

THE CULTIC PHENOMENA:  
NEW AND EMERGING RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN AMERICA

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## THE CULTIC PHENOMENA: SUMMARY

This report deals with the cultic phenomena surrounding new and emerging religious movements in America. Moving from an analysis of such terms as cult and sect today and in the past to an overview of cultic movements generally throughout history and particularly in the United States (including ritual suicide), it gives special attention to the People's Temple-Jonestown movement and provides a larger historical perspective for cults, new and old, with emphasis on their social and political context, the nature of their appeal, and the issues they raise for freedom of religion and public order alike.

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## I. Introduction

The tragic events in Guyana surrounding the disintegration of the Jonestown-People's Temple cult have focused attention on the larger phenomenon of religious cults in American life -- their nature, extent, and significance. Proposals many and varied are being put forward for dealing with problems engendered by so-called "cults," by which are meant out-of-the mainstream religious movements, sometimes called "fringe" or "marginal" religious groups.

The cultic phenomena should be seen in the larger perspective of history. Even the most recent groups -- and the more bizarre -- invariably have origins in the past and often have earlier counterparts. Moreover, important distinctions must be made among and, in some cases, within new religious groups in terms of classification and definition. While strong objection has been made to the use of "cult" in referring to new religions, it seems evident that the popular use, however vague and even derogatory, is firmly established. This report offers an analysis of the imprecision inherent in such terms as cult and sect in the past and today, 1/ cultic movements and their social and political context throughout history (including the ritual suicide phenomenon), the "cultic scene" in general in present-day America (with special attention

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1/ In this regard, see the discussion in Sydney Ahlstrom's *A Religious History of the American People*, Doubleday Image, Garden City, 1975, Library of Congress BR 515, A4. Vol. 1, Chapter 29, "Sectarian Heyday", pp. 571-592.

to the Jonestown group), and the various explanations advanced by sociologists of religion and others to explain the appeal of new religions and cults as well as their relationship to society at large.

According to J. Gordon Melton of the Institute for the Study of American Religion, 2/ religious cults (seen as the outgrowth of urban life, its anxieties and dislocations), which now touch the lives of ten percent of our urban population in one way or another, will continue growing until the end of the century. Gallup Polls in recent years have indicated that nearly twelve percent of Americans have participated in some form of meditation or religious practice outside the normative traditions of Judaism and Christianity. 3/ Similar reports have come from other studies -- Irving Zaretsky's estimate of more than ten million Americans involved since the early 1970's in "fringe religious cults", and the Berkeley Religious Consciousness Projects of Charles Glock with the evidence of growing interest in "counter-traditional" and "alternative" religions. 4/

On the other hand, it is also true, according to Robert Ellwood, that the percentage of persons involved in "fringe cults" as a proportion of the total national population apparently has remained about the same for decades. "Many people," he notes, "are under the impression

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2/ Quoted in "The Quandary of the Cult", Time, December 18, 1978. p. 52.

3/ Cited by Kenneth Briggs, "Fringe Religions Find Fertile Soil in U.S.", New York Times, November 28, 1978, p. A14.

4/ See his The New Religious Consciousness, written with Robert Bellah (California, 1976, Library of Congress BL 98.N48).

that the religious scene seems to be in great flux, but the greatest characteristic is its stability." This view is confirmed by Sydney Ahlstrom: "I'm not sure the quantity (of religion) changes, but it flows in different channels." The strong influence of Eastern religions and the changing attitudes of young people are new elements. Indeed, there is evidence that some decline has set in for religious cults and new religions. 5/ It should be noted that the Jones group probably never had more than 10,000 members, despite claims of twice that number; Sunday congregations of 5,000 or more were no index to actual commitment. While there are probably hundreds or even thousands of "fringe" or "marginal" religious groups, most are infinitesimal and transient. "Perhaps, some three dozen" have had any appreciable influence, "aided by considerable media attention." 6/

Such phenomena as the Charismatic Movement have crossed denominational and sectarian lines, flourishing even in mainline churches and involving about eight million people (in both "charismatic renewal" and glossolalia, speaking in tongues). Religious cults and new religions must be seen against this general climate of belief (in which, for example, one person in every five is said to be a believer in astrology) and practice, symbolized by the popularization and transformation of the term ~~charisma~~.

5/ "Religious Cults: Is the Wild Fling Over?", U.S. News and World Report, March 27, 1978, pp. 44-45.

6/ Briggs, New York Times, loc. cit. According to the Times of January 22, 1979 (Cults in America, II, p. A14), "cults may have anywhere from 300,000 to three million members".

In the New Testament (I Cor. 12: 8-11 and 28), it refers to those "gifts of grace" with which God the Holy Spirit endows and so empowers the faithful. Gradually it came to be used of strange phenomena manifest at worship, especially glossolalia (speaking in tongues), phenomena subordinate to the authority and good order of the church. Max Weber later distinguished three sources of authority in society: traditional, rational (bureaucratic), and charismatic. 7/ For him, charisma is that extraordinary power inherent in a person by virtue of natural endowments. In current popular use, it is virtually a synonym for a dominating or "magnetic" or "dynamic" personality, emphasizing self-autonomy as against the Weberian sense of speaking in the name of "the other." Hence, the judgment of Harriet Whitehead and others that "marginal religions" have benefitted from the "overflow of the charismatic" in recent decades and the attendant emphasis upon personal feeling and satisfaction in religion -- the same emphasis found in the highly popular "psychotherapeutic" groups (such as Erhard's est, Silva Mind Control, Arica, etc.), in popular astrology, and the like. 8/

7/ Weber's charismatic leadership concept is discussed by Robert Bierstedt, "The Problem of Authority" in Morroe Berger et al. (ed.), *Freedom and Control in Modern Society* (Octagon, N.Y. 1964; Library of Congress HM51.344).

8/ See Harriet Whitehead's "Reasonably Fantastic: Some Perspectives on Scientology, Science Fiction, and Occultism" in Irving Zaretsky and Mark Leone, *Religious Movements in Contemporary America* (Princeton, 1974, Library of Congress BR 516.5.237), pp. 547-587.

William J. Petersen has suggested nine factors at work in society and conducive to new religious movements and ideas, 9/ though not all are equally significant or valid: 1. a sense of disillusionment with American life and institutions, 2. a feeling of dehumanization wrought by scientific and technological advance, 3. the impact of the drug culture, especially the hallucinogens, 4. cultural "future fright", anxiety regarding the stabilities of life, 5. the breakdown of the family and its values, 6. the influence of popular culture (music, the media) on new forms of religious experience, 7. the appeal of psychology and the occult (cf., the mystico-sexual liberation celebrated in Norman Brown and others), 8. the weakening of traditional religion in the churches, and 9. ecology and the mystique of Nature. Taken together with ideas often removed from their historic cultural context (viz., reincarnation), these constitute the context in which the appeal of cultic movements is intensified.

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9/ cf., *Those Curious New Cults* (Keats, New Canaan, 1973, Library of Congress BF1411. p. 47), pp. 4-10



## II. Distinguishing Characteristics of Cult and Sect

The words cult and cultus, in origin, refer to any systematic corpus of rites or ceremonies proper to religious worship (as the cult of ancient Israel, the cult of Apollo, etc.). Emphasis is on the external aspect of religion rather than its inner significance or truth, provided that distinction is not overdrawn. Cultus is traditionally used of ceremonial veneration (as to a saint or image), though increasingly replaced today by cult. The usage of cult and cultus in English dates from the 17th century. In recent times it has been common journalistic practice to speak of almost all religious bodies as churches or sects, whereas cult has acquired a new and distinctly pejorative meaning -- viz., any religion regarded as unorthodox or even spurious. In this special use of cult, the word is intended to embrace all "fringe" or "marginal" religious movements outside a normative or mainstream tradition.

