

What Is a Cult?

Norman L. Geisler

There is no universally agreed-upon definition of a cult; there are only some generally recognizable traits. Actually, there are three different dimensions of a cult—*doctrinal*, *sociological*, and *moral*. Below we take a brief look at these. Keep in mind, though, that not every cult manifests every single trait we discuss.

1

DOCTRINAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A CULT

There are a number of doctrinal characteristics of cults. One will typically find an emphasis on new revelation from God, a denial of the sole authority of the Bible, a denial of the Trinity, a distorted view of God and Jesus, or a denial of salvation by grace.

1. ***New Revelation.*** Many cult leaders claim to have a direct pipeline to God. The teachings of the cult often change and, hence, they need new “revelations” to justify such changes. Mormons, for example, once excluded African Americans from the priesthood. When social pressure was exerted against the Mormon church for this blatant form of racism, the Mormon president received a new “revelation” reversing the previous decree. Jehovah’s Witnesses engaged in the same kind of change regarding the earlier Watchtower teaching that vaccinations and organ transplants were prohibited by Jehovah.
2. ***Denial of the Sole Authority of the Bible.*** Many cults deny the sole authority of the Bible. The Mormons, for example, believe the Book of Mormon is higher Scripture than the Bible. Jim Jones, founder and leader of Jonestown, placed himself in authority over the Bible. Christian Scientists elevate Mary Baker Eddy’s book *Science and Health* to supreme authority. Reverend Moon placed his book *The Divine Principle* in authority over all his followers. New Agers believe in many modern forms of authoritative revelation, such as *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*.
3. ***A Distorted View of God and Jesus.*** Many cults set forth a distorted view of God and Jesus. The “Jesus Only” Oneness Pentecostals, for example, deny the Trinity and hold to a form of modalism, claiming that Jesus is God, and that “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” are simply singular names for Jesus. The Jehovah’s Witnesses deny both the Trinity and the absolute deity of Christ, saying that Christ is a lesser god than the Father (who is God Almighty). The Mormons say Jesus was “procreated” (by a heavenly father and a heavenly mother) at a point in time, and

was the spirit-brother of Lucifer. Mormons do speak of a “Trinity,” but redefine it into Tritheism (i.e., three gods). The Baha’is say Jesus was just one of many prophets of God. The Jesus of the spiritists is just an advanced medium. The Jesus of the Theosophists is a mere reincarnation of the so-called World Teacher (who is said to periodically reincarnate in the body of a human disciple). The Jesus of psychic Edgar Cayce is a being who in his first incarnation was Adam and in his thirtieth reincarnation was “the Christ.”

Related to the above, cults also typically deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, say that Jesus was raised from the dead as an invisible spirit creature. Herbert W. Armstrong, founder of the Worldwide Church of God, also denied the physical, bodily resurrection of Christ. (Note that in recent years the Worldwide Church of God has repudiated many of Armstrong’s teachings and has taken significant steps toward orthodoxy.)

4. *Denial of Salvation by Grace.* Cults typically deny salvation by grace, thus distorting the purity of the gospel. The Mormons, for example, emphasize the necessity of becoming more and more perfect in this life. The Jehovah’s Witnesses emphasize the importance of distributing Watchtower literature door-to-door as a part of “working out” their salvation. Herbert W. Armstrong said that the idea that works are not required for salvation is rooted in Satan.

From the brief survey above, it is clear that all cults deny one or more of the fundamental, essential doctrines of Christianity.

SOCIOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A CULT

In addition to the doctrinal characteristics of cults, many (not all) cults also have sociological traits. These include authoritarianism, exclusivism, dogmatism, close-mindedness, susceptibility, compartmentalization, isolation, and even antagonism. Let us take a brief look at these.

1. *Authoritarianism.* Authoritarianism involves the acceptance of an authority figure who often uses mind-control techniques on group members. As prophet and/or founder, this leader’s word is considered ultimate. The late David Koresh of the Branch Davidian cult in Waco, Texas, is a tragic example. Other cults that involve authoritarianism include the Children of God (now called “The Family”), the Unification Church, and Jonestown (headed by Jim Jones).

Cult prophets/founders should not be confused with legitimate reformers/revivalists, such as Martin Luther and John Wesley. The differences are significant. A reformer, in contrast to a cult founder, leads people by love, not by fear. He influences by love, not by hate. He tries to motivate the heart but makes no attempt to control the mind. He leads his followers like a shepherd leads sheep; he does not drive them like goats.

2. **Exclusivism.** Another characteristic of cults is an exclusivism that says, "We alone have the truth." The Mormons believe they are the exclusive community of the saved on earth. The Jehovah's Witnesses believe they are the exclusive community of the saved.

