

The Creation of Cults: An Alternative View

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ABSTRACT Cults are based on the identification and labeling by key decision makers and mainstream society of groups of people who engage in weird behavior. The creation of cults may have less to do with cult leaders and the particular weird behavior involved than with the need for the mainstream society and political leaders and elites to focus attention on what they regard as "contrary" behavior. As a result, the behavior engaged in by people in the mainstream of society is reinforced.

Cults have proved fascinating for lay people as well as theologians, anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists, historians, and psychologists for many decades. The abilities of cult leaders to exert leadership, the often bizarre beliefs and behavior of adherents, the rapid spread of the beliefs, the unusual rites and means of conversion, and the continued persistence of cults even in the face of strong opposition have all proved endlessly intriguing topics. The seemingly strange origin of cults cannot be easily explained, no matter the disciplinary frameworks, no matter the imaginative theories used as explanatory devices. Why cults come into being then, is an on-going question. This paper offers an explanation substantively different from those typically available in the literature. The ideas began with experiences of the author in North Carolina with so-called drug cults in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Subsequent reviews of the literature were drawn from numerous disciplines and led to 15 months in the field as a participant-observer and anthropologist with the John Frum Cargo Cult on Tanna, Vanuatu. Most of all, however, reflections over the past twenty years about the nature and causation of cults have served to increase personal and professional interest.

WEIRD BELIEFS AND BEHAVIOR

Wherever you go in the world, whatever

you do, you will find people who hold dearly to strange beliefs, and who in addition, practice strange behaviors. These beliefs and behaviors are significantly different from: 1) the mainstream beliefs and behaviors in each and every society, 2) scientifically demonstrable effective and efficient beliefs and behaviors, and 3) reality based beliefs and behaviors, if indeed there is any such common sense reality. These beliefs and behaviors are sometimes at variance with the larger world to such an extent that they can be said to be "weird." That is, much of the belief and behavior of many human beings is simply and truly, strange, unscientific, or subjectively pleasing but even objectively "weird."

Several specific situations may serve to illustrate this argument. The following experiences or situations drawn from the literature are cases or examples:

1) "Take this sugar cube, and you will trip," the long-haired hippie claimed to a small group of teenagers on the streets of a North Carolina city in 1970. "Try it, just once, and you will see things differently ever after."

The small circle of young people sat on the sidewalk, on a warm summer evening, linked arms and then each took a tab of acid, swallowed and waited. In ten or fifteen minutes, each began hallucinating - the major feature of psychedelic drugs such as LSD. They did see things differently, but also, they were soon arrested, thrown into jail, and their families had to pay attorneys more than \$1,000 each for their release and return to free society. Many did not succeed in returning to society or their families, at least for several years, and they became hippies, seeking to convert still others with LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs.

Not only the young people in such a scenario appeared to act weird. From their point of

view, so too did their parents, the police, the lawyers, and much of the larger society.

2) "Perform this dance, and you will be safe," the medicine man proclaimed. The young Native American braves, ready for battle, began to dance, following the intricate footwork and patterns of movement of their leader. "The white man has guns and bullets, but we will be safe, and the bullets will not kill us, no matter how many are fired," the medicine man continued. The young men danced, until it was time to ride forward on their horses to battle.

Afterward, the white men spoke to each other, "strange, they just kept coming at us, as if they were intent on committing suicide. We wiped out the entire tribe and they didn't seem to care," he remarked. The strange "Ghost Dance" of the Lakota did not, and could not, prepare young braves to be bulletproof, no matter how strong their beliefs (LaBarre, 1938).

The young braves acted in a weird way. Then again so too did the soldiers, who killed their fellow human beings with their guns.

3) "God is everywhere, my people, only you cannot see him, you cannot hear him, and you cannot know him except through my words," the priest proclaimed to the people. The young child asked his mother, "Mommy, what is God?" The mother hushed him up, saying that when he was older, he would understand.

When the child grew to be a young man, he asked a priest, "What exactly is God?" The priest said that "God is everywhere, only you cannot see him, you cannot hear him and you cannot know of him except through my words." The young man asked again, and the priest said that "you just have to believe, you just have to have faith." He continued, "Read and study your Bible."

The same thing happened when the young man became older, and finally again when the now old man arrived near death's door. "Believe, have faith, and you will understand." The old man did not understand, but by then, it was too late.

Religions have proclaimed strange and weird beliefs, and their adherents have acted in strange and weird ways, for centuries and around the world.

4) "We believe in Jesus first, they do not," said the minister to his congregation. Disparag-

ing another group of people was part of his effort to keep his flock together - for an out-group was an incentive for people to "stick to their own." That the others believed in the Bible, in God, and in Christianity mattered not, for they did not put Jesus first and therefore they were to be shunned. In fact, they were disparaged, and regarded as less than human, for adherence to false Gods was sufficient to brand them as pagans. And of course, pagans were by definitions not regarded as human anyway.

Organized religious groups have quarreled over minute points to the extent of killing, carrying out Crusades, and destroying others, while losing sight of the evidence that there is really no proof that stands up to scientific or logical or rational scrutiny for their weird beliefs.

