

Millennium Watch

"It's Not the End of the World."

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Cults, Brainwashing, and Society

Now it can be told: years ago I spent some time as a member of a cult. My comrades and I were carefully indoctrinated in a set of beliefs for which we were expected, and trained, to kill and die. Some of us did die. I was moved around the country at the whim of my superiors. I was cut off from contact with my family, and my relationships with women were stringently curtailed. I was not permitted to marry without the permission of my "betters." I was told what to wear, what time I was to go to bed and rise each day, and what kind of work I was to do, and when I was to do it. We were all in the service of a charismatic and widely adored leader, whose commands were absolute. They had to be instantly obeyed without question. If I had tried to leave this group without permission, I would have been hunted down and confined.

The name of the cult was the United States Army and its leader was John F. Kennedy. I was too early for Vietnam, so I spent two grueling years in Brooklyn. War is hell.

Obviously no one is going to agree

that the Army is actually a cult; for one thing, it is too big, and for another it is scarcely religious. My point is that cults are not uniquely powerful agents of influence, but share most of their persuasive techniques with many other institutions that seldom receive such vile press. I make the comparison not to belittle either institution, or to offend those whose kin may be caught up in destructively manipulative religious groups. They do exist, though the extent of their power is often wildly exaggerated, the point I want to make in this essay.

Cults are a peculiar and difficult subject. In sociology there is little agreement as to the word's meaning. The "cult" is at least a generally recognized type of religious grouping, and there is some agreement that these groups are small, relatively exclusive, and fervent in their beliefs. In popular usage the word "cult" means "any belief I don't like." This is not a bad definition, if it is clearly stated. Opponents of cults have all the say about them, for "everybody knows" that cultists lie; no defense

they offer is acceptable. Besides, few groups I am aware of are willing to accept the term as applied to themselves. It is one of those words from which people go to great lengths to distance themselves. It always applies to those we wish to define as The Other. Thus, another usage of the word could be "that other group that believes differently from me to such a degree that I cannot identify with them."

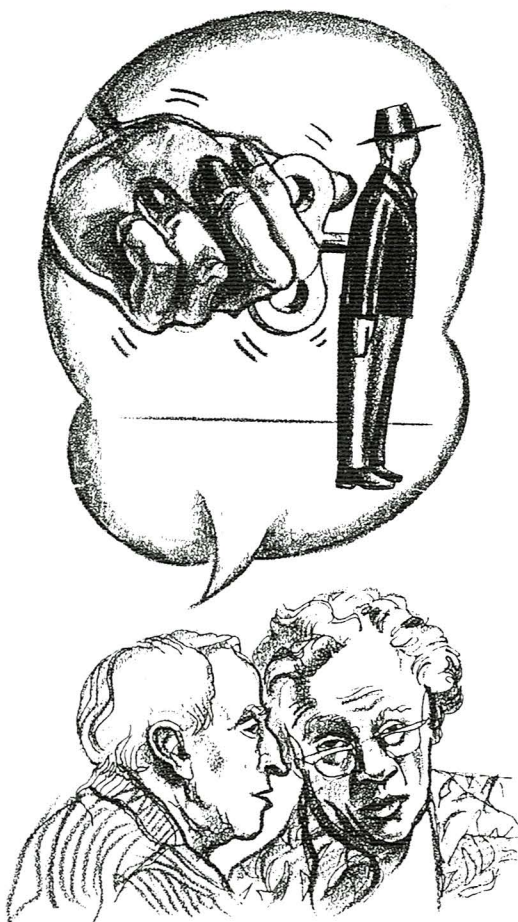
"Cult" also suggests totalitarianism: it is said that members of such groups are completely subordinate to the will of their superior(s) in virtually every aspect of their lives. Further, such groups are often violent and indulge in bizarre and unsavory sexual practices. (The Manson Family and the Jonestown group, for example, apparently filled the bill completely.) The easiest way to account for this is by means of brainwashing, which amounts to no more than a technologically updated version of the ancient "evil eye" superstition. The prophet has a magical power to rob people of their will. Cults indoctrinate their followers in slavish

devotion to the person and ideas of the leader—this is known as the "cult of personality" and is nicely illustrated in Manson, Jones, Koresh, not to mention such dictators as Hitler and Mussolini. Further, they remove followers from contact with their families and friends and dictate every detail of their lives.

If the people in cults are not actually insane, they have an uncanny ability to drive everybody else crazy, as Waco showed. As a result, there are few disinterested accounts of them. Concerned outsiders, as perceived by the members, are nearly always opponents—if they were not, they would join. Insiders must defend their choice, and apostates have a special interest in exaggerating the extent to which they were under the baleful influence of a sinister power. You *can* persuade people to do things that later they find unbelievably inappropriate, or even stupid. This is the core of "brainwashing" stories. Converts always have to justify making their radical changes, no matter which direction the conversion is taking them. Whenever they testify, and they are generally only too happy to do so, they will tell you how ignorant and blind they were before they saw the light and found the True Way. They will usually take some blame for their prior "mistakes" (or "sins") but some of it (to save face and serve the new dogma) has to belong to the old system—that members of the cult were really tools of Satan working sinister wiles on the member. This has the added benefit of feeding the apostate's ego: it makes him or her so important that ultimate supernatural forces do battle for the soul.

The modern notion of brainwashing had its origin in propaganda during the Korean War, when some Pentagon flack decided the Chinese were using sinister means to get our brave boys to defect. The Chinese had, it was believed, magic unknown

to the west that could cloud the minds of POWs and rob them of their will. These alleged techniques were later picked up by American religious groups who attempted to work their ideologies into our innocent young. Someone later examined the original claims and made a comparison of the percentages of POWs who defected during the Korean War and with those who defected in the



American Civil War. Amazingly, no difference was found. There is a serious question as to exactly what techniques were actually used, and a dose of skepticism is called for regarding their effectiveness.

Yet the misunderstanding (and sometimes slander) about cults and their "mystical" power over individuals persists. There are reasons for this that are more than superstitious. Certain groups, religious and other

kinds, do not permit much information about themselves to permeate to the outside world. Such information as does get out is carefully controlled to give the impression that the groups contain sources of cosmic power. Members of groups like these do what they can to support that impression, like other converts who justify their own decisions in such ways. Meanwhile their outsider friends observe sudden and unsettling changes in their behavior, for which they must account. The group's dogmas frequently contradict ordinary common sense. The outsiders have a choice: accept the new creed, which implies making drastic changes in their own presumably comfortable lives, or find a reason for the change. Challenges to common sense reality are always difficult to accept, and the notion that something is "wrong" with one's own kin is sometimes even harder to accept. So the blame must be placed on the group that affronts the quotidian, and especially its leader. In these terms it is only "logical" that there is an evil magic at work.

Skeptics would be wise to consider these alleged brainwashing powers of cults and cult leaders over individuals as a type of paranormal claim. Some religious groups do have effective techniques of persuasion, while others subject potential recruits to hours of terminal ennui and boredom. Of course, so do schools, TV networks, newspapers, families, ad agencies, and many other institutions, including mainline churches. But there is nothing mystical about what they do. You can coerce, convert, educate, seduce, threaten, wheedle, and indoctrinate people. You can cajole, flatter, hypnotize, drug, intimidate, and find a thesaurus full of words meaning "influence," but you cannot remove or destroy individual will. Brainwashing is only and always legend. ■