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THE NEW CULTS: A THREAT TO UNITY AND AUTHENTIC HUMANITY

A decision was made in the Vatican in 1984 to survey the bishops of the world to discover how serious is the problem of "cults," or if, indeed, there is a problem. This investigation brought into collaboration four of the Vatican offices: the Pontifical Council for Culture, and three secretariats, the one for Promoting Christian Unity, the one for Non-Christians and the one for Non-Believers. By October of 1985 there were about seventy-five replies received from episcopal conferences around the world. The results of the survey were published May 3, 1986 in what was described as a "progress report." It appeared in *Origins* for May 22, 1986.¹

A body of literature has been building up around the world relevant to the problems presented by the cults and by manipulation in general. Some of it has come from the victims themselves,² some psychologists, counsellors and clergy who wrestle with the problem of coping with cults,³ and there

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1. *Origins*, Documentary Service published weekly by the National Catholic News Service, Washington; D.C., 20005. Vol. 16, No. 1, May 22, 1986.
 2. Robert Boettcher, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, *Gifts of Deceit*, (New York, 1980).
Barbara and Betty Underwood, Clarkson N. Potter, *Hostage to Heaven*, (Publ., New York, N.Y., 1979).
Christopher Edwards, *Crazy for God*, (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1979).
Allen Tate Wood, *Moonstruck*, William Morrow & Co., New York, 1979.
Josh Freed, Virgo Paperback, *Moonwebs, Ticket to Heaven*, (Montreal, 1981).
 3. Flo Conway & Jim Siegelman, J. B. Lippincott, *Snapping*, (Philadelphia 1978).
Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, (W. W. Norton Co., New York, 1963).
Irving Louis Horowitz, Ed., *Science, Sin and Scholarship*, (MIT Press, Cambridge, 1978).
Ronald Enroth, Zondervan, *Youth, Brainwashing and the Extremist Cults*, (Grand Rapids, 1977).
Ronald Enroth et. al., *A Guide to Cults & New Religions*, (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill., 1983).
A. James Rudin and Marcia R. Rudin, *Prison or Paradise? The New Religious Cults*, (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1980).

has been some writing which philosophizes about the phenomenon.⁴ The same issue of *Origins* which carries the progress report also cites a speech by Cardinal Franz Konig of Vienna in which he warns of the strong challenge posed by these sects.⁵

The Situation

The Vatican survey found, especially in the responses from Africa, a need for inculturation on the part of the Church and its evangelization because so many Africans feel estranged from Western forms of worship and ministry.⁶ All of the local churches reported a "proliferation of all kinds of 'new' religions or pseudoreligious movements, groups and practices."⁷ The report deduced that these phenomena seem to be symptomatic of the depersonalizing structures of contemporary society, largely produced in the West and widely exported to the rest of the world, which create multiple crisis situations on the individual as well as on the social level."⁸

A great many people in the United States at least, seem to feel that the "cults" are disappearing and that the cult problem is dying out. This is not the case and wishing will not make it so.

An office of the Cult Awareness Network in New York had, in one recent month, forty-two telephone inquiries from people concerned about a son or daughter or some relative apparently caught up in a manipulative

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4. *Investigation of Korean-American Relations*, Report of the Sub-Committee on International Organizations, U.S. House of Representatives, Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C. 1978.
Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind*, (Vintage Books, New York, 1981).
Bernard Haring, *The Ethics of Manipulation*, (Seabury Press, New York, 1975).
Denise Winn, *The Manipulated Mind*, (Octagon Press, London 1983).
Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda, The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, (Vintage Books, New York, 1983).
Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, (William B. Eerdmans, Publ., Grand Rapids, 1985).
Joost Meerloo, *The Rape of the Mind*, (World Publ., New York, N. Y. 1956).
Margaret Singer, "Coming out of the Cults" in *Psychology Today*, January, 1975.
 5. *Origins*, Vol. 16, No. 1, May 22, 1986, p. 5.
 6. *Ibid.*, para. 3.3
 7. *Ibid.*, 1.2
 8. *Ibid.*, 1.5

organization. As it turned out there were thirty-eight different groups involved, some of which had never been heard of before. Among them were not only pseudoreligious groups but also the mind-empowerment, economic and political types. These are the principle varieties in the United States where there are, according to conservative estimates, more than three thousand different cults.

A rabbi recently spoke to a college audience in St. Louis and found that one-third of the students had a recent overture from some one of the manipulative groups.

The number of cult-related court cases is also very large as the American Bar Association can testify. In the past year a number of the cults have suffered legal reversals as a result of lawsuits brought by victims. The charge most often is of fraud and deception. Scientology, Synanon, Hare Krishna and Transcendental Meditation have all lost decisions and Reverend Moon has served a jail sentence as a result of an income-tax case pressed by Internal Revenue Service. This, however, has not completely disheartened his followers who are making even greater efforts to win friends and influence people. The Bhagwan Rajneesh also lost at court and, as a result, was deported. This enabled the Internal Revenue Service to sell off all of his many Rolls Royce limousines at the commune in Antelope, Oregon. It was the government that got the money while most of his disciples were left without carfare home.

