: "Have you ever put your hand in a rattlesnake pit? Why not?" The point here being that people don't have to put their hands in a rattlesnake pit to know there is a good chance they will be bitten should they choose to do so.
6. The idea here is similar to Lifton's (1961) discussion regarding the "thought-terminating cliché."
7. This is a projection of the therapist's.

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