The problems of definition, classification, and terminology in religion are highly complicated. The German scholars Max Weber (d. 1920) and Ernst Troeltsch (d. 1923) elaborated a typology of religious organization, which later sociologists of religion have continued to refine. <sup>10/</sup> The older view recognized "established" churches and "dissenting" sects in the tradition of the European State Church. In Troeltsch, the ecclesia or "church type" refers to religious bodies

<sup>10/</sup> See Section II, "The Sociology of Religious Congregations" (on "the sect-church legacy and beyond") in J. Alan Winter's Continuities in the Sociology of Religion (Harper and Row, N.Y. 1977, Library of Congress BL60.W56), pp. 105-137.

into which one is born (inclusive in membership), which maintain a lively sense of tradition and continuity with the past, have an inherited or received confession of faith or liturgy, a polity (sacrament and creed), and have a positive view of nation and culture. In contrast, the "sect type" refers to religious bodies exclusive in membership (emphasizing "right" belief and behaviour), seeking to restore purity of "primitive" doctrine or practice, marked by strict discipline, nonconforming to the world, and reserved (if not negative) toward the State and cultural life. A third classification, mysticism, was intended to include those religious bodies which seek direct and unmediated access to the divine, the "shamanistic ground of cult movements." 11/

In America, with the disestablishment and democratization of the churches, a new phenomenon appeared, mediating between the traditional ecclesia of a whole nation or people and the sect, namely -- the denomination, a body with broader membership than the sect though less inclusive than the ecclesia and substituting religious for social status. Cult has come to be applied to groups whose origins lie in special revelation associated with a self-perpetuating leadership of seers or prophets, supplanting traditional authority (the Bible, etc.), and conveying a secret knowledge, usually in conflict with

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11/ The sect-cult distinction is so treated in Robert Ellwood's *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (Prentice-Hall, 1973, Library of Congress BP603.E55), pp. 19-27 et passim.

accepted belief. Cults are described as small in size (but not necessarily), lacking a highly organized structure (usually), emphasizing charismatic leadership and mystical experience, and deviating from those traditional rites and doctrines which sects often seek to restore in "purer" form. While sects are primarily concerned with the spiritual needs of individual believers (as against the church's concern with ecclesiastical and social order), the individual is absolutely crucial to the cult and its "purely personal ecstatic experience, salvation, comforts, and mental or physical healing" (as against churchly concern for the maintenance of religious structure in society). For Troeltsch, sects tended to become churches (or, in American use, denominations -- cf., the Methodists). So, too, one can discern a tendency in some cults to become sects (cf., Spiritualism, and the "Nation of Islam"). In fact, the sect-cult distinction is largely blurred today, and both terms have taken on a disparaging connotation: thus, speaking of the same group, the Los Angeles Times (not unrepresentative in this regard), of November 21, 1978, announces "Sect Plot to Kidnap U.S. Leaders Told" and "Probe of Cult Lacked Depth, Ryan Aide Says" (pp. 3 and 24 respectively).

Nevertheless, respect for language requires a clearer or at least less ambiguous distinction. Allen Eister has proposed a helpful paradigm in his theory of cults: the sect is essentially "schismatic", a protest against (and return to a "purer" form of) another religious

group and its tradition. <sup>12/</sup> In contrast, the cult draws its inspiration from other than the primary religion of the culture. It is usually world-denying and unique, and its rites may seem "bizarre". Cults may be classified as utopian, millenarian (the association of Christ's Second Coming with a thousand year reign on earth), messianic, and nativist (consciously cultural-nationalist or ethnic in character), all seeking "revitalization" through the visions of a charismatic leader. The sense of "relative deprivation" or loss, social strain or disappointment or frustration, engenders "crisis cults" in response to the traumas of society.

However, no theory does justice to the complex reality of cults, which are not monolithic in character. <sup>13/</sup> Emphasis on the occult, the esoteric, and the arcane does indeed make for "privatized" religion, but many cults defy simple analysis: cf., Baha'i, syncretic, innovative, and highly ethical-minded; New Thought, incorporating non-religious elements, optimistic, pragmatic, extrovertive; and contemporary "self" cults, which concentrate on ego-centering, non-social objectives.

In attempting to include all of the contemporary cultic manifestations, scholars have proposed larger categories. Bruce Campbell, defining cults as "non-traditional religious groups based on a belief in a divine element within the individual" (a definition applicable to most cults in the Western world regardless of whether their origins

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<sup>12/</sup> Allan Eister, "Culture Crisis and New Religious Movements: A Paradigmatic Statement of a Theory of Cults", in Zaretsky and Leone, op. cit., pp. 612-627.

<sup>13/</sup> cf., the Ahmadiyya Movement, often classified as a cult but, in fact, a new expression of the Islamic tradition, albeit heterodox and, in that sense, sectarian.

are in the West or in the East), suggests a three-fold ideal typology: 1. illumination or mystical cults (such as Theosophy), 2. instrumental or self-adjustment cults (such as New Thought, and Soka Gakkai), which often take on sect-like characteristics, 3. service-oriented cults, a tendency present to varying degrees in most cults (cf., the church-like aspects of such instrumentalist groups as Scientology, Transcendental Meditation, and the Unification Church). 14/

Jacob Needleman had divided cults into two broad categories: 1. evangelical or outward-reaching, and 2. psychological or centered in self-awareness. 15/ Three rather different categories are proposed by Frederick Bird: 1. congregational (associated with a transcendent being or prophet), 2. schools for learning (a special teaching), and 3. sacred power cults. These and other ventures in definition and categorization, 16/ while stimulating and often helpful, seem designed to simplify unduly the stubbornly recalcitrant diversity of cults.

Both the unities and the diversities of the cults are treated by Robert Ellwood, who prefers to speak of "new" or "emerging" religious and spiritual groups or movements. 17/ Broadly distinguishing traditional

14/ Bruce Campbell, "A Typology of Cults", *Sociological Analysis*, V. 39, No. 3, Fall, 1978, pp. 228-240.

15/ *The New Religions* (Doubleday, N.Y., 1970, Library of Congress BR516.5.N4)

16/ Quoted by Kenneth Briggs in "Fringe Religions", *New York Times*, loc. cit.

17/ Ellwood, op. cit. Section I, "In Quest of New Religions, pp. 1-41.

or "emissary" religion, associated with "conscientious man", from the ecstatic experience-oriented or "exemplary", associated with "expansive man", he defines cults as groups derived from the experience of one or a few individuals, whose superior, ecstatic insights into a non-historical, non-temporal reality can be communicated through intermediaries, human or supernatural or both. This definition is inclusive of almost every religious group in America outside the normative Judaeo-Christian tradition (except for those religious communities, usually largely ethnic-based, which represent normative expressions of other religious traditions -- Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and the like).

Probably the single most distinctive characteristic of the cults is their syncretism (the fusion or coalescence of different forms of belief and practices). Generally small, often ephemeral, and usually led by a charismatic personality, most cults, concentrating on the problems of the individual, are (to greater or lesser degree) at variance with the mainstream of both religion and society. However, cults are not always short-lived: some have survived (through what Weber called "the routinization of charisma") for long periods of time (notably the Spiritualist and Theosophical movements).

