

The culture of cults and cult leaders



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

There's a certain fascination with cults, cultic behavior and cult leaders. The word "cult" comes from the Latin word "cultus" meaning "worship." In my youthful Evangelical years, we were warned to avoid cults because they would endanger our faith. A popular book by Walter Martin, "The Kingdom of the Cults" (recently re-published), points a disapproving finger at Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Scientists, Unitarians and even major historical traditions including Buddhism and Islam. Any theological group that doesn't hold to Martin's strict biblical standards is a cult — a dangerous threat to authentic Christian faith. In our young minds, this book helped us identify who was on God's side and who was on the Devil's side. Counterfeit Christians and other dark forces were lurking everywhere.

The primary definition of a cult is: "a relatively small group of people having beliefs or practices, especially relating to religion, that are regarded by others as strange or sinister or as imposing excessive control over members." The exam-

ple used is: "Satan-worshipping cults." We like to think "those other people" are following a cult, blinded by evil, but not us — our religious practices could never be a cult. So we think. Once, while visiting a Mormon household with a friend, I felt uncomfortable. The mother sat down with me and asked what troubled me. I told her I believed they were in a cult, under the influence of the Evil One. She looked pained, calmly assuring me they were a happy family who served a loving God. I'm ashamed to admit my early judgmental faith, but years later I also see the beginning of my own emergence from cult-like thinking.

"Regarded by others as strange." This one phrase from the definition, ought to "cause pause" for any thoughtful person. When we're quick to judge or criticize the beliefs of others, we are really exposing our own strangeness. While serving as a jail chaplain, I heard an older man in a cell explain: when you point a finger at someone, three more fingers are pointing back at you. A wise reminder, perhaps similar to "judge not, lest you be judged." Another lesson easily forgotten.

It seems fairly clear, it isn't just in religion where we find cults. Could we consider some of the "followers" of music or movie stars, along with sports figures and "influencers", as exhibiting cultish beliefs and behaviors? Some of the rituals — if we could call them ritu-

als — sure look like forms of worship. Then, no surprise, there are politicians and their "disciples." Watching a political rally, there is natural enthusiasm that animates the crowd. However, there are times the actions of the people and the leader seem to approach the level of cult behavior. Here again, I'm hesitant to point fingers, aware there may be times when I "follow the herd" (without uncritical adoration, however).

This is how I would summarize a cult of leadership:

- Presents an image of authority. An outward self-confidence and command of the "truth."

- Has an authoritarian nature. Once they claim authority, and gain power and influence, a leader can assume almost total control over others.

- Bases personal power and authority on direct connection with the divine. Interpret historic texts (scriptures or other documents, like the Constitution) as legitimizing their authority.

- Attracts "followers" who believe in them, and believe what they say, who ignore the obvious, or resist questioning their leader or their own devotion. Faith takes the place of reason and critical thinking

- Tends to lull believers with their voice — or in some cases, their silence. Pronouncements full of promises, sometimes cloaked in god-language or clever humor, direct the faithful with as-

surances that all is under control. They will be taken care of, protected, secure....if only they believe in the leader.

- Demonizes "the other side" (sometimes warning of literal demonic threats). Fear is a central mechanism to keep followers in a constant state of anxiety that "they" are coming and "they" will try to destroy the true faith and the present order.

Lastly, I would add my personal view on these presumptive leaders.

- Makes stuff up. Their "facts" often have little or no basis in reality, yet many believers accept what they are told at face value, never seriously interrogating the truth-claims with a skeptical eye.

We might keep in mind the word "cult" is related to "cultivated." To prepare land for planting might be the most fruitful image for considering the consequences of cults. Maybe that gets to the root: what are the fruits? Which calls to mind another cautionary verse: "By their fruits you shall know them." Who seeks to plow our field, sow their seeds, to harvest their crop of power over our lives? It's essential to cultivate our minds with fruitful and fertile wisdom.

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