5) "Do you put the interests of other people ahead of your own?" the young man asked another. When the reply was affirmative, he looked shocked, and announced, "then you must be a communist." He walked away, eager to tell others that he had identified a communist, and that the evil person must be shunned, investigated, perhaps jailed. It was 1955 or thereabouts, during the height of the McCarthy era in the United States.

Labeling and persecuting others comes easily to those who adopt weird beliefs. Others, gullible in the face of such strong opposition, lose their own rational, scientific or objective bases, and go along with crowd behavior.

6) "My block of wood, and my bamboo pole, look exactly like the radio of the American soldiers. Now if I can just remember the words they said into their radio, say the words in the same order, then I will be able to bring in an airplane filled with cargo. If not an airplane, perhaps a boat filled with Western goods will arrive, just like the boats came with American soldiers," the cargo cult leader said. He really believed that the magic would work, for how else could planes and ships land and discharge jeeps, trucks, troops, and equipment of all sorts? (Gregory and Gregory, 1984).

Even though the planes and ships did not land, he thought, as did his convinced followers, "if only we can get the words right, the cargo will roll in, or perhaps the bamboo pole has to be longer, or maybe the pole should be aimed in a different direction . . ."

7) "Vote for me and the future will be yours," the political leader proclaimed. The people looked forward to the election with excitement, thinking that their lot in life would improve.

Politicians play to and manipulate the beliefs and lives of their constituents, so much so that they are even strange to themselves. People do try their best to believe in political promises, knowing full well that politicians rarely tell the truth.

Strange indeed are the beliefs and behaviors of people around the world, for much of daily life and behavior has little or no sound basis in reality, nor in any scientific findings. Yet people operate daily with weird beliefs, strange behaviors, and suffer the consequences.

THE POWERS THAT BE

Every individual has some power to make decisions for themselves, but some have much more power, and their decisions can and do affect others. Each and every human group has leaders, people of power who make decisions that affect all members of the group. This hierarchy of power may be broadly based, as in democratic groups, or autocratically based, as with dictators, or even temporarily laissez faire, less organized, until more formal or informal organization sets in to create a decision-making hierarchy. The broad mass of people may participate in some of the decisions, but are not typically key decision-makers. Then there are almost always, the others, the outsiders, those who are less able to participate, and those who do not quite fit, who may be labeled deviant or different. Quite often, when a careful count is made, this latter group is actually the largest in number, but certainly is the least powerful.

The leadership may be secure or insecure in their hold on power, and newcomers may challenge them, oppose them, or go along with them in the hopes that in the future, they will gain rewards. Societies and human groups work in this way, around the world. The size and scope of the groups may vary greatly, but in larger groupings, inherent smaller groupings are enfolded within.

Gaining and holding onto the key decision

making positions in a group is difficult and takes special skills. Politicians and elites master this game and perform extremely well. One of the optional methods of holding onto power, in times of decline, challenge, or threat, is to evoke nationalistic, chauvinistic, in-group, unifying activities. To do this, leaders have a large bag of tricks. One method of the many is of interest in this paper, that is, the leaders can identify some small group or a few individuals who have been proclaiming strange beliefs, or acting in ways that could be said to be contrary to the benefit of the majority. By calling attention to these fortunate or unfortunate few, control over the rest of the masses strengthens. If and when this small group tries to continue, either with their beliefs, or by their actions, then they can be branded and called or labeled a cult. The larger society or group or majority can then be mobilized against them, defining their behavior as weird, placing them in jail, shunning them, even exterminating them, or otherwise carrying out such actions that strengthen the ties, the values, the beliefs and behaviors of this majority. They justify their behavior, they believe in the rightness of their behavior, and they discount normal rules in the ways they confront or even eradicate the "evil ones."

In this way, cults are born. Once created, cults can be maintained and even institutionalized. Such institutionalization can be manipulated for the advantage of the leadership of the majority, a clear case of setting up a "contrary" to use to point out the wrong values, the wrong beliefs, and the wrong behaviors.

It is the mainstream which defines a way to live, builds a society, and continues which should be suspected for their intolerance, their search to solve their own internal problems by making minorities a scapegoat. Sometimes a cult of rationality, of reason, of a better way of life for all people, becomes suppressed. In such a situation the existing society itself is literally weird. Any and all challenges to such a society are repelled, and those who are challengers are crushed. Vested interests have and use power to destroy any threats to their continuation. Such a nation may well be branded an international outlaw by the "global community."

One can, if one looks carefully, see many cults. By using the criteria of mainstream, scientific

evidence, or objectivity, much of human behavior, and human belief, is certainly suspect.

CONCLUSION

For far too long, cults have been examined with little reference to the context in which they are found. The larger society, not the members of a cult, define what is a cult, then use the cult to bolster their own hold on society. Those who study cults have too frequently concentrated on the cult, as defined by the larger society, and not on the manipulation or creation of the cult by this majority. Even those who have more recently "deconstructed" cults and cult like behavior (Lindstrom, 1993) have made the point that cults are created by societies, particularly

societies in decline or with insecurities. Future research could focus on a wider context with profit. Future research could also focus on a scientifically based, aware and intelligent, and wise society and attempt to deal rationally with the weird behavior and belief so omnipresent these days.

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