Ellwood describes fifteen "general characteristics" of cults, recognizing that not all will be evident in every cult:

1. The role of a Magus or charismatic personality as a kind of shaman, the center of ecstatic vision and power
2. Altered states of consciousness by way of possession or trance (and contact with deities or spirits) or marvelous travel (often induced today by psychedelic drugs)

3. Supernatural helpers
4. The desire to be "modern", and the use of languages derived from the sciences
5. A reaction against orthodoxy in religion and science
6. Eclecticism and syncretism
7. An ultimate monistic, impersonal ontology (except in those groups with strong theistic belief, such as the Hare Krishna, and apocalyptic-fundamentalist Christian groups of the cult-type)
8. An optimistic, success-oriented, evolutionary world-view (though cults, in time of crisis, tend to move toward an apocalyptic-sect direction)
9. Healing of body and mind
10. Magical techniques (often associated with altered consciousness)
11. An entry and initiation rite, requiring separation and commitment
12. A sacred center
13. Psychic power
14. Tendency to appeal to isolated individuals
15. Corporate participation in ecstatic experience

Here is a useful profile of characteristics by which cults may be identified, provided that they are applied with some flexibility. Probably no single cult will exhibit all of the criteria at any given time.

Some which are quasi-sects in their relation to a dominant, normative tradition may never incorporate certain of the characteristics, and thus may be thought of as combining cultic and sectarian elements (cf.,

the Children of God, and the Unification Church). 18/ Moreover, cultic movements are seldom static, and many groups which began as "cults" have become "sects", even as "sects" have become denominations or churches. One need only cite the history of many revivalist and "holiness" movements in America. 19/ (Characteristics of "cult" and "sect" are contrasted in the Addendum on p. 44.)

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18/ See, for example, the differing treatment of the Unification Church in John Lofland's *Doomsday Cult* (Prentice-Hall, 1966, Library of Congress BL53.L6) and Frederick Sontag's *Sun Myung Moon and The Unification Church* (Abingdon, 1977, Library of Congress BX9750.S4566), the latter reflecting the continuing development of the movement toward sect and church-like characteristics.

19/ The emergence of Pentecostalism from the Holiness Movement is examined by J. T. Nichol in *Pentecostalism* (Harper and Row, N.Y., 1966, Library of Congress BX8763.N5). A similar development can be seen in the history of Mormonism and Christian Science, "marginal" groups in origin and now increasingly church-like ("a cult organized as a church" is the description of Christian Science in Nelson Burr's *A Critical Bibliography of Religion in America*, Princeton, 1961, Library of Congress BR515.S6, Vol IV, p. 339). Barbara G. Harrison's *Visions of Glory* (Simon & Shuster, N.Y., 1978, Library of Congress BX8525.7H37) discloses the same pattern of change in the Jehovah's Witnesses.



### III. Religious Cults in History

Religious cults have flourished throughout history, particularly in times of disruptive social and cultural change when the authority of traditional institutions is weakened. Such "deviant" movements are sometimes both political and religious in character. (A partial listing of contemporary religious cults in the U.S. and abroad is given in the Addendum on p. 45.)

Perhaps the most famous example is the Hellenistic era (late Graeco-Roman society), marked by the decline of older religions associated with the Roman Imperial State, and the rise of mystery cults (Mithraism, Manichaeism, and early Christianity). This period -- characterized by Gilbert Murray as one of "failure of nerve" <sup>20/</sup> -- saw the emergence of innumerable "gods many and lords many" (I Cor. 8:5) offering to initiates cultic deliverance from the demonic powers of fate and death. The ideas and practices associated with Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, Theosophy Hermetic literature and Cabbalic lore (Kabbalah), including astrology, alchemy, ritual magic, and the occult arts (demonism and the like), may be thought of (in Robert Ellwood's terminology) as constituting an "alternative reality tradition" -- that is, other than and apart from the normative Judaeo-Christian tradition. <sup>21/</sup>

<sup>20/</sup> The famous phrase first appeared in Murray's Columbia Lectures, published as *Four Stages of Greek Religion* in 1912, revised in 1925 under the title of *Five Stages*, etc. (Doubleday, N.Y., 1955, Library of Congress BL781.M8) p. 119.

<sup>21/</sup> cf., Ellwood, op. cit., Section II, "The History of an Alternative Reality in the West", pp. 42-87.

In the Middle Ages, especially during the 12th to 14th centuries, cults of all kinds proliferated, embodying both religious dissent and social protest: the Spiritual Franciscans (including the Fraticelli and Michaelites); the Templars (accused by their enemies of cultic heresies); radical movements such as the Pastoureaux Crusade in 1251 (led by a strange "Master of Hungary"), the Amaurians, the Flagellants, the Dancers, the Picardians (Mediaeval advocates, like the 2nd century Adamites, of ritual nudism); and the dualist-gnostic Albigensians or Cathari. There was an endless "underground" of sects whose teachings and practices deviated from religious (and cultural) orthodoxy, often in ways regarded as immoral and bizarre. Many were millenarian, proclaiming the imminent end of the world (cf., Joachim of Fiore). 22/

Similar movements flourished at all levels of society during the Renaissance and Reformation eras when many, including some of the most famous figures in Europe, turned to the occult "sciences" (cf., Agrippa, Dee, Bruno, Pico della Mirandola, Ficino, Cardano, Reuchlin, and the ideal Magus or latter-day shaman of his age, Paracelsus); this was also the period of the great witchcraft persecutions in both Catholic and Protestant nations (particularly the latter). 23/ Germany was

22/ The clothing of social conflict and aspirations with transcendental eschatological significance is described in Norman R. Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (Oxford, 1970, Library of Congress BR270.C6), emphasizing the influence of Joachim's apocalyptic "Third Age" of the Spirit and of Love.

23/ See H. C. Erik Midelfort's *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany, 1562-1684*, on the social and intellectual foundation of the witchcraft trial. (Stanford, 1972, Library of Congress BF1583.M5).

the scene of revolutionary violence by the "left-wing" of the Anabaptist movement, who combined religious with socio-political dissent. Imbued with wild millenarian ideas, various groups sought to overthrow "the kingdoms of this world" (cf., the theocratic rule over Munster by the fanatic John of Leyden, marked by cruelty and sexual excess; the role of Thomas Munzer's radical sectarian teaching in the Peasants' Revolt; and the apocalyptic communism violently espoused by the Zwickau Prophets, eventually put down by Luther himself).

