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# Cults Update

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## *Eryl Davies*

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On 18 November 1978 in the forests of Guyana, 913 members of the **People's Temple** cult committed suicide on the instructions of their leader, the Rev Jim Jones. Brought up by God-fearing parents in Indiana, Jim Jones seemed a likeable person. By 1965 Jones and his church were accused of fraud and promiscuity so they later moved to California and eventually to Guyana with the intention of setting up a Utopian socialist commune. It was in 1970 that he announced to people that he was the successor divinely chosen to lead people to God. Using sex, blackmail and violence he finally coerced his followers to commit suicide; men, women and children lined up to drink orange squash mixed with cyanide. News of the Jonestown massacre shocked the world but since then the growth in the number of cults has continued at an astonishing rate. The tragedy of Jonestown 1978 is by no means an isolated event.

Early in 1990, for example, a cult leader in the United States was arrested near the Mexican border for the ritual killing of an Ohio family of five. The cult leader, Jeffrey Lundgren was a former Sunday School teacher and guide in the Reorganised Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Ohio, a breakaway from the Mormon Church. Or do you remember the Waco disaster? On 28 February 1993, four United States FBI agents were killed as authorities raided the **Branch Davidian** cult headquarters in Waco in Texas. It all ended in even greater tragedy on 19 April when the compound burned to the ground after US agents launched an assault using tanks and tear-gas. At least eighty five cultists died, including the founder David Koresh, a self-styled 'Messiah'. Koresh, his real name was Vernon Howell, gained the leadership position quite deceitfully in 1986. In 1979 he had been expelled by the Seventh Day Adventists; some months after visiting Jerusalem in 1985, Koresh announced that he was the Messiah. His background was extremely unhappy; the illegitimate son of a fifteen-year-old girl, he was later abused by his stepfather.

During 1993 the **Family of Love** or **Children of God** were investigated in countries like Argentina, France and England. In France, for example, twenty one cult members were charged with inciting children to perform sexual acts. The English headquarters and country house are located in Dunton Bassett in Leicestershire where 'free-love' is allowed between consenting adults and children over the age of sixteen.

On 5 October 1994 forty eight cult members of the Canadian based **Order of the Solar Temple** were found dead in Switzerland in two separate locations. The cult leader was Luc Jovret, a forty six year old homeopathic doctor who had recruited his members from among civil servants in Quebec. Jovret thought the world would end by 2000 AD and that, prior to this, there would be wars and plagues. Jovret spoke continually about the magic of fire, of catastrophe and ruin.

The cult problem, however, is not confined to the West. Eastern Europe is now overrun by a multitude of cults from the West but some are also indigenous. For example, in the Ukraine, **Maria Devi Khristos** claimed to be the reincarnation of Christ and to have a mission to save mankind; she also predicted the end of the world in mid-November 1993.

Her followers exceeded 150,000, most of whom were brainwashed and isolated from friends and relatives. Or think of China. In the summer of 1992, police in rural north-east China stopped a hundred cult members from committing mass suicide. They had been told that the end of the world was imminent and that, if they jumped off the cliff, they would go to heaven immediately. There are also examples of some cult members killing their own children in order to emulate the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac while some drowned in rivers vainly expecting an 'ark of salvation' to be lowered from heaven to rescue them.

In Korea, a Christian-based group prophesied that the end of the world would occur in late October 1993. I was in the country at the time; it was an anxious period as thousands of people resigned their jobs, sold their homes, waited in vain for the end of world history. Some were arrested by the police for disturbing the peace and threatening national security. Later in February 1994 a prominent Korean theologian, Tak Myung-Hwan, was murdered for speaking out against the cults. He was brutally beaten outside his apartment in Seoul. Previously he had received many death threats and survived several attempts on his life including a car bomb in 1985 and a stabbing in 1992. About three hundred and fifty cults in Korea claim Christian affiliation, involving an approximate two million members.

