

SPECIAL SECTION ON CULTS

CULTS!

Cynthia Kisser's essay provides an excellent introduction to this special section since, like "genius" in the last issue of Skeptic, a "cult" is so difficult to define, even though we all think we know one when we see one. As an active observer through the Cult Awareness Network, Kisser is well suited to provide objective criteria by which we can distinguish a cult from related organizations.

—Editor

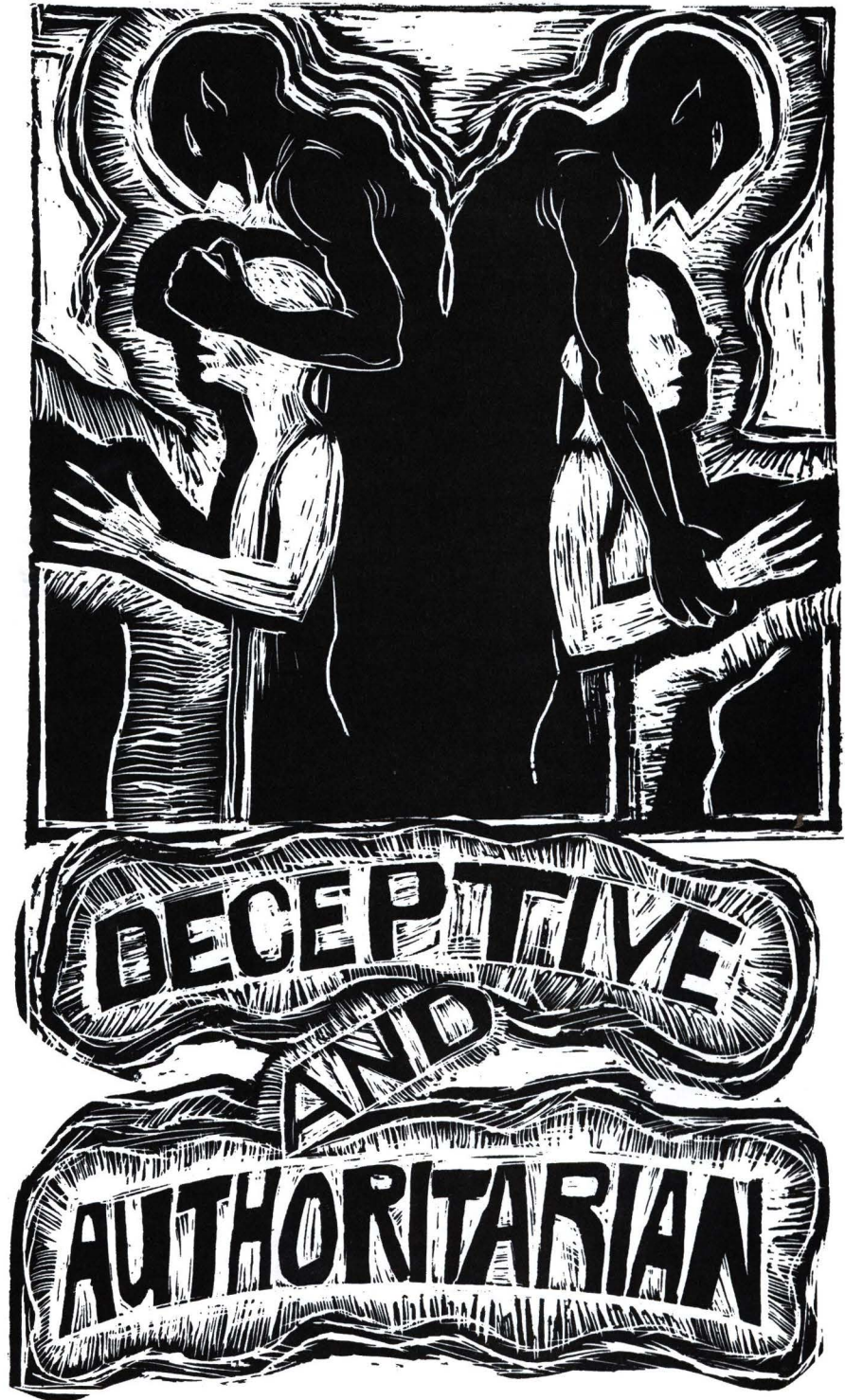


Illustration By Pat Linse

Waco, Jonestown and All That Madness

An Analysis of Cults From the Director of the Cult Awareness Network

By Cynthia S. Kisser

Ask most people about cults in America, and they think immediately (if they are old enough) of Jonestown, in Guyana, where over 900 people died on orders of leader Jim Jones. Of course, if they own a television, read the newspaper, or listen to radio, then they will also mention David Koresh and Waco, Texas, where the tragic and spectacular end for Koresh and approximately 80 followers was witnessed live by satellite around the world as the compound burned to the ground.