The 18th century (especially in France), the age of the Enlightenment, saw the appearance of movements related to the "alternative reality" tradition which are clearly continuous with cults in present-day America: Freemasonry (embodying earlier Rosicrucian influence) and the Illuminati; and the "enthusiasms" associated with such figures as Swedenborg (among the most influential thinkers and seers of the century), Mesmer, Cagliostro, and St. Germain. Swedenborg has been called "the major bridge" between the older occult tradition (thinly Christianized) and modern American Spiritualism and Theosophy. <sup>24/</sup> The mysterious Comte de St. Germain (who died around 1784) diplomat (and spy), adventurer and occult master, illustrates dramatically the historic continuity of cults. Deeply involved in mystical and Masonic rites in his own day, he encouraged belief in his own immor-

<sup>24/</sup> cf., Ellwood, op. cit., p. 64 (Ironically, the first Swedenborgian church in America was founded -- in 1784 at Philadelphia -- by a wealthy British planter from Guyana, James Glen).

tality, kingly origins, and numerous illustrious incarnations in the past. In 1930 he is said to have appeared in America to Guy Ballard, near Mt. Shasta, as the "Lord of the 7th Ray", one of the Ascended Masters of Modern Theosophy (Ballard's account was published in 1934 in Unveiled Mysteries). As the "Mighty 'I Am' Presence", St. Germain was, in effect, Americanized. 25/ The I Am movement, which waxed and then waned in the late 30's (after Ballard's death as well as costly and damaging litigation), has recently taken on new life under the leadership of the California "World Mother", Elizabeth Prophet, founder of the Church Universal and Triumphant, who claims to be in continuing contact with St. Germain and other Masters. 26/

The 19th and 20th centuries have been marked by an upsurge of "new religions" and religious cults throughout the world, many seemingly associated with social disruption, rapid change, and politico-religious alienation: in Latin America and the West Indies (the Rastafarians, who worship Haile Selassie as God and "spiritist" cults such as Santeria, Umbanda, Macumba, and the like), in Africa (the Zulu and Bantu "Zionist" groups and many others), in Asia (the new Shinto-inspired sects and cults proliferating in Japan; the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao in Vietnam; Subud and other cults in Indonesia; the Me-

25/ There is a full account in Charles Braden's These Also Believe (MacMillan, N.Y., 1949, Library of Congress BR516.B697), Chapter 7 ("The I Am Movement"), pp. 257-307.

26/ See Robert LaBrasca, "Preaching Violet Fire and Taxes", Madison Press Connection (Madison Wis.), November 3, 1978.

lanesian Cargo cults), and in North America (the "Ghost Dance" religion among American Indians, and numerous Black-oriented cults). 27/ Without exception, these movements tend to be highly syncretic, incorporating in eclectic fashion elements from many sources, traditional and modern. They are invariably characterized by an apocalyptic or eschatological emphasis (proclaiming a "hidden" teaching of the world's imminent end and of judgment), charismatic leadership, divination, faith healing, and spiritism, usually associated with social or humanitarian ideals, mutual helpfulness, and a sense of special virtue or righteousness. Many are seen as "religions of the oppressed", i.e., of groups or peoples who feel their traditions and folkways to be undermined or dislocated in some way. This nationalist or ethnic response to external stimulus is strikingly evident in the T'ai P'ing Rebellion in mid-19th century China, whose leader proclaimed himself Son of God (and brother to Jesus), fusing Christian and traditional Taoist beliefs in a radically egalitarian movement of religious and social protest. The "Boxers" toward the end of the century represented a similar traditionalist resurgence, combining religious and political sentiments in a fiercely "anti-foreign" ideology. 28/

The conviction of the "Boxers" that they would be invulnerable to European bullets is found in many religious cults, associated with

27/ Many of these and other groups are included in Vittorio Lanternari's *Religion of the Oppressed* (Knopf, N.Y., 1963. Library of Congress BL85.L363), a study of messianic cults.

28/ Both T'ai P'ing and Boxer Rebellions are dealt with in C.K. Young's *Religion in Chinese Society* (California, 1961, Library of Congress BL1802.Y3), Chapter 9, "Religion and Political Rebellion", pp. 218-243.

belief in supernatural or magical protection. Thus, the Mahdists, whose uprising in the Sudan during the latter part of the last century (also strongly political and social as well as religious in character) deeply influenced the surrounding areas in Africa, taught that the Dervishes, (and their tribal allies) could not be defeated in their holy warfare against their enemies. Only with great reluctance did the Mahdi arm his forces with modern weapons. 29/ Similarly, thousands of Muslim and native (pagan) tribesmen who revolted against German rule in East Africa (Tanganyika, now Tanzania) in 1891 and again in 1905 were slaughtered in suicidal attacks against gunfire, in the belief that enemy bullets would turn to water. 30/

Some have sought to trace patterns or cycles in the rise and fall of cults -- for example, it is argued that there have been cycles in the religious history of the United States, with an outbreak of cults every half-century or so (i.e., in the first and second "Great Awakenings", in the mid-19th century, in the aftermath of the First World War, and now today). Such theories seem to rest upon a selective approach to the diversity, plurality, and ambiguity of historical evidence.

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29/ The defeat of the Mahdi at El Obeid and the loss of 10,000 men (September, 1882), due almost entirely to Egyptian firearms, led the Mahdi to adopt guns and artillery, resulting in the fall of El Obeid in January of 1883 (See P. M. Holt's *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, Oxford, 1958, Library of Congress DT108.3.H6).

30/ Lance Morrow, "The Lure of Doomsday", *Time*, December 4, 1978, p. 30 (on the Maji-Maji movement).

In the words of an eminent historian, H. A. L. Fisher: 31/

One intellectual excitement has, however, been denied me. Men wiser and more learned than I have discovered in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following upon another as wave follows upon wave, only one great fact with respect to which, since it is unique, there can be no generalizations, only one safe rule for the historian; that he should recognize in the development of human destinies the play of the contingent and the unforeseen.

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31/ See his preface to A History of Europe (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1939, revised, Library of Congress D102.F56).

## IV. Religious Suicide

Religious suicide is found in various forms throughout the world in almost every tradition. <sup>32/</sup> However, it has been especially associated with religions that hold the doctrine of metempsychosis (the transmigration of souls) or reincarnation, particularly in India (Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism), but not in Orphism and other Greek or Hellenistic cults. The great monotheistic religious traditions in their normative teachings -- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam -- have been unanimous in their condemnation of suicide as a sin against God and the community and also in their rejection of metempsychosis (though the belief has flourished in all three traditions among heterodox sects). As concerns martyrdom, highly honored in all three faiths, a distinction has been made between direct and indirect taking of one's life. Whereas direct suicide is always prohibited by both natural and revealed law, a kind of indirect suicide has been recognized in martyrdom (as with the Jewish Zealots at Masada in 73 A.D. and the Jewish community at York in 1190). The example of Samson (Judges 16: 28-31) -- like Eleazar in I Mac. 6: 46, commended in Scripture -- was attributed by St. Augustine to a special divine ordinance (cf., The City of God I: 26). In Catholic thought, indirect suicide -- though in principle unlawful --

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<sup>32/</sup> There is an exhaustive treatment in Hastings, Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, vol. XII, "Suicide", pp. 21-40 (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1934, Library of Congress BL31.E44).



is sanctioned in those cases where it occurs as an undesired albeit foreseen consequence of an otherwise legitimate action and under conditions necessary for reasonable applications of the "double-effect" theory. Nevertheless, ritual suicide has been far from unknown in Christian history, usually associated with religious and social protest. Recent excavations in North Africa confirm its practice (asserted in Gibbon) among the Donatists, a 4th century separatist heretical movement with political-nationalist overtones, whose circumcelliones (marauding bands) terrorized the countryside under the cry "laudes Deo" (praise to God); they survived in the face of fierce persecution until the Muslim conquest in the 7th and 8th centuries. 33/

In mediaeval Europe the movement known as Albigensianism or Catharism, embodying gnostic and dualist beliefs, spread from East to West (under various names -- Paulicians, Bogomils, Patarenes), establishing itself in Germany, Southern France, and Italy from the 11th to the 14th centuries. Eventually exterminated by the Church through both Crusade and Inquisition, the Cathari taught a form of metempsychosis in which souls, ensnared in the fallen realm of matter, expiate their sin through suffering and find release in return to the realm of spirit. For the "Perfect", the elite initiated into their ~~mysteries, the rite of the Adura was commended~~ -- a suicidal fast to death. Its frequency has probably been exaggerated, but it appears

