

# The Danger of Cults

## From fervour to fanaticism

OCCASIONALLY there are news reports containing shocking information about individuals or groups that have come under the sinister control of organisations that claim to be religious. One outstanding example is the mass suicide of nine hundred men, women and children in a Guyanan jungle in 1978. The Reverend Jim Jones led his followers from California into an isolated South American village because of the pressures of the twentieth century world and his conviction of an approaching apocalypse, or dramatic end to the world. Everyone outside that community was seen as an enemy, leading eventually to such a feeling of desperate persecution that all of Jones's followers were persuaded by him to take a lethal poisoned drink.

Before and since that event there have been other examples of people blindly following the commands of a powerful personality. Young people are often susceptible to this kind of persuasion, leaving their families because of the attraction of a mystical philosophy, without realising the dangers involved. Some of these excursions have also ended in tragedy. Parents are naturally very concerned lest their own children are drawn into the activities of a cult and away from the principles they have been taught in their families. Warnings are sometimes given about different groups who target those who are young and impressionable. We need to know the factors that mark out cults, and what it is that can make them dangerous or lead to tragedies like those in Jonestown.

We need first of all to determine the factors that create a cult. Is anyone who believes differently from us, automatically a member of a cult? Some literature circulated by various cult help groups suggests that any organisation that does not accept the teachings of the mainstream Christian churches is a cult. But is it right for all non-conformists to be likened to the fanatical groups we have briefly considered? What exactly is a cult?

### Are all minority religions cults?

We are not helped very much by the word itself, which refers simply to worship, devotion or homage. But a related word –sect– helps to distinguish groups with a different belief system from groups that pose dangers like those mentioned above. A –sect– is simply a religious party or group; and the term is normally applied to groups that are not among the –accepted– denominations. By definition, sects are minority groups. They may be regarded with a degree of suspicion because of the different views they promote, but rarely do they constitute a serious threat.

This can be seen from the use of the word –sect– in the Bible. The Apostle Paul in the first century AD spoke of his strict Jewish upbringing: ‘According to the strictest sect of our (Jewish) religion I lived as a Pharisee’ (Acts 26:5). The Pharisees did not always agree with other religious Jews, notably the ruling Sadducees (see Acts 23:6), but their existence was not regarded as a serious threat to others. Also when Paul accepted the gospel of Christ and became his apostle, he recognised that the Jews were suspicious of his joining a group with different beliefs. He therefore sought to put their minds at rest: ‘According to the Way which they (i.e., the Jews) call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets’ (Acts 24:14).

By contrast, the term 'cult' is normally associated with those groups regarded as distinctly dangerous ó because of the implications of their beliefs and the methods used to attract and control their members. Cult is a more sinister term with overtones of persuading individuals against their will and against their better judgement. It must not be confused with simply holding different beliefs.

### **Non-conformists**

Down through the ages almost all non-conformist groups were ostracised by the established church and therefore by society in general. Even the reformers of the 16th century ó Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and others ó appeared outrageous to the majority of the population. Leaving aside the question of whether these or other non-conformists were misguided in their beliefs, they were standing apart for conscientious reasons, usually based on interpretations of the Bible. While it is possible for a religious sect to be a cult, cults separate and alienate themselves on the basis of social organisation and behaviour, and often in an aggressive fashion, not simply because their beliefs do not match the majority view.

Governments have struggled with the concept of outlawing organisations they believe to pose a danger, and have generally followed the definitions given above to determine which organisations are sects and which can be classified as cults.

Key practices that attract the designation 'cult' include the following:

- idolising one individual as a 'leader'
- activities designed to reduce powers of discrimination and to deter questions.
- control of what members wear, eat or drink.
- withdrawal from general society.

All these factors are intended to make the group very close-knit; they bond individual members to the group, but more particularly to the leader ó who is usually a very charismatic and dominant personality. In the process of being bonded to the group and its leader, members are gradually alienated from the rest of society, and in extreme cases are removed totally from society to live as if they have nothing to do with normal life.

### **Isolation**

Some of the ways this isolation is achieved are distinctly worrying. Potential recruits to the group are encouraged to distance themselves from family and friends ó all those who are likely to have the greatest influence upon them. Separated from previous contacts, the recruits are subjected to intense persuasion by group members. This peer group pressure quickly replaces the previous influence of family and friends. The recruits are overwhelmed with a sense of immediate acceptance: they are 'love-bombed' with flattery, hugging and touching. They are never left alone for long periods to collect and recover their thoughts, and by an insistence on attending long sessions that deprive them of sleep any natural resistance is quickly destroyed.

The effect of this withdrawal from society in general is often revealed only when an individual who has been attracted to a cult seeks to leave it. Great pressure is applied ó psychological pressure, and sometimes physical force too ó to encourage the individual to

change his or her mind. Family members who have not joined the group are described as enemies, and leaving the group is seen to be a personal attack upon the leader himself.

