

WHAT IS A CULT

Qualities which can be recognized as cultic in terms of a theological definition (i.e. constituting deviations from orthodoxy) would include the following:

1. **A false or inadequate basis of salvation.** The Apostle Paul drew a distinction that is utterly basic to our understanding of truth when he said, “By grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Inasmuch as the central doctrine of biblical Christianity is the sacrificial death of Christ for our sin, all cultic deviations tend to downplay the finished work of Christ and emphasize the importance of earning moral acceptance before God through our own righteous works as a basis of salvation.

2. **A false basis of authority.** Biblical Christianity by definition takes the Bible as its yardstick of the true, the false, the necessary, the permitted, the forbidden, and the irrelevant. Cults, on the other hand, commonly resort to extra-biblical documents or contemporary “revelation” as the substantial basis of their theology. While some cult groups go through the motions of accepting the authority of Scripture, they actually honor the group’s or leader’s novel interpretation of Scripture as normative.

Many groups use biblical scriptures to validate their claims, but plainly jettison any concept of biblical authority in favor of the pronouncements of a charismatic leader.

In authentic Christianity, at least, there is no prophet or guru who does not stand under the judgment of Scripture, as do the rest of us.

Non-theological standards will also be helpful in identifying cults. Most such guidelines concern techniques of acquiring and training converts, and include (among others) the following:

1. **Isolation or “involvement” of the recruit to the point that the group controls all incoming information.** One of the most critical stages of cultic conditioning requires that the new member be insulated from any opinion, data, or interpretation that does not conform to the group’s purposes and understanding. It is one thing to withdraw from the world’s turmoil for a period of reflection or training. It is an insidiously different matter to create fortified

boundaries against the outside world which confine members and attack or threaten those who would leave.

2. **Economic exploitation or an enslaving organizational structure.** This factor is both obvious and self-explanatory. Ordinary gumption ought to steer one clear of a group in which the leaders live in luxury while the “lay” members toil to support the organization; likewise beware of arrangements which bind the convert to serve the group in return for “training” or other forms of advancement through the ranks.

3. **Esotericism.** This quality may well be the most damning evidence of all; unfortunately, it is the most difficult to document. The concept of the “esoteric” simply refers to a deliberately created gap between the truth about the cult which is given to the “inner circle” and a misleading image which is projected to the public at large. In cult evangelism, recruiters usually conceal either the identity of the group or its real purpose until the convert has become vulnerable or has already established a preliminary commitment. One legal scholar has referred to this factor as a “segmentation of the joining process,” and notes that “what is distinctive about this process is that, although the potential convert may be given a general idea of the activities and teachings that will be offered at the next stage, at no point early in the process is he given an opportunity to elect to embark on the entire journey.”

To bring the discussion around once more to the theological question, the element of “esotericism” is perhaps the clearest distinction between Christianity and cultism. There is nothing in the beliefs and practices of authentic Christianity that is not - in principle - discoverable to a modestly diligent in-quirer through any public library. In contrast, the central core of cultic belief is - as a matter of principle - commonly hidden from the eyes of outsiders.

It should be understood, of course, that the above discussion does not pretend to be either exhaustive or conclusive. At best it is a tentative and preliminary effort to define an amorphous and marginally useful term. In the context of those reservations, we hope that this article might help to clarify the thinking, talking, and writing of our brothers and sisters.

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