What kind of a problem exists in regard to cults, and what, if anything, should be done to contain the problem, or to try and avert tragedies such as Waco and Jonestown? Or are they an inevitable result of exercising freedom of religion in this country?

An essential step in understanding this problem is defining what exactly these groups are—the Jonestowns, the Mt. Carmels in Waco, and the other groups which seem capable of leading followers to fanatical actions which rob them, or the innocent children whose destinies they control, of any sense of self-preservation.

These groups are destructive cults. They have two important hallmarks in common.

First, destructive cults are unethical (by outside standards) and deceptive in how they recruit and indoctrinate their members. They have a hidden agenda in store for recruits. They withhold or lie about facts, actions, and conduct concerning the group to which the recruit has not yet been exposed, and which might deter the recruit from further involvement at the early stage of contact with the

group. They do not tell the recruit all that will be demanded of that individual once the decision is made to embrace the organization as a true member.

Second, destructive cults use powerful techniques of influence and persuasion in a concerted manner, without the consent or knowledge of the recruit, during the recruitment and indoctrination process to influence the way the recruit's value system and the way he or she thinks. Often these techniques are disguised as exercises meant to be beneficial to the recruit, and, in fact, if used ethically and with disclosure, could actually be beneficial.

Lots of groups in society show one of these two hallmarks of a destructive cult. For example, some marketing operations promise recruits big money or exciting premium gifts without explaining all the work that the recruit must really perform to make that money or gain those awards. However, in these scenarios, the recruit initially holds up his or her end of the bargain, i.e. attending a high-pressure weekend seminar to get a fabulous free gift, or investing money for the sampler kit and the hours to sell the revolutionary new product not available in stores. At a certain point, sooner or later, the individual, sometimes with pressure from friends or family to re-evaluate the commitment, realizes the deception involved in the initial recruiting pitch, and breaks off involvement with the organization, a wiser, if poorer individual.

My first experience in such a scenario was at the age of six when, without my mother's permission, I

sent off for "quality greeting cards" to sell to friends and neighbors as a way to make easy money. No one would buy the ugly, overpriced cards; my mother got quite angry with me for falling for the scam and mailed the cards back, and I, while embarrassed and chagrined by the experience, survived it with my original personality and values intact.

On the other side of the coin, some organizations, with no deception, make it clear they are offering their customer the opportunity to reshape aspects of their value system by being subjected to influence techniques. Those, for example, who sign up at a clinic to quit smoking know, and expect, that their value system in terms of their attitude toward their self-image and toward tobacco itself will, hopefully, be altered. The ethical clinic, however, makes no attempt to alter views on religion, politics or sexuality while using influence techniques to curb the smoking habit.

Clearly, religious beliefs are not the issue when it comes to defining a destructive cult. A group can be solely religious, political, or commercial, or a combination of the three, and function as a destructive cult. Even a therapy group can be a destructive cult if it is deceptive to recruits and uses persuasive techniques systematically and without disclosure.

Conversely, two groups can embrace the same doctrine or belief system, but if one is not using this deception and lack of disclosure concerning influence techniques, then, though the groups are similar in other ways, only one is truly a

destructive cult.

Enough is now known about Jonestown and Waco to determine that there were both deception perpetrated by the leaders on recruits, and, especially after the members had moved to isolated communal environments, and a constant barrage of influence techniques used regularly. Harsh physical conditions, lack of, or irregular sleep, criticism of individuals in group settings, control of diet, and the use of language in a redefined manner, were typical in both groups.

Not all groups are as extreme as Jonestown and Waco. And, as with everything in life, one cannot neatly label some groups as "safe" and others as "dangerous." Groups evolve over time, change as leadership changes, may inconsistently and irregularly apply influence techniques, or may reform with enough pressure. But this imprecision in identifying groups should not prevent us from finding a way to educate the public on how to recognize such groups. Indeed, as the Skeptics Society endorses, the ideal avenue is to promote critical thinking and awareness in general, and leave to the individual a determination of what groups, once an awareness is cultivated, are indeed destructive cults to him or her.