33/ See W. H. C. Frend's The Donatist Church (Oxford, 1971, Library of Congress BT1370.F7).

to have been far from unusual. Buddhist or other Eastern (Iranian\*) influence has been suggested, but whereas for the Buddhist (and, indeed, for the Indian tradition generally) the world of matter is essentially unreal, for the Christian dualist matter is both real and inherently evil. Part of the appeal of the Cathari involved an element of social and religious protest, and their rejection of procreative sexuality led to the sanctioning of unconventional and irregular sexual practices. 34/

Russia in the 17th century was swept by mass suicides (usually by burning) on the part of "Old Believers" opposed to the liturgical revisions ruthlessly imposed by the Patriarch of Moscow (Nikon, 1608-1681) with the coercive power of the State. The Raskolniki (schismatics or dissenters) included peasantry and devout priests (but no bishops), led by the saintly Archpriest Avvakum, excommunicated in 1667 and eventually burned at the stake. They later divided into two groups -- the "Priested" (Popopovtsy) and the "Priestless" (Bezpopovtsy); the latter lost touch with the dominant tradition, and numerous cults sprang up, associated with bizarre practices. A strong note of social protest characterized the Schism from the beginning. 35/

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34/ See Sir Steven Runciman's *The Medieval Manichee* (Cambridge, 1947, Library of Congress DR253.R8).

35/ See F. C. Conybeare's *Russian Dissenters* (Harvard Theological Studies X, published in 1962 by Russell and Russell, N.Y. Library of Congress BX599.C6).

\* cf., Manichaeism

In other religions and cultures, religious suicide has been regarded as meritorious. Mahavira Vardhamana, the reformer (and re-founder) of the Jain religion, a rigorously ascetic faith in which salvation is attainable only by monks, died c. 468 BC in the Sallakhana rite of self-starvation, setting an example emulated by others throughout Jainist history. His sometime companion, Gosala, founder of the Ajivaka sect (eventually absorbed into the Hindu tradition), likewise starved himself to death, having attained perfection in ascetic disciplines. For Jainism and the Hindu-Buddhist tradition in general, renunciation of all desire, including the desire for death, must precede religious suicide. The practice was not uncommon among Hindu Saivites and disciples of Durga (Kali) in mediaeval India, especially in the Deccan, associated with theistic mysticism rather than the a-theistic tradition of the Jains. The ancient Hindu practice of sati (suttee), the widow's suicide on her husband's funeral pyre, was highly honored, though condemned by the Sikhs and by modern Hindu reformers. It should be emphasized that religious suicide is wholly absent from the Vedas, the most ancient and sacred Hindu scripture. 36/

It is the Mahayana Buddhist tradition which especially exalted the ideal of self-immolation as an act of worshipful self-surrender, though Mahayana theologians generally deprecated the practice as imprudent, especially for novices in ascetic detachment. Suicide from

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36/ Hastings, op. cit., p. 33.

whatever motive would appear to be in violation of the Buddha's prohibition (in the Five Precepts) against any taking of life, a prohibition associated with the doctrine of loving kindness (metta) to all beings and, for that matter, shared with both Jainism and Hinduism in their doctrine of ahimsa or non-injury to any living thing. Nevertheless, the practice seems to have won approval both in India and, later, in China, partly because of traditions in which the Buddha is said to have sanctioned it (cf., the suicide of the Monk Godhika, who had attained release through meditation six times and chose to commit suicide the seventh time rather than fall away again: "thus act the strong ones; they desire not life, having removed thirst and the root of thirst\*----," according to the 4th century Hinayana text of Vasubandhu, the Abhidharma-Kosavyakhya). 37/

The influence of the Saddharma-Pundarika Sutra, the "Lotus of the True Law", one of the great Mahayana scriptures, was a highly significant element in fostering self-immolation as a meritorious act (after the image of a burning light before the Buddha). Written around the 1st century (in Sanskrit) it is cited by Nagarjuna, the great philosopher of the "Void or Emptiness" doctrine, a century later and was translated into Chinese c. 223 A.D. In China the cult of self-

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37/ Ibid., p. 25.

\* ignorance

immolation sought to emulate the Bodhisattva in the "Lotus Sutra" who after twelve years of preparation set himself afire as an offering of perfect surrender to the Buddha. 38/

In Japan the Mahayana faith encountered an indigenous Shinto tradition with its honorable practice of ritual suicide or Seppuku (harakiri) and junshi (the suicide of a feudal lord's ronin or retainers on his own death). The latter practice was revived in the Yedo Period (1615-1868), stimulated by the popularity of the cult of the 47 Ronin, deeply revered in Japan from 1703 to this day. In 1422 devotees of the theistic Sukhavati ("Happy Land") sect, venerating Buddha as Amida (Lord of Paradise), drowned themselves while chanting the Nembutsu (calling on Amida to deliver them to the "Pure Land"). However, while such acts were not unknown, they were never widespread or generally encouraged. 39/ The savage persecution of Buddhism in T'ang China (9th century), establishing Confucian hegemony in the State, vigorously discouraged ascetic mortification.

In modern times, suicide has often served as a form of religious and social protest by devout Buddhists (cf., Southeast Asia, especially Viet Nam).

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38/ See entry "Self-Immolation" in S.G.F. Brandon's A Dictionary of Comparative Religion (Scribner's N.Y., 1970, Library of Congress BL31.D54), p. 569.

39/ More commonly, suicide in Japan has been related to dishonor rather than heroic asceticism.

## V. The Jonestown - People's Temple Cult

The "People's Temple" cult was both like and unlike the generality of American cults whose characteristics have been noted. 40/ It appears to have functioned on at least two rather different levels, both centered in the personal leadership of James Jones. On the one hand, it was a religious cult, proclaiming Jones as God and as the reincarnation of Jesus Christ; here its strength lay mainly among its black followers, most of them older (or very young) members. On the other, it was a political cult, proclaiming Jones as a kind of Lenin or Marx reincarnate and incorporating various ideas associated with the "New Left" of the 1960's counter-culture; here its strength lay mainly among more recent (and predominantly white) followers and younger members, including an elite inner corps. The movement's success owed much to the support of political figures and of the media. 41/

Jones himself seems to have had no clearly defined religious or denominational identity beyond a vaguely fundamentalist Pentecostal background. At times he attended Nazarene and Methodist churches; in college he listed himself as a Unitarian, perhaps reflecting the "Jesus

40/ Three books have already appeared, providing a journalistic treatment of the People's Temple: The Suicide Cult by Marshall Kilcuff and Ron Javers (Bantam, N.Y., 1978) Guyana Massacre, by Charles Krause et al. (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1978); and Hold Hands and Die by John Maguire and Mary Lee Dunn (Dale, N.Y., 1978).

41/ See particularly Phil Tracy's "The Making of a Madman" and Jeanie Kasindorf's "The Seduction of San Francisco", New West, December 12, 1978, pp. 48-63. It was after his stay in Brazil that Jones "began telling friends that he himself was Jesus Christ" (Newsweek, December 4, 1978, p. 56). "He said he was the actual God who made the heavens and earth" (Time, December 4, 1978, p. 27).

