

ANALYSIS

Cultic groups use coercion to keep members and ex-members in line

As a subtle form of coercion, the proliferation of cults in recent years has become alarming. Cults are not the robe-dressed societal deviants which many people still perceive them to be. Their operations have become so intertwined into our environment that they are extremely difficult to distinguish. And in fact it is virtually impossible to establish an objective criteria that will justly point out which groups are cults. In the following article, Blair Cosgrove examines the recruiting techniques many cults incorporate, the impact of a cultic experience on an individual, and how the group pressures its membership into strict obedience. As one psychologist noted, no one understands the overwhelming influence which a cult can exercise over an individual, until a loved one is lost to such a group.

"Close your eyes and let your mind go blank." This is cultic language, the type you might hear at a seminar to expand mind power, develop ESP, improve memory or reduce stress. Often, it is a mask for religious cultism.

Criticism of cults stems not from their religious beliefs but primarily from the methods used to indoctrinate recruits. The following is a message from a pamphlet published by the Council On Mind Abuse (COMA): "When you meet the friendliest people you have ever known, who introduce you to the most loving group of people you've ever encountered and you find the leader to be the most inspired, caring, compassionate, and understanding person you've ever met, and then you learn that the cause of the group is something you never dared hope could be accomplished, and all this sounds too good to be true—it probably is too good to be true!"

Recently, the Interfaith Council and the Office of Student Affairs at York University co-sponsored a lecture by COMA. COMA is a non-profit educational organization that publicizes information about deceptive recruitment and indoctrination tactics of cults and groups with cultic affiliation. COMA also counsels estranged members, their families, and friends.

According to Robert Tucker, Executive Director of COMA, cults no longer recruit the stereotypical lost or lonely back-packer type. "That was a trend of the '60s. Now people have the wrong impression. When they think of cults they think of Krishna or the Moonies," he said. Cultic groups have become more sophisticated, Tucker explained. They target conventional society members and professionals such as doctors, dentists, and the business community, particularly large corporations. In fact, Tucker emphasized, typical cult recruits are intellec-

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tual, well-educated, open, and searching people.

Prior to becoming director at COMA, Tucker completed his Masters in Business Administration at a west-coast university. He is currently working on a psychology degree at York. Tucker's personal experience with satanic groups raised his interest in cults and ritualized mind abuse. He's convinced that mind control is real.

Currently, there are cultic groups at both York and U of T campuses, COMA believes. In a letter to U of T,

the former president of COMA wrote, "COMA is concerned with the loss of freedom of choice when anyone is unwittingly coerced from his or her traditional beliefs and lifestyles by the use of subtle coercively persuasive methods." Parents and ex-members of such groups, as well as the Interfaith Council and the Office of Student Affairs at York, are afraid that students may unknowingly be approached by members of cults on campus.

According to Tucker, a cult is defined as a phony totalist society, structured on a power system that coerces its membership in sessions where members are constantly forced to confess and share their private lives with the rest of the group. The abuse of this type of power is unethical, Tucker explained. "Power is a difficult thing to handle. There is always a potential for disaster."

Characteristics of destructive religious cults include an authoritarian structure: to argue with the authority

is to argue with God, Tucker continued. A new member is always surrounded by seemingly unconditional love, known as "love-bombing." However, in reality, it is conditional on obedience to superiors. Questions towards the leadership are discouraged, and those who do question are shunned by the group. If questions persist, Tucker added, the curious member is expelled.

Cult leaders maintain that those outside the organization are evil and unenlightened, said Tucker.

Members are asked not to associate with old friends, churches, and families. In fact, they are told to abandon former lifestyles and patterns altogether. Leaders explain that negative reaction from the outside towards the group is expected and necessary. Criticism is equated with persecution, Tucker stressed, and members are told to rejoice in persecution.

Leaving the denomination is equated to leaving God, Tucker continued. During meetings, the leaders denounce members that have withdrawn from the group. The group is reminded to disassociate themselves from ex-members and to advise the leadership if ex-members try to make contact.

Former cult members may be depressed for lengthy time periods after leaving the group, Tucker said. They have trouble making decisions and feel fearful, guilty and isolated even with the support of their family and counsellors. People can become dependent on a cult even after only one intense weekend, Tucker warned. It may take years to regain stable mental health after the experience, he added.

One on one discipleship is used in order to sustain a constant stream of confession, Tucker explained. Confession is used as a means of maintaining control over members and exposing them to the group in "home gatherings." At "home gatherings," smaller groups of people are pressured by peers to give away secrets, usually of a sexual nature, in what appears to be an atmosphere of love and concern. "This becomes almost incestuous in intensity," Tucker said. The information from confessions ends up in the hands of the hierarchy and is used to threaten members who want to leave the organization. It is also used to keep ex-members quiet, he added.

According to Tucker, people must be aware of organizations that are fast-paced and extremely time-consuming. Recruitment is the main objective of cults, he said. Display charts, similar to corporate charts that illustrate profits, assess the number of new members. Members have steady recruiting obligations that go beyond reasonable commit-

ments, and intense involvement leads to dropping courses or even careers. Addiction to the organization is often inevitable, Tucker stressed.

It has been alleged that in Toronto, some corporate employees feel obligated to participate in cultic seminars that are recommended to them by their employers. Tucker could not disclose evidence confirming these allegations; however, he said that people are contacting COMA regularly, asking, "Does my employer have the right to put me through a seminar series that conflicts with my religious beliefs?" Not attending a seminar series means being disloyal to the employer: it's these types of deceptions which are inexcusable, according to Tucker.

Cults are not necessarily religious. They can form around anything, Tucker emphasized, citing cults recently forming around the ultra-consciousness. "These are also groups with elements of leadership, mind control and corruption," he said. These groups are part of what's known as "the New Age Movement." "In my opinion, the real concern is organizations such as the Silva Method, Life Spring and Scientology that use potent psychotherapeutic techniques that look scientific," he explained.

According to the latest edition of *Omni* magazine, "the New Age Movement" in the United States includes mystic phenomena such as the popular "channeling." "Channeling" is a communication transformation process in which gods or spirits enter a living person, somewhat like in the movie *The Exorcist*. However, these gods have the power to reveal universal knowledge to thousands of their followers. Christopher Lasch of *Omni* refers to the "New Age Movement" as "the 'Me generation's' latest contribution to our long history of bizarre spiritual fads . . ."

Tucker takes the movement much more seriously. "There's a new marketplace out there in Spiritual goods that focuses on the deconstruction of your personality and reintegration into their (cult) society," he concluded.

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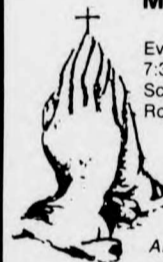
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