There are certain problems that destructive cults have in common, and which separate them, when viewed in toto, from open, ethically motivated groups, no matter how controversial the causes or doctrines those other groups embrace. Certainly some groups may display a few of these problems, and they are not true destructive cults. However, a cumulative picture does emerge with destructive cults, where all these problems are apparent when the true facts about how the group functions can be determined.

Destructive cults eventually cause a disruption of family and social ties. Followers are expected, in the end, to replace their matrix of social, economic, religious and political ties, to the degree the group can provide such a substitute, with a matrix dominated by group members. The group, for example, may run a home school and expect the recruit to send

his or her children to that school. Or, the group may not offer a home school, so the recruit's children go to public school, but may pressure the recruit to work for a company run by the group or loyal group members. Friends and family that oppose this shift from one matrix to another are generally shut out of the recruit's life; those that do not oppose it are allowed token relationships as long as they do not hinder the recruit's responsibilities to the group as defined by the group.

Destructive cults lack any true accountability for resolving complaints or abuses within the group. Checks and balances do not exist for resolving conflict, and the leadership resolves a situation of abuse in favor of the abused only when it is in the leadership's advantage to do so as well. If fact, the abused may risk more abuse for complaining. The consequences for James Thimm, relayed below, are a tragic consequence of such a risk.

Destructive cults demand conformity to the values of the group, with no responsiveness to individual members' needs or interests, or any true toleration for diversity. Such a conformity to values may include dress, lifestyle, career choices, or even personal relationships. There is a key point to consider with this conformity to values. Bizarre, distinct, or markedly separatist groups that are not actually destructive cults are quite open about their values, and their members embrace these values with their own free will. The values destructive cults demand conformity to often are, at least in part, inculcated to begin with in the recruit through the deceptive use of the techniques of persuasion. Journalist Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, writing in the August, 1993, issue of *Mirabella* magazine, notes:

Mainstream religions quarrel over whether women should be ordained priests or rabbis, and offer conflicting views about everything from homosexuality to the death penalty, abortion rights, pacifism, and "just" wars. As a result they frequently (if inadvertently) leave the burden of choice and discrimination to the individual believer. But the fanatic, the

fundamentalist, and the cultist are able to say, "This is how it is; it can be no other way; I am certain."

The primary focus of destructive cults is on its own expansion or activities, even at the price of breaking the law, exploiting followers, and violating their basic human rights. In conjunction with this they are illogical or inappropriate in their use of funds, allocate the funds without any true type of group consensus or concern for the welfare of the membership, and may be secretive with members about the use of such funds.

In the Koresh commune there were roughly three guns to a person according to Tim Madigan, author of "See No Evil," one of the many books now coming out about Waco. Ammunition boxes were stacked too deep in one room, reaching to the ceiling of a ten-foot wall. At least \$199,715 was spent on weapons and related equipment in one 17-month period. Yet, children released from Waco were unaccustomed to hot meals, seldom received baths, lived in buildings without adequate heat and sanitation, and were home schooled with little in the way of school supplies.

While some destructive cults engage in token programs, such as donating food to a local charity, or contributing time to community clean-up projects, their programs certainly consume little of the actual resources the group has at its disposal, and are done strategically to recruit new members, gain political support, and good public relations in their community, or to attract mainstream ministers, academicians and community leaders who, helped in some way by the group, are expected to publicly criticize the groups' critics in return.

Destructive cults have a complete disregard for authority. The more extreme they become, the more reckless this disregard grows. Eleven Scientologists, for example, were convicted in 1979 for their part in a break-in of government offices and wire-tapping, clearly outlined in documents of theirs seized by the FBI as part of a criminal plan with a code-name "Operation Snowwhite."

Destructive cults that engage in

commercial enterprises, and many do, compete unfairly with legitimate businesses by drawing on cheap or free labor from followers. Koresh, for example, ran a bakery in California, according to Madigan, which operated without a license, issued no W-4 forms to workers, and registered no profits with government agencies. The Alamo Christian Foundation was assessed \$7.9 million in taxes for operating businesses as religious enterprises, with followers working in sweatshop conditions for as little as \$20.00 a week.