Only" teaching of those Pentecostal Assemblies who hold that only the Son is truly part of the Godhead or perhaps indicating liberal religious views (characteristic of the Unitarian Universalist movement). Eventually he established his own heavily politicized church in the revivalist-holiness tradition, the Christian Assembly of God, in 1953 in Indianapolis. According to a "personal history" allegedly written by Jones in 1974, he had espoused "Communism" as early as 1950. <sup>42/</sup> During this period his charismatic personality was increasingly evident. In 1956, the name of his church was changed, significantly, to the People's Temple Full Gospel Church.

Sometime in the sixties he apparently visited -- and was profoundly influenced by -- the Philadelphia-based Holiness cult, the Father Divine Peace Mission Movement, founded in the early years of the Great Depression by "Major J. Divine" (George Baker). As "Father Divine", he declared himself to be God, organizing an "ascetic love communism" which emphasized racial equality and justice. Civil rights and social welfare were basic to the Mission, which fed, clothed, and housed its members, both black and white. A similar movement -- the United House of Prayer for All People, founded by Charles Emmanuel Grace, revered as God under the name of "Daddy Grace" -- flourished in the same era. ~~Its services were marked by ecstatic dancing and~~ what have been delicately called "allusions to sex motives." <sup>43/</sup>

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<sup>42/</sup> "Paper Calls Jones Communist in 1956", New York Times, December 20, 1978, p. A-19.

<sup>43/</sup> See E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Church in America* (Schocken, N.Y. 1969, Library of Congress BR563.N4.F7), pp. 57-62.

The People's Temple has been described as "an odd mixture of Malcolm X and Father Divine", adding the more militant rhetoric of the later civil rights movement to the exotic religious and humanitarian tenets of the Peace Mission. At any rate, it was in 1964 that Jones declared himself to be God before his people. 44/ (Divine died the following year.) It has been suggested that his religious activities were part of a conscious technique to advance Marxian causes; others claim that he was himself manipulated by a Marxist group around him.

Eventually the Temple was affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); Jones was recognized as ordained in that tradition in 1964. It should be noted that the Disciples are strongly committed to the sovereignty of the local congregation, with minimal denominational structure. Indeed, the churches are, in fact and by intent, independent, autonomous local congregations.

Around 1961, Jones had his vision of Indianapolis in racial warfare and holocaust; within ten years the People's Temple would be relocated in San Francisco. Before that move, Jones visited both Guyana and Brazil. It is at least probable that he came into contact in Brazil with the neopagan spiritist cults, many led by messianic beatos promising a "golden kingdom" on earth, and with such groups as the Kardecist Church (founded by Hippolyte Rivail in the last century)

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44/ Tracy, New West, loc. cit. (p. 45).



and their teaching of reincarnation. The receptivity of Guyana to religio-political cults such as the People's Temple was evident in its welcome in 1972 to the "House of Israel", a cult group led by "Rabbi" David Hill from the United States, combining Marxist and religious rhetoric. The Guianas, ironically enough, have been associated with Utopian traditions since More's Utopia: here was the fabled Eldorado of Voltaire's Candide and the legendary Demerara of Waugh's Handful of Dust.

The history of the People's Temple cult over the past decade, during which it took on its character as, according to the Los Angeles Times, "a bizarre blend of Marxism, Christianity, Democratic politics, and socialism," 45/ was one of steady movement away from traditional Christian belief and toward that secularization of Biblical eschatology associated with Marxist ideology. Jones' influence in San Francisco and beyond was recognized in 1975 when he was named among the hundred most outstanding clergymen in American life by Religion in Life, a national inter-faith body.

The media references to the Jones cult as "fundamentalist" would seem to be misleading since Jones himself, though often inconsistent and contradictory, appeared increasingly to have repudiated any authority beyond his own, even quoting Marx on religion as an "opiate"

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45/ See "Jones Reportedly Wooed GOP as Early as 1968", Washington Post, December 18, 1978, p. A 15. Regardless of his ideology, Jones gave support to both parties, "whoever could help."

and allegedly negotiating for sanctuary for both the commune and its funds in the Soviet Union. Much of his appeal in recent years was to people of upper middle-class background who, deeply concerned over social problems, responded to his radicalized version of the "social gospel." On the other hand, he continued to play upon the religious feelings of his followers in healings, in the "worship" services and in his constant and interminable homilies. At "Jonestown" to which the cult moved in 1977 (following hostile articles in New West), along with principles of racial and economic equality, human service and cooperative living there was manifest (in Jones) a charismatic, supernatural type of power which the community believed could transport them all to another plane of life, hence the mass suicide (allegedly encouraged by murders). 46/ "Martyrdom" for social ideals was compared with the spirit of the early Christian martyrs. An ever more paranoid atmosphere was generated by what the press reported as the deliberate manipulation of fear and guilt among the members through such techniques as ego-denial, confrontation-consciousness raising, communal living, and revolutionary discipline, with an ever-widening gulf between Leader and led. There is evidence for the extensive use of depressant and other drugs. 47/

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46/ See the account in Time, December 4, 1978, pp. 22-27 ("Messiah from the Midwest"), and Chicago Tribune, November 27, 1978, pp. 1, 7 ("Jones saw revolutionary death as road to life"). According to Nicholas Horrocks (N.Y. Times, December 11, 1978, pp. 1, D21), at least 70 unwilling members were given cyanide injections.

47/ See "Large Quantity of Drugs Found at Jonestown", Washington Post, December 29, 1978, p. A20.

Attempts to explain the appeal of cults in general and the Jones cult in particular usually advance psychological or sociological causes or both. The tendency to "blame" California seems least convincing. While California may be peculiarly hospitable to the search for "instant roots" and personal satisfaction, symbolized by the "counter-culture" image (Rock, drugs, sexual liberation, and the like), it would be difficult to prove that the State breeds more violence than many other areas of the world. 48/ Similar caution should be exerted when America as a whole is indicted. Neither bizarre cults nor mass violence are peculiar to the United States.

However, the "permissive society" may exact a price: both Richard Quebedeaux and Hardat Sukhdeo (of the Center for the Study of Coercive Persuasion) note a hunger for discipline and authority, which leads the individual to submerge himself in the group. Margaret Singer and others have commented on the search for structure and order, special truth, and a sense of belonging to a cause, which animates many young, intelligent, frustrated people. Lowell Streiker and Rosalie Dunbar have emphasized the role of the substitute "extended family" provided by cults in meeting that need to belong. Peter Berger has written on the "sense of homelessness" associated with modernity, the shattering

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48/ On California (and San Francisco) see "But Where Is What I Started For?", Time, December 11, 1978, p. 27.

of communal solidarity and moral consensus. Cults promise a foretaste now of a longed-for ideal community in the future. 49/

In his Sunday Morning: Aspects of Religious Ritual, Michael Ducey analyzes traditional religious worship, "mass ritual" associated with sacred symbols, objective revelation, and a stable cosmos, and "interaction ritual" centered in the "shared charisma of a we-group". For the latter, "the traditional sources of 'meaning giving and moral authority' have lost legitimacy." The result is a kind of "do-it-yourself" religion in which "an emerging subjective and 'private' religious sphere (may) lead to the death of the church as a source of moral 'maps'." 50/ This view accords with Kenneth Briggs' study of "fringe" religions as deriving some support from young people who are untaught in their own religious tradition (as well as confused by rapid social change and deprived of strong family ties).