Jim Morris, Director of Overseas Ministries of the *Overseas Missionary Fellowship* reports that, "Asia is witnessing a flurry of religious cult activity." He warns that, "their appeal cannot be dismissed, because their followers are many and not all are from the fringes of society."<sup>1</sup> A theology lecturer in Singapore explains that, "the punishing pace of life and the relentless push towards materialism means many people experience a vacuum in their lives. They seek answers and relief in various ways. Cults and New Age groups are invading the marketplace and promising to meet people's deepest needs."<sup>2</sup> In Japan, new religions and cults are growing at a phenomenal rate. The Japan Evangelical Missionary Association has listed at least twenty new religions in Japan. Research indicates that at least half of the members in these new religious movements are young and in their twenties. One such cult, **Aum Shinrikyo** (Supreme Truth) was linked with the sarin poison nerve gas attack on five Tokyo subway trains which killed ten people and left nearly six thousand ill, some in a critical condition, in March 1995. This militant quasi-Buddhist cult teaches that the world will end in 1997; it claims to lead people to mystical experiences through practices said to include swallowing water and vomiting it up in order to 'purify' their bodies.

The cult problem is certainly international as well as contemporary. Apart from also being on your doorstep or in your area, the cults are beginning to exploit information technology. For example, a large American anarchist group is targeting Internet users in order to promote murder and the eating of human flesh. The group is called **The Cult of the Dead Cow**. The cult world provides an enormous challenge for Christians and churches today.

## Questions

Why do people join these cults? A brief consideration of David Koresh's **Branch Davidians** in Waco, Texas may begin to help us towards finding answers to this question. At the outset, it is acknowledged that there are difficulties in studying the Waco phenomenon. For example, most of the cult's members have died so we cannot interview them and discover their own reasons for joining the Branch Davidians. Again, it is

difficult establishing the reliability of the sources of information which are available especially through the media.

Samuel Henry, whose wife and children died in the Waco fire, declared in THE GUARDIAN (20 April 1993): 'I can't understand it. I just can't understand how my family got themselves involved in this'. Nicholas Gilbert asks: 'Why should people choose to follow a rock-guitar, high-school drop-out who carried Messiah business cards and peppered his preaching with overt sexual references?'<sup>3</sup> He argues persuasively that 'we can go a long way' towards answering this question by examining Koresh's exploitation of existing interpersonal bonds and ties in communities where he recruited. Numerous cult researchers have observed, especially in relation to the Moonies, that 'close ties' with a member of a cult are crucial in encouraging individuals to join. This is confirmed by the evidence that British recruits to the Branch Davidian cult had a 'double bond' with those who recruited them, namely, through family relationships and also their common links or background with the Seventh Day Adventists. Researchers like Lofland and Skonord<sup>4</sup> suggest six different types (motifs) of conversion: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive. The last four types seem more appropriate to Koresh disciples. It seems that curiosity was a major 'reason for people going initially to meetings held by Koresh but pressure to attend was not significant'. Koresh certainly exploited 'affectional' bonds and the social network while his stirring, dramatic and apocalyptic speeches were influential later in the recruitment process. Opinion is divided among sociologists and psychologists as to whether he used 'brainwashing' techniques or not and it is uncertain to what extent Koresh used physical force in his recruitment drive. Gilbert argues that Koresh used behaviour control rather than mind control in the conversion process.

Our discussion can be widened at this point to consider the appeal and 'charisma' of cult leaders. It is not true that all cults depend on the charisma of their leader. For example, the Watchtower Society does not any longer have one individual leader who stands out with charismatic leadership powers. On the other hand, many cults have leaders whose authority is almost absolute; their charisma and leadership are key factors in promoting their organisations. What is this '*charisma*' they have? It is extremely difficult to explain and the term has a wide range of meanings. Frequently there are personality qualities which attract people to the leader; he is often able to inspire others with awe, display self-confidence and even suggest some control over fate or claim to possess exclusively some infallible knowledge of what is going to happen in the future. Usually there is an ability to generate excitement and make oneself the object of rapt attention. These factors relate to what is called a neurophysical explanation of charisma. The macro-sociological/contextual explanation locates charisma within an essentially relational context especially as a quality of a relationship between the cult members and their leader. The psycho-analytic explanation goes further and seeks to identify and explain why factors of social change contribute to this special relationship. For example, feelings of anxiety, guilt, insecurity and conflict can be produced by domestic and social changes. Individuals can then seek to resolve these feelings by appealing to an 'ideal' figure. Or does charisma flow out of a particular framework of social relationships in which both sides attribute value and status to one another? If so, the leader tries to live up to the image while others, appointed to assist, work to improve his image even further. A sociologist, Bryan Wilson, offers this explanation and illustrates it from his study of Moses David, the former leader of the Family of Love.