As many as four hundred people gather each weekend in midtown Manhattan to spend the time chanting with the Nichirin or Sokkagakkai cult which came from Japan. Those who have come out of this group contend that the chanting has a hypnotic effect leaving one susceptible to manipulation. Lifespring attracts another four hundred or so who are eager to spend over three hundred dollars for a weekend promising mind expansion. Werner Erhard's "est", under whatever name, Forum, Mastery, The Hunger Project, is still profiting from its promise of mental enhancement. Mastery is that segment which is actually presided over by a Trappist monk; it has drawn many priests and nuns as a clientele. At Barrytown, New York, there is, at least one priest on the faculty of the Moonies "seminary", once a novitiate for the Christian Brothers. A Catholic high school in New Jersey rented its real estate for a weekend study session to the notorious Church of Bible Understanding and, similarly, an order of Catholic nuns turned over their retreat house on the grounds of a prestigious college to a group recruited under the banner of Mastery.

In January a Catholic priest from California testified in a Washington court-room in favour of Transcendental Meditation. He acknowledged that even before ordination he was an adept of TM and that he still teaches it. The litigation ended, however, with the jury convicting TM of fraud and deception. That outcome ought to cause the priest some misgivings. However, those who have had some experience with the victims of thought-control are not very optimistic that it will embarrass the priest or result in his conversion.

There is a long list of Catholic periodicals which, strangely, have published material sympathetic to the cults. What is particularly mystifying is that there are many people who deny the dangers of totalitarian thought control even after being presented with the most convincing evidence. In spite of the hazard of contamination of the human mind and the threat to genuine religion there is only a small counter-cult effort on the part of Catholics and Jews and almost none at all on the part of the Protestant churches.

The Vatican Document

The study emanating from Rome undertakes, first of all, the responsibility of defining terminology. A vocabulary developed by the average man to deal with an ongoing problem in daily existence cannot be expected to have the precision and scientific accuracy which specialists would wish for. Therefore, even the words, "sect" and "cult" offer challenges when the theoreticians begin to cope with the problem the organizing and systematizing the available evidence. For practical purposes the Vatican document accepts the view that a "sect" is "any religious group with a distinctive world-view of its own derived from but not identical with the teachings of a major religion."⁹ The document admits to a concern about groups which pose a threat to the freedom of individuals or to society in general. "Cults" are described as "authoritarian in structure, exercising forms of brainwashing or mind-control, cultivating group pressure and instilling feelings of guilt and fear."¹⁰

The controversial term, "brainwashing" was first used, according to Robert Jay Lifton, by an American journalist, Edward Hunter, who was

9. *Ibid.*, 1.1

10. *Ibid.*, 2.2

trying to describe the methods of indoctrination employed by the Chinese Communists in their takeover under Mao tse-tung. The word was used a good deal, again, in the anguished effort to understand the conversion of captured American soldiers to Hanoi's propaganda during the war in Vietnam. In the early part of this decade the London Daily Mail used the term to describe the methods of the Unification Church (the Moonies) in England. That "church" brought the issue to court charging libel. One of the witnesses in the trial was the wellknown California psychologist, Margaret Singer. She testified, when asked about the validity of the word, that it is legitimately used to describe what happens to a cult victim.

"There is no doubt in my mind, that of the many cults practising forms of brainwashing, the Moonies to a probably greater degree than any other cult rely upon all the essential features found in the indoctrination techniques that constitute brainwashing."¹¹

Since there are an increasing number of individuals subjected to an Orwellian manipulation or thought-control one can easily agree with Margaret Singer that the word, "brainwashing" serves the purpose for ordinary discourse.

The Vatican document admits that for the recovery of a victim from such mental enslavement, a genuine psychological skill and expertise are required.¹²

Those who study the cult problem invariably try to design a profile which will indicate the psychological types which would be most vulnerable to this deception. It would seem that young people are most susceptible but this is not universally so. There is one family in which a grandmother, her daughter and grand-daughter were all involved in a human potential cult in Connecticut. They were not looking for a cult but, as it happened, there was a cult looking for them. The cults capture good, idealistic, highly-motivated people and all the better if they happen to have some money to contribute to the cause of the *guru*. At Jonestown many of the victims were senior citizens who generously turned over their social security cheques to Rev. Jim Jones.

11. Margaret Singer, Quoted in *The Manipulated Mind*, Denise Winn, (Octagon Press, London; 1983), p. 160.

12. *Origins*, 1.3

In a society where manipulation is so much a fact of life, where advertisers pride themselves on "hidden persuasion", everyone is vulnerable. The followers of the "Bayside apparitions" in Brooklyn are, for the most part, ordinary, devout, middleaged Catholics. It may be that there is an emphasis upon conformity in a world where education gives priority to the profitable and where techniques of management - of things and people - are presented as keys to success. A few years ago the New York public school system discovered what had long been overlooked, that they were teaching everything but "how to think". Perhaps our society should be working to defend the critical faculties which the cults try to destroy.