### **Dominant leaders**

Dependence on the leader is encouraged by a series of complex games with rules imposed by the leader. Gradually members are conditioned to stop thinking for themselves and are strongly encouraged to accept unquestioningly the leader's decisions and teachings. Chanting and singing form a large part in the repertoire of bonding individuals to the group. It is well known that this practice quickly blocks rational thought processes, like a form of brainwashing. Together with a special diet, often nutritionally inadequate, recruits become more susceptible to suggestions that would otherwise be immediately dismissed.

It is easy to see how this approach can quickly tip over into even more unacceptable practices, where a leader uses his influence to bind recruits to him by sexual domination. His favourites are granted small but significant privileges, giving them a sense of importance, while the less favoured are encouraged to try harder to please him, and thus come even more under his domination. The careful use of drugs or purchased on behalf of the recruits is another sinister way of taking control of recruits' minds and lives. Sometimes recruits have to hand over all their personal wealth to the group and, because they live in accommodation provided for them, are soon completely indebted to the group for everything they need.

The definitions that have been developed, and the aspects that classify an organisation as a cult, are important when we come to consider minority, non-conformist groups. This booklet, for example, has been prepared by Christadelphians. In some literature published about cults, warnings are sounded against the beliefs and practices of Christadelphians. Are these warnings justified?

### **Christadelphians**

From the definitions we have tried to make, we hope it would be agreed, despite what some groups say about Christadelphians, that even though they are definitely non-conformists, and in the scriptural sense a sect, they are certainly not a cult. As a community, Christadelphians do not accept some of the teachings of the mainstream Christian churches. For well over 150 years, Christadelphians have been saying that Christendom in general has moved away dramatically from what the Bible teaches. Their members are keen to discuss these differences, and they regularly hold meetings where the teachings of the Bible can be discussed openly and without rancour. As we have already seen, different beliefs are not the real issue. It is, indeed, a good thing that in most countries individuals are free to come to different conclusions, even about subjects that are believed to be vital and critically important.

Christadelphians do not have a leader who sets the rules. The only head they recognise is the Lord Jesus Christ, and their only authority is the Bible which they believe is the word of God. In fact, they are critical of other religious groups who have pastors, ministers, bishops and archbishops or a complex organisation where authority is vested in a few and where the ordinary members have no real input.

### **No human leadership**

There have of course been individual Christadelphians who have become well known, and whose views have been influential. When the body was founded in the mid-nineteenth century, it was mainly through the work of one man, John Thomas, who had an active and enquiring mind and who searched the scriptures constantly to discover their teachings. But Christadelphians do not believe he was inspired. They accept that his views were right on many Bible teachings, especially those that form the basis of their faith. But they do not blindly accept all he said and wrote, and honestly admit that on occasions he was wrong.

Equally, he never demanded or expected a following when he was alive, and he would have been horrified to think that it would be any different after his death. The same is true of all other well-known Christadelphians; they have always sought to serve others and have never been hungry for power or influence over their fellow believers.

Christadelphians, in fact, do not consider themselves to be a group with a history extending over a mere century and a half, but faithful descendants (in terms of beliefs and practices) of the first century Apostles. They claim to have an Apostolic Faith.

Nor is it just the absence of individual charismatic leadership that stops Christadelphians from being a cult. One striking feature is their non-hierarchical organisation, based on the examples found in the New Testament of how believers in the first century organised themselves. Each congregation (they are called *æcclesias*) is responsible for its own affairs. They all accept a common basis of belief, but its implementation is left to each separate ecclesia. Within each ecclesia, members appointed for limited periods, who are answerable to the whole congregation, undertake the work. Their services and the administration of each congregation are undertaken by the completely voluntary assistance of lay members. One sociologist commenting on how Christadelphians are organised has remarked at the extent to which individual members are involved in all aspects of the work. [\[1\]](#)

### **Recruiting new members**

If Christadelphians do not have cult leadership characteristics, how do they seek potential recruits? How do they treat them? Does this make them a cult?

Various methods are used to advertise their beliefs. They hold regular public meetings ó talks, seminars and debates ó where Bible subjects are introduced. They have a travelling Bible exhibition explaining how God's word is dependable and accurate. They produce books, leaflets, videos and correspondence courses dealing with different aspects of Bible teaching. They have websites containing information about Bible teaching and offering online tutoring. They organise week-long activities, concentrating their efforts in one geographical area at a time with a variety of different events to encourage people to think about their lives and the gospel message. These activities are not limited to one country, but Christadelphians try to spread the gospel message as widely and freely as they can.

Always, the Bible is the focus of their appeal. Christadelphians are keen to discuss its message, and talk about *öBible teachingsö*, not about *öChristadelphian teachingsö*. They encourage individuals to enquire for themselves, to ask questions and to discover information for themselves. Jesus spoke of the gospel as the *öpearl of great priceö* (Matthew 13:46), and Christadelphians treat it as the most valuable thing in their lives.

No one is asked to commit him or herself quickly. Everyone is given ample time to consider carefully the implications of accepting God's gracious offer of salvation, and of the responsibilities of discipleship.