While it is difficult to explain adequately the charisma of cult leaders there is a warning for us. In a cult, generally one person stands out and claims to be 'special' and makes extra-ordinary claims for him or herself. To what extent has this type of leadership been encouraged in Christian circles?

### **Non-violent cults**

**Christian Science** has been in decline in the United Kingdom since its peak of probably 30,000 active members in the 1930s. The cult now uses smaller buildings, receives less media attention and is dominated by older middle-class women; its membership fell to 12,000 in 1987 and to 9,500 in 1995. The **Children Of God** cult, renamed as **The Family Of Love** lost its leader, David Berg, when he died in November 1994. Berg had previously changed his name to Moses David but he does not seem to have expressed any repentance for his erroneous teachings, writings and immorality. In October 1994 the British Criminal Injuries Compensation Board awarded a teenage girl £5,000 after having been abused by members of the cult from the age of three. Another cult leader who died, possibly because of Aids in 1990, is Rajneesh; his movement has since been renamed **Osho**. The **Divine Light Mission** now operates under the title **Elan Vital**. The UK CHRISTIAN HANDBOOK 1994/1995 reports: 'The previous instructors have left, except for Maharaj Ji. The group is no longer considered a religion and has renounced its Hindu connections... Presentations take place to give knowledge...'<sup>5</sup>. Today the **Christadelphian** movement is divided into a number of groups. The main world-wide group is known as the Central Fellowship with approximately 40,000 plus members. Other smaller groups include the Berean Fellowship, the Dawn Fellowship, Old Paths, Advocate and Servants of Christ. Divisions within Christadelphianism have arisen due to differences over subjects such as the inspiration of the Bible, the atonement, eschatology, church discipline and the practical life. Concerning justification, their general view is that faith, baptism and works are all part of man's response with each aspect being necessary and contributory. They have always denied the personality of the Holy Spirit but vary in their account of the Holy Spirit. The social, corporate life of the community approximates to the more exclusive Brethren groupings.

Discussion continues as to whether **Seventh Day Adventism** constitutes a cult. Several Adventists have written to me in recent years providing useful evidence that they accept unreservedly central doctrines such as justification by faith alone. Their formal statement is: 'This faith which receives salvation comes through the divine power of the Word and is the gift of God's grace. Through Christ we are justified...'; it adds further that justification is 'the divine act by which God declares a penitent sinner righteous'. This was further explained to me by an Adventist minister: 'When this declaration takes place the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer... justification is by faith alone and does NOT have anything to do with work or merits...'. These statements are unambiguous and, if embraced by all members and ministers, show us that Adventists formally embrace this key Reformational doctrine of justification which, as Calvin observed, is 'the hinge on which all true religion turns'.

Have you heard about the **Cooneyites** or 'Go-Preachers'? They arrange Gospel Mission Tents in different areas without any consultation with local churches. A recent REACHOUT TRUST newsletter<sup>6</sup> refers to this kind of mission in a rural area near Leyland in Lancashire some months ago. Based on Matthew 10:7, they go from place to place, usually in groups of two, preaching their message. Preachers are expected to