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49/ Quebedeaux and Streiker are cited by Briggs in "Fringe Religions", New York Times, loc. cit. For Sukhdeo, see John Nordheimer's report from Guyana, "Jersey Psychiatrist, Studying the Guyana Survivors, Fears Implication for U.S. Society from Other Cults", New York Times, December 1, 1978, p. A16. Dr. Dunbar's essay, "The Family: Cure for Cults", appears in The Christian Science Monitor for December 5, 1978. Dr. Singer is quoted in Time, December 4, 1978 ("Why People Join", p. 27). Berger's views are given in his Facing Up To Modernity (Basic Books, N.Y. 1977, Library of Congress, HM22.U5B39), pp. 56-80.

50/ Ducey's book is reviewed by Esther Heffernan in Sociological Analysis, vol. 39, No. 3, Fall 1978, pp. 272-275.

The "high demand" made by cults (in terms of regimentation and commitment), noted by Ronald Enroth, may fill the vacuum left by churches unable or unwilling to assert moral and spiritual authority, an attitude which may also feed that "intolerance of ambiguity" which surrounds cult leadership. 51/ Thus, "they (Jones' followers) became as one with their leader, believing that he was, if not their God, at least their prophet ..."52/ In the People's Temple, the rhetoric of "Bible Belt" preaching and the rhetoric of revolutionary socialism were fused in the person of James Jones as unquestioned charismatic authority.

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51/ See Enroth's *Youth, Brainwashing, and the Extremist Cults*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Library of Congress BP603.E6) pp. 149-183.

52/ James S. Gordon, "Jim Jones and His People", *New York Times Book Review*, January 7, 1979.

## VI. Representative Cultic Groups

Of the many "cults" and new religions active in America, the following, among the more widely-known, are representative:

1. "I Am" movement, inspired by the Theosophical-Rosicrucian tradition and founded by Guy Ballard (1878-1939) in California in 1930; claims to speak for Ascended Masters and to communicate psychic powers through "decrees" of light from occult realm; goal is "ascension" into purified energy-state of joy and bliss.

2. Hindu-derived movements:

A. International Society for Krishna Consciousness, founded in India by Bhaktivedanta, Vishnaite swami and disciple of the Chaitanya Krishnaite sect; teaches salvation through devotion to Krishna as supreme and personal Lord and chanting of the Mantra "Hare Krishna" (bringing joyful consciousness of God's presence); strongly communal family-oriented; claims 250,000 members in U.S. 53/

B. Transcendental Meditation, founded in 1959 in India as Spiritual Regeneration, by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, to make traditional meditation techniques easier and more widely available; teaches universal access to "bliss-consciousness" through meditation. Claims approximately 1 million "students" in U.S.

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53/ U.S. News and World Report for March 27, 1978 (p. 44) gives a figure of about 35,000.

- C. Divine Light Mission, founded in India in 1960 by Shri Ji Maharaj and now headed by his youngest son, Guru Maharaj Ji, who came to the U.S. in 1971; teaches mystical transmission of liberating knowledge through devotion to the Guru (the Perfect Master), meditation, and discourses; claims 50,000 in U.S.
3. Nichiren Shoshu (Soka Gakkai), deriving from Japanese Buddhism and founded by Makiguchi and Toda in Japan in 1930; teaches that Buddha-nature may be invoked now for present blessings through chanting of the Daimoku; brought to America in 1960; claims 235,000 in U.S.
4. The Unified Family (Unification Church), founded by Korean prophet (and former Presbyterian) Sung Moon in 1945; strongly anti-Communist; teaches Divine Principle for life, revealed by Moon in coming New Age for world; heavily communal family-oriented; Judaeo-Christian messianism growing out of a Korean context; claims 37,000 in U.S. 54/
5. Scientology, founded by L. Ron Hubbard in 1952 (cf., Dianetics in 1950); teaches liberation of thetan (individual consciousness),

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54/ According to the New York Times of November 28, 1978 (p. A14), there are only 7,000 "hard-core" members.

the source of matter, energy, space, and time, into "clear" (self-determined) state through "auditing" and removal of "engrams" (stored memories); claims 3 million members; strong communal family orientation. 55/

6. "Christian Heritage" groups ("Jesus People")

A. The Way Biblical Research Center, founded in Ohio in 1950's by the Rev. Victor Paul Wierwille; teachings based on Wierwille's interpretation of Scripture (anti-Trinitarian, evangelical), emphasizing conversion, healing, and speaking in tongues; claims over 10,000 in U.S.

B. Children of God, founded by David Berg and Fred Jordan, evangelists, in Los Angeles in 1960's; emphasis on memorization of Scripture, apocalyptic premillennialism (imminent return of Christ), and Pentecostal baptism in Spirit (healing, tongues, etc.); tightly disciplined; claims 250,000 worldwide, under Prophet "Moses" (Berg).

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55/ The Washington Post for December 6, 1978 (p. A4) states that there are 600,000 active members in the U.S. According to the New York Times, January 21, 1979 (Cults in America, I), the movement claims a world membership of 5.4 million.



## VII. Conclusion: "Cults" and Religious Liberty

The issues raised by deviant or marginal religious groups -- the "cults" -- permit no easy resolution. They require a delicate balancing of rights which touch upon the fundamental concerns of a free society, including religious liberty and freedom of worship. "Freedom of religion," writes the Rev. Dean Kelley, "means freedom to make commitments which others may believe to be mistaken." 56/ In a notable statement, Justice Robert Jackson, speaking for the Supreme Court in United States vs. Ballard, 322 U.S. 78, wrote: "...the price of freedom of religion or of speech or of the press is that we must put up with, and even pay for, a good deal of rubbish." The precedents for Government surveillance of religious groups are far from reassuring. "It would be disastrous for the Government, in an attempt to prevent possible abuses, to set about judging the quality of the commitments men and women consider religious." 57/

At the same time, there is no legal sanction or protection for criminal acts such as fraud or violence. In the words of Professor George Williams of the Harvard Divinity School:

"Whenever a religious body indicates in its literature or conduct that physical coercion is being used or

56/ Dean M. Kelley, "Beware 'Open Season' on Cults", Christian Science Monitor, December 18, 1978, p. 22.

57/ "The Dark Nights of Jonestown," America, December 8, 1978, p. 420.

advocates religiously motivated armed rebellion against society, that organization cannot claim immunity on grounds of the free exercise of religion." 58/

The real problem arises in the vexing area of alleged coercion by psychological means -- "brain-washing", "love-bombing" and other techniques of manipulation and indoctrination. According to some, "the balance would then appear to tip toward intervention" -- i.e., by Government to protect members of religious cults from themselves. Others argue that such allegations of "mind-control" are "unsubstantiated" and that "whatever can be done in the way of persuasion (or dissuasion) without the use of force would seem to be permissible." 59/

It is the nature of religion -- certainly in nearly all of its historic expressions -- to assert a divinely sanctioned authority over believers, often in the most sweeping terms: "Do not think that I am come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household" (Matthew 10: 34-36), and "Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee?"

58/ Quoted in "Cult and State", Christian Science Monitor, December 8, 1978, p. 27.

59/ The views favoring intervention are stated by Prof. Richard Delgado (see his "Investigating Cults", New York Times, December 27, 1978, p. A23). Dean Kelley's skeptical view of "brain-washing" is shared by Dr. Stephen Hersch, who likens it to "high pressure salesmanship" (Newsweek, December 4, 1978, p. 77). A partial listing of organizations concerned with cults is given in the Addendum on p. 46.