Ultimately it is, over and above all else, victimization of the most innocent on a systematic and methodical basis that characterizes destructive cults. Bruce Perry, chief of psychiatry at Texas Children's Hospital, headed the team that interviewed the children of Koresh's followers who were released from the Waco compound in the early days of the siege. The children, he told press, were disciplined regularly with a paddle called "the helper," or by being denied food. According to Perry they were "living in an environment which had an unhealthy, malignant, and predatory quality of sexuality." Most of them, he said, felt "a great deal of fear of David Koresh."

Sadly, the life for children in Koresh's group was no worse than in many of the smaller, isolationist destructive cults.

In March of 1985, Michael Ryan, leader of a Christian Identity survivalist group, ordained that five-year-old Luke Stice was the seed of Satan. He tortured the small child for weeks, and ultimately dangled him from a dog leash until he died. When follower James Thimm questioned Ryan's actions, the 27-year-old man was tied to an overhead pipe in a barn where he was sodomized repeatedly with shovel handles and beaten for four days. Then Ryan ordered Thimm's fingers shot, and using a razor and pliers, stripped skin from the victim. Ryan completed the torture by breaking Thimm's arms and legs and jumping on him repeatedly. Ryan was eventually sentenced to death for this crime.

The victimization of children is ongoing in cults and one of the most heinous things they do. Recently,

Mike and Kelli Huth left a small communal group still functioning in rural Georgia and headed for the last six years by Lawrence Clark. The Huths report that Clark believes "you need to spank a child into submission, even for minor infractions, using wooden rods, rubber hoses, and other items." Mr. Huth has admitted to authorities that he beat his oldest daughter, 4, on the buttocks until she bled, administering the beating with a wooden rod inscribed with a Bible verse, "He that spareth the rod, hateth his son, but he that loveth him chasteneth sometimes."

Arguments against doing anything to combat the problems posed by destructive cults ring hollow in the face of the facts about how these groups exploit and victimize so many. Society as a whole is diminished when it does nothing to face the cult problem.

The larger cults engage in political and economic activities that influence the way organizations and individuals who influence our own lives think and act. This influence extends to politics, education, the media, and even the economic sector. These groups cost Americans millions of dollars in hidden costs. The state of Oregon, for example, spent over half-a-million dollars caring for 51 children seized by the law from a rural commune in 1988. The raid occurred after one little girl was savagely beaten for hours for stealing food from another child's plate. Philadelphia taxpayers spent millions replacing homes for over 200 people when local police, attempting to dislodge members of a radical political cult called MOVE, accidentally set the surrounding neighborhood on fire, burning to death 11 MOVE members, including children, and destroying approximately 60 homes.

The most telling example of this is offered by the case of Jim Jones. Jones ran charity programs for minorities and senior citizens and got the endorsement of California politicians, and even Rosalyn Carter. What was discovered, however, was that the seniors on social security were turning their checks over to the People's Temple in return for a meager existence. Worse still, some of

the children that died in Jonestown were wards of the state of California that had been placed in foster homes with People's Temple families. The children had been allowed to be taken out of the country to Guyana, the checks continued to be paid on the children's behalf while they were abused and ultimately killed on Jones' orders. The ultimate irony is that it is possible that some of California taxpayers' money intended for the care of the children was used to buy the cyanide with which they were injected. Likewise, costs to American taxpayers for the Waco situation have already reached the millions.

If these and so many other cult-related incidents were totalled up in terms of the money taxpayers have had to spend on this issue, the cost would surprise most, and make a good argument, economically, for a pro-active response to this problem.

There is no such thing as a "risk-free" society, writes William Ecnabarger an article, "The Home of the Not So Brave," (*Chicago Tribune Magazine*, July 26, 1992). Yet increasingly we avoid risking the debate over religious, Constitutional and human rights issues which a full examination of the cult problem in this country would engender. Instead, we need to come to grips with how our democratic system makes us vulnerable to exploitation by destructive cults. We need to face what our obligations as defenders of Constitutional rights really means. We need to confront what we have already permitted to happen in the name of religious and political freedom.

The one thing more dangerous, says Ecnabarger, than taking a risk is not taking it. The longer we delay examining the cult issue, stripped bare of the propaganda with which destructive cults and their apologists try to surround it, the longer the danger continues for the cults' most innocent victims. The message we send worldwide, each time a cult-related incident makes the news in this country, is that we are allowing children to be abused, lives to be wasted, sometimes even murder to occur, rather than risk coming to terms with what religious liberty and human rights really stand for if they are to mean anything at all. ■