They do not specially target any particular group in the community. They do not approach only young people or children; they do not focus especially upon women and not on men. Any special activities for children, such as Sunday Schools, are completely open to the parents as well. Individuals are never encouraged to leave their homes and families, or to part with their money. As a community, Christadelphians do not engage in tithing or donating a tenth of one's income or nor do they expect it of any of their converts. They are not therefore a wealthy community, with the problems of greed and corruption that large funds can cause, and they do not have paid ministers.

There are no rules about diet. Because of the well-known dangers created by substance dependence, some Christadelphians are teetotallers, smoking is shunned and members are expected to keep clear of drug taking. But these are all essentially personal decisions. Christadelphians take to heart the words of the Apostle Paul, who wrote: "He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:6-8).

[1] Bryan R. Wilson, *Sects and Society*, 1961, page 271.

#### **Emotional appeals?**

Meetings and services do not rely on artificial means to impress Bible teachings upon new recruits. Generally speaking, meetings consist of hymns, Bible readings, prayers and Bible-based talks. They are always calm, ordered and devotional. Sometimes open discussion is encouraged, and private debate and questions are always welcomed. Christadelphian services do not involve repetitious chanting, hand clapping or dancing; emotion arises only from an individual's contemplation of the scripture message and not from any applied "techniques" to stimulate it.

Cults encourage their members to separate themselves from surrounding society. This sometimes occurs through the clothing members are encouraged or demanded to wear. The Amish in North America, for example, though they do not exhibit other features of cults, deliberately dress in black old-fashioned clothing. Other groups demand dark suits or long skirts or headscarves. In extreme cases, clothing is only the beginning of a complete separation from society. Members are expected to live in "group" accommodation, only to work with other members, and to restrict contact with "unbelievers" to an absolute minimum.

None of these methods are practised by Christadelphians. They are generally conservative in their clothing, and shrink from outrageous and provocative fashions. But the choice of clothing is left completely to individual conscience. In accordance with the Apostle's teachings (1 Corinthians 11:1-16), their female members wear a head covering when they worship. But the choice of head covering is left to each individual.

Occupations that would offend their consciences or like joining the armed forces or police service or are not followed. But with these exceptions, Christadelphians are to be found in all walks of life: in the professions and trades or farmers, fishermen and pharmacists. There could

be a Christadelphian living next door to you, or working alongside you. Their real Master and Lord is the Lord Jesus Christ, but as he said, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21), Christadelphians try hard to be good, honest and law-abiding citizens.

### **Leaving a cult**

One characteristic of cults is their unreasonable control of individual members. Great emotional pressure is applied to any who wish to leave the group. If this pressure is resisted and all formal ties with the group are cut, the individual is completely shunned and treated as an outcast. All social contact is ended – in extreme cases even by members of the person's natural family – and he or she is considered as good as dead.

If an individual wishes to leave the Christadelphians, he (or she) is free to do so. Naturally, other members will wish to discuss this decision with him, but they will not force their presence, and will respect the decision that has been taken. If a member has a family that does not share his beliefs, he is specifically encouraged not to separate himself from them, but to show by his behaviour that his faith has made him a more considerate and loving person.

### **The cult-busters**

The main aspects that determine whether a movement is a cult – leadership, mind control and withdrawal from society, do not therefore apply to Christadelphians. Why is it then that reference is sometimes made to them in books about cults and sometimes when warnings are given after an event occurs like those mentioned at the beginning of this booklet?

A lot of written material about cults comes from the evangelical –Christian– churches. They have organisations that claim to be "cult-busters", part of an anti-cult movement. In reality, these are thinly disguised preaching organisations, sometimes posing as cult help groups, using scare tactics to promote their own teachings. It is ironic that the leading features that distinguish a cult often apply to their own arrangements. They are known, for example, to have highly charismatic leaders (television and media "stars" in their own right). They hold large conventions where music, chanting, clapping and dancing are all used to excite the emotions. These often conclude with highly charged appeals to "Come on up and be saved", and individuals are encouraged to commit immediately to the beliefs of the organisation. Often, little opportunity is given for calm, logical appraisal of the message that has been presented.

### **The challenge of Bible teachings**

This is not to say that such churches are cults; it would be wrong to jump to that conclusion. But there is strong evidence of behaviour and organisation which is characteristic of cults, and which when abused can lead to the difficulties described earlier. When they define Christadelphians as a cult, it is because Bible teachings as explained by Christadelphians are unacceptable to them. It is easier to dismiss a group by describing them as a threat to vulnerable members of society, than to address the challenge of their teachings.

Christadelphians do not ask anyone to accept what they have to say without checking all they hear against the teaching of the Bible. The same test should be applied to anyone who

suggests that our lives should take on a new direction. The Bible talks with obvious approval of the people who lived in first century Berea in Macedonia: "These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

Here is a challenge worth taking up. Turn to the Bible, for Jesus said, "Search the scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life: and these are they which testify of me" (John 5:39).

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*This booklet is only concerned with taking a dispassionate look at the concept of sects and cults, not with taking specific issue with the beliefs and practices of any particular group or groups. Christadelphians sincerely hold different beliefs from all other 'Christian' groups, and there is literature available explaining all these beliefs. Those specific differences are not, however, dealt with in this booklet.*

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