...I hate them with perfect hatred" (Psalm 139: 21-22). Religious movements which have broken radically with cultural and societal norms have nevertheless so developed in history that they have made significant contributions to the life of the human community. The example of the Mormons in 19th century America is illustrative of this. Hence, any official effort to investigate or regulate new and emerging religions must be sensitive to the whole range of concerns which bear upon the "cultic phenomena."

The severe decline in traditional Judaeo-Christian institutions and "the extraordinary increase both in fundamentalist church membership and the exotic cults," cited by Richard Marsden (who claims that "about 2,000 cults have sprung up within the last 15 years") suggest together that there is a religious hunger which mainline religious institutions have not been able to satisfy. The result has been "a cacophony of religious voices" and a breakdown of "the universe of moral discourse provided by our traditional biblically based religious institutions." The weakening of doctrine and tradition leaves "raw emotional passion and moral zeal" undisciplined and unstructured. 60/

The question of whether the People's Temple was a religious or a political cult is misconceived, given the religious character of political ideology. ~~As Robert Nisbet has noted:~~

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60/ Richard Marsden, "When Religion Wrestles With the Devil, Sometimes He Wins", Washington Star, November 26, 1978.

"There is no mystery at all in the high correlation between the millennialist spirit in religion and that same spirit in politics, for there is close affinity psychologically between religion and politics and the millennialist spirit in the two is drawn from the same sources." 61/

What Nisbet calls "the secularization and individualization of religion in the West" provides the context for the Jonestown cult:

Extreme behavior has been accepted for what it is -- an opportunity to view society from an unexpected angle, to perceive insights that otherwise might be missed.

When the dust of all the interpretations, from the psychological to the economic, finally settles, these extraordinary moments become the landmarks of history because they offer us a chance to test comfortable assumptions. However much the normal, the prosaic, and the recurrent may tell us, the unique, the bizarre, and the disturbing remain the best proving grounds for our conclusions about human nature, society, and the temper of a particular time or place. 62/

According to the Gallup Polls, the mass suicides and murders in Guyana, the "most widely followed event" in 1978, 63/ are attributed by the public to "need for leadership, a father figure" (15 percent), "unhappy lives, a feeling of hopelessness" (13 percent), and "gullibility" (13 percent), reasons not dissimilar to many advanced by sociologists and theologians. However, in the end, it is imaginative

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61/ The Twilight of Authority (Oxford, N.Y. 1977, Library of Congress J6571.N53), p. 88.

62/ Theodore Rabb, "The New Jerusalem", New York Times, December 20, 1978, p. A27). See also Melvin J. Lasky's Utopia and Revolution (Chicago, 1976, Library of Congress HX806.L37), pp. 58-67.

63/ Gallup Poll report, Washington Post, December 29, 1978, p. A20.

literature rather than academic speculation which may indicate the nature and significance of the Jonestown cult -- Thomas Mann's Mario and the Magician and Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, both portraying men of great gifts corrupted by self-indulgence and lust for power. Conrad's Mister Kurtz is caught by "the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness -- that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions .... this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations." Mann's Cipolla imposes his will upon others: "the capacity for self-surrender, he said ...for the most unconditional and utter self abnegation, was but the reverse side of the other power to will and to command."

Perhaps the meaning to be found in the Jonestown tragedy is best expressed in words written eighty years ago by Winston Churchill after the overthrow of the Sudanese Mahdi:

All great movements, every vigorous impulse that a community may feel, become perverted and distorted as time passes, and the atmosphere of the earth seems fatal to the noble aspirations of its peoples. A wide humanitarian sympathy in a nation easily degenerates into hysteria. A military spirit tends towards brutality. Liberty leads to licence, restraint to tyranny. The pride of race is distended to blustering arrogance. The fear of God produces bigotry and superstition. There appears no exception to the mournful rule, and the best efforts of men, however glorious their early results, have dismal endings, like plants which shoot and bud and put forth beautiful flowers, and then grow rank and coarse and are withered by the winter. It is only when we reflect that the decay gives birth to fresh life, and that new enthusiasms spring up to

take the places of those that die, as the acorn is nourished by the dead leaves of the oak, the hope strengthens that the rise and fall of men and their movements are only the changing foliage of the ever-growing tree of life, while underneath a greater evolution goes on continually. 64/

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64/ From *The River War* (Longmans, London, 1902. Library of Congress DT108.5.C563), p. 35.

CHW/cjs

Addendum I: Cult-Sect Characteristics

While ideal types are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, given the infinite diversity of religion, the following characteristics are often present:

<u>Cult</u>	<u>Sect</u>
1. Largely divorced from normative religious tradition in belief and practice and at variance with larger religious community	1. Intimately related to normative religious traditions in belief and practice, but in "separatist" (purified) form (re larger religious community)
2. highly syncretic, mixture of beliefs and practices	2. central beliefs derive from normative religious tradition
3. individual experience and satisfaction is basis for membership and for unity	3. selective membership based on commitment to "revitalization" of religious tradition
4. relatively small and short-lived	4. durability, deriving from withdrawal yet continuity with normative tradition
5. charismatic leadership centered in exemplary figure to be emulated in "parallel spontaneities"	5. charismatic leadership subordinated to ethical and doctrinal teaching

Addendum II: Religious Cults in U.S. and Abroad

The following list is necessarily incomplete:

U.S. (Mainly)U.S. and Abroad

Living Waters	Children of God
Process Church	Rosicrucianism
Foundation Church of the Millenium	Spiritualist churches
Church of Bible Understanding	Nichiren Shoshu
The Way, The Truth, and The Life	Subud
Alamo Christian Foundation	Scientology
Love Family	Divine Light Mission
Kingdom Voice, Inc.	Prosperos
American Native Church	Gurdjieff Foundation
Abilitism	Hare Krishna
Building the Adytum	Unification Church
Holy Order of Mans	Satya Sai Baba
Church of the Light	Meher Baba
Feraferia	Sivananda Yoga
Church of All Worlds	Harihananda Yoga
Satanist cults (Church of Satan, etc.)	Transcendental Meditation
I Am Movement	Theosophical Societies
Church of the Divine Man	Old Roman Catholic Church
Healing Light Center	(not to be confused with
Full Moon Meditation	Old Catholic Church)
UFO cults (Flying Saucer cult)	Liberal Catholic, and Pre-
Aetherius Society	Nicene Catholic Churches
Psychiana	Gnostic Societies
Universal Life Church	Order of the Pleroma
American Council of Witches	Anthroposophy
Hanafi Muslims	Ananda Marga
World Community of Islam in the West	House of Israel
Self-Realization Fellowship	



Addendum III: Organizations Concerned with the Cults

There is a sympathetic account of organizations engaged in "de-programming" activities across the country: see Ronald Enroth's Youth, Brainwashing, and the Extremist Cults, pp. 188-199. He lists the following:

Citizens Engaged in Reuniting Families  
Return to Personal Choice  
Individual Freedom Foundation  
Free Minds

Many such groups appear from time to time under these and similar titles. Opposing viewpoints may be examined in "Deprogramming": A Book of Documents, published by the American Civil Liberties Union, 22 East 40th Street, N.Y.C., 10016, and in Let Our Children Go, by Ted Patrick (with Tom Dulack), E.P. Dutton, N.J., 1976, L of C BP 603.P37). An unofficial but carefully documented listing of current "information-retrieval" and other organizations concerned with cults, compiled by Prof. Richard Delgado of the University of Washington, presently visiting lecturer at UCLA Law School, will be available from Charles H. Whittier, Government Division, CRS, on request.

CHW/cjs