Human Longings and the Cults' Exploitation

The Vatican document grasped the fact that the cults do respond to many human longings: in answer to the "quest for belonging" the cult offers human warmth.¹³ The individual is given "ready-made answers" to his questions and a gratifying religious experience, a "conversion", to accommodate the human search for wholeness.¹⁴ The cults appear to offer a style of prayer and preaching closer to the culture and the aspirations of the people.¹⁵ They offer a concern for the individual and opportunities for ministry when, humanly, a person needs to be recognized.¹⁶ The document perceives that they offer Bible, a sense of salvation, meditation and a spiritual achievement satisfying the human search for transcendence.¹⁷ The cults provide guidance, orientation and strong, charismatic leadership. They offer a "new vision" of self, humanity and the cosmos.¹⁸

The document manifests a familiarity with the recruitment techniques and the methods of indoctrination in these groups: it recognizes the subtlety of the process, the flattery, the "love-bombing", the "ready-made answers" for every question. It recognizes that the neophyte is isolated, programmed to disdain his past and his parents, his education, his former loyalties and loves. He is kept busy to the point of exhaustion, deprived of confidence

13. *Ibid.*, 2.1.1

14. *Ibid.*, 2.1.2

15. *Ibid.*, 2.1.4

16. *Ibid.*, 2.1.5

17. *Ibid.*, 2.1.6

18. *Ibid.*, 2.1.8

in his own critical faculties.¹⁹ He is afraid to think for himself as he is brought to a complete dependence upon the *guru* of the group who ultimately becomes, in Lifton's words, "the dispenser of existence."²⁰

The compilers of the report note that almost all responses to the survey appeal for a re-thinking of the parish-community system, suggesting that something is needed which is more fraternal, more adapted to peoples' life situations.²¹ Not surprisingly there is a call for evangelization to fortify the faith of Catholics. However, it is specifically suggested that in religious education there must be greater attention paid to the experiential dimension, to formation as well as information.²²

Our pastoral concern should not be one-dimensional; it should extend not only to the spiritual, but also to the physical, social, cultural psychological economic and political dimensions.²³

The question of inculturation is regarded as a "fundamental one" by the compilers of the report.²⁴ The survey revealed a wide variety of problems and needs around the world. The challenges are not the same in Africa and the Caribbean, in Western Europe and in North America.

There is a caution in the document against being naively ironical in confronting the attitudes which "can be destructive of personalities, disruptive of families and society."²⁵ It even warns that "we may know from experience that there is little or no possibility of dialogue with the sects."²⁶ In conclusion, the report calls for further study not only theological and psychological but interdisciplinary, and it suggests that, where possible, the research ought to be undertaken in ecumenical co-operation.²⁷ This is already the case in the Archdiocese of New York where a front page story in the New York Times of August 1, 1982 reported that the major faiths in the city have undertaken the first unified effort against cults. This

19. *Ibid.*, 2.2

20. *Lifton, op. cit.*, p. 433.

21. *Origins*, 3.1

22. *Ibid.*, 3.2

23. *Ibid.*, 3.3

24. *Ibid.*, 3.5

25. *Ibid.*, 4.

26. *Ibid.*, 4.

27. *Ibid.*, 4.

Interfaith Coalition against Cults is actually only one of many ecumenical collaborations in the country.

It was from another Vatican office and in another context that Cardinal Ratzinger once insisted: "The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of freedom and a force for liberation" . . . "The desire for liberation finds a strong and fraternal echo in the heart and spirit of Christians . . . freedom is a new life in love."²⁸ What is at stake in the cult problem might be seen as an appropriate interest for all the devotees of liberation theology. In fact, it was Father Leonardo Boff who once wrote: "If there is repression by one individual over another through the exercise of power, then a "human" spirit is at work instead of the Spirit of Christ. The freedom to which Christ called us is stifled."²⁹

There is a warning about the threat to the human mind and the freedom of man in the writings of Jacques Ellul on the subject of propaganda :

The only truly serious attitude – serious because the danger of man's destruction by propaganda is serious, serious because no other attitude is truly responsible and serious – is to show people the extreme effectiveness of the weapon used against them, to rouse them to defend themselves by making them aware of their frailty and their vulnerability, instead of soothing them with the worst illusion, that of a security that neither man's nature nor the techniques of propaganda permit him to possess. It is merely convenient to realize that the side of freedom and truth for man has not yet lost, but that it well may lose – and that in this game, propaganda is undoubtedly the most formidable power, acting in only one direction (toward the destruction of truth and freedom), no matter what the good intentions or the goodwill may be of those who manipulate it.³⁰

28. Cardinal Ratzinger, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation" in Theology and the Church*, Juan Luis Segundo, (Winston Press, Minneapolis, 1985), p. 169.

29. Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism and Power*, (Crossroad Publ., New York, 1985) p. 160.

30. Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda, The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, (Vintage Books, New York, N.Y. 1975), p. 257.