Some groups manifest exclusivism in their practice of communal living. Under such conditions it is easier to maintain control over cult members. Examples of this kind of cult include the Children of God and the Branch Davidians.

It is important to note that there are some religious groups that practice communal living that are not cults. The Jesus People USA in Chicago are an example of a good Christian group that lives communally.

3. **Dogmatism.** Closely related to the above, many cults are dogmatic—and this dogmatism is often expressed institutionally. For example, Mormons claim to be the only true church on earth. The Jehovah's Witnesses claim that the Watchtower Society is the sole voice of Jehovah on earth. David Koresh said he alone could interpret the Bible. Many cults believe they have the truth in a suitcase, as it were. They alone are in possession of the divine oracles.
4. **Close-mindedness.** Hand in hand with dogmatism is the characteristic of close-mindedness. This unwillingness to even consider any other point of view often has radical manifestations. One educated Mormon we encountered said he did not care if it could be proved that Joseph Smith was a false prophet; he still would remain a Mormon. A Jehovah's Witness we met once refused to finish reading an article that proved the deity of Christ because, said he, "It is disturbing my faith."
5. **Susceptibility.** The psychological profile of many individuals who are sucked into cults is not flattering. All too often, though not always, people who join cults are highly gullible. Sometimes they are even psychologically vulnerable. But above all, the cultic mentality is characterized by an unhealthy compartmentalization (that is, they "compartmentalize" conflicting facts and ignore anything that contradicts their claims). Many Mormons have a "burning in the bosom" which makes it nearly impossible to reason with them about their faith. Cultists often

accept teachings by a kind of blind faith that is impervious to sound reasoning. One Mormon missionary said he would believe the Book of Mormon even if it said there were square circles!

6. **Isolationism.** The more extreme cults sometimes create fortified boundaries, often precipitating tragic endings, such as the disaster in Waco, Texas, with the Branch Davidian cult. Deserters are considered traitors, and their lives are sometimes put in jeopardy by more zealous members of the cult. In many cases cult members are told that if they leave the group, they will be attacked and destroyed by Satan. The erection of such barriers, whether physical or psychological, creates an environment of isolation, which in turn often leads to antagonism.
7. **Antagonism.** In a context of isolation, both fear and antagonism toward the outside world is often generated. All other groups are considered apostate. They are considered “the enemy” and “tools of Satan.” In extreme cases this may lead to an armed conflict, as in Jonestown and Waco.

MORAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A CULT

On top of the doctrinal and sociological traits of cults, there are also some moral dimensions to be considered. Among those that crop up most often are legalism, sexual perversion, intolerance, and psychological or even physical abuse. Again, though, not every cult manifests every one of these traits.

1. **Legalism.** Setting down a rigid set of rules by which the devotees must live is common to many cults. These standards are usually extrabiblical. The Mormon teaching forbidding the use of coffee, tea, or any drink with caffeine is a case in point. The requirement of the Watchtower Society for Jehovah’s Witnesses to distribute literature door to door is another example. Monastic-type asceticism, with its rigorous rule-keeping, is often seen as a means of gaining favor with God. As such, it is a manifestation of the common cultic rejection of God’s grace.
2. **Sexual Perversion.** Along with legalism, the twin vice of moral perversion is often found in the cults. Joseph Smith (and other Mormon leaders) had many wives. David Koresh claimed to own all the women in his group, even the young girls. According to a 1989 revelation, this reportedly included girls as young as ten. The Children of God cult throughout its history has used “flirty fishing” techniques to sexually lure people into the cult. Sex between adults and children has been reported in this cult.

3. ***Physical Abuse.*** Tragically, some cults engage in forms of physical abuse. Ex-cult members often accuse their former leaders of engaging in beatings, sleep deprivation, severe food deprivation, and beating children until they are bruised and bleeding. Sometimes there are charges of satanic ritualistic abuse, though these seem to be much more rare than advertised. However, psychological abuse, such as fear, intimidation, and isolation, is more common. The ultimate physical abuse is illustrated in the person of cult leader Jim Jones, who led all the members of Jonestown to drink poisoned punch.
4. ***Intolerance toward Others.*** Toleration is not one of the virtues of the cultic mentality. Intolerance is often manifest in antagonism and sometimes culminates in killings. Both Mormon and Branch Davidian history have examples of this kind of violent intolerance. Of course, other religious groups, such as radical Muslims, are known for the same. Closer to home, the Spanish Inquisition is a manifestation of Christian cultic zeal.¹

¹Geisler, N. L., & Rhodes, R. (1997). *When cultists ask: A popular handbook on cultic misinterpretations*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.