renounce all possessions, including property, and accept the ideal of poverty. They are usually unmarried and supported by their house fellowships which have between 12-20 members led by an elder or bishop. The movement is more episcopal in terms of church government. Sadly, they are exclusivist in their attitude towards other Christians and churches. They are secretive about their movement and do not publish a magazine or books for sale. Gordon Melton thinks they 'are Trinitarian and orthodox in their view of Christ and salvation. Rebirth is the result of faith in the Word of God and proclaimed by a servant',<sup>7</sup> that is, a preacher in their movement. Melton's summary of Cooneyite teaching, however, is questionable. For example, W M Rule studied this movement in detail some decades ago and interviewed several people who had formerly been Cooneyites.<sup>8</sup> Rule reports that they believe the Bible is a 'Dead Book' until it is 'made to live' through one of their own preachers. Former members reported that they had rarely heard the blood of Christ preached. The movement appears to claim that the work of Christ is not yet finished and misuse the words of Acts 1:1 '... of all that Jesus *began* both to do and teach...'<sup>9</sup>. Their claim to be exclusive is cultic and Christians need to beware of this movement.

David Burnett claims with justification that 'one of the most surprising movements of recent times has been the growth of Paganism and witchcraft within Western societies'.<sup>10</sup> An academic journal refers to 'the modern occult revival'<sup>11</sup> taking place in the areas of Paganism, ritual magic and witchcraft. In the United Kingdom, the repeal of the witchcraft law in 1951 was significant in encouraging the pagan movement to surface, recruit and publicise its ideas in various ways. Did you know that there is a large mail order company (called *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*) specialising exclusively in the occult with many thousands of customers? A large occult shop, called *Mysteries*, was opened in London in 1982 and it is claimed that trade doubles every six months. There are about a hundred different occult magazines and the largest occult publishing company is the *Aquarian Press*. An extensive Occult Census commissioned in 1989 in the UK revealed a conservative estimate of 250,000 witches/pagans with many more hundreds of thousands who dabble or are interested in occult and pagan rituals/practices. The majority of people participating in the Census were under 40 and 67% were attracted to neo-paganism before the age of eighteen. Pagans claim that they embrace religious beliefs and practices which are much older than those of Christianity. They also insist that they are different from Satanists. It is not easy to explain what paganism is although three central teachings commonly shared by pagans involve the Earth goddess, polytheism including the 'horned god', and then a 'transpersonal psychology' with a view of man's nature strongly influenced by Carl Jung. Paganism is a 'diverse, pluralist and developing tradition...' in the UK and Burnett identifies 'four major streams'<sup>13</sup>: these are Wicca, Pagans, Magicians and Satanists. A degree of interaction often takes place between these streams.

There are many reasons why people become pagans. For some, it is a matter of following the traditions of their parents and even grandparents. Others are attracted by the movement's genuine concerns for ecology and valiant, often well-publicised, endeavours to protect woodlands and the countryside from developers. Paganism also provides a 'spiritual' base for various forms of feminism. Just as significantly, the movement offers a positive alternative to a secular society where materialistic, impersonal and non-spiritual values dominate. Pagans are also disillusioned with churches and Christianity. The denial of the miraculous and spiritual powers by church leaders and a

more cerebral approach to Truth serve to distance pagans from Christendom, as well as a seeming indifference to ecological and social issues. Professing Christians, too, appear to be inconsistent and lacking radical, biblical discipleship. Believers as well as churches need urgently to repent of sin and live more obediently as well as zealously under the lordship of Christ. The challenge to Christians is enormous. At the same time, people including pagans must hear the Word of God and be directed to the one, true, living God who alone is able to meet man's deepest needs.

## References

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*A revised and expanded edition of the author's book TRUTH UNDER ATTACK, dealing with cults and contemporary religions, has just been published by Evangelical Press, 368pp at £9.95, ISBN 0 85234 341 8.*

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There is no need for the cults because everything they offer, and more, is given in Christ. They have no right to exist. . . if you feel He is not enough, and that you must turn to the cults for help or aid or assistance; if you say that he needs any help or assistance, you are denying Him, you are insulting Him. It is the 'wiles of the devil'. This faith, which has supported and strengthened and blessed the saints throughout the running centuries, and which has stood every conceivable test, is enough. You need not turn to some new-fangled idea that only began last century or this century. Go back to the 'Old, Old Story,' which is ever new and ever true.

*D M Lloyd-Jones, THE CHRISTIAN WARFARE, p 145-6*