

*Well, you know, Bryant, some
folk takes the Bible wrong.*

Jean Holub
David Koresh's Grandmother
NBC *Today* show interview

Classifying and defining religious movements is difficult. Cults represent an interesting case, because they seem to revolve around one particular dimension: the growth of alienation from traditional religion, and from society itself. The alienation is so severe, that instead of appealing to traditional revelation, classical models of religious truth, or so-called "true" interpretations of scripture, the cult claims to build, *de novo*, a profound religious system. Outsiders usually have a difficult time even understanding a cult's beliefs since they usually employ new terminology and symbols, and focus on very esoteric matters.

Cults are, for the most part, an urban phenomenon. They do not attract great hordes of people, and therefore need to draw from a large population. Also, cults attract anomie, marginal individuals who are looking for meaningful attachments with others in an otherwise anonymous, urban environment. Yet another reason cults are found almost entirely in urban settings is that in small communities, there is much more control over culture and group membership.

Characteristics of Cults

1. small in size,
2. in search of mystical experience,
3. lacking in formal structure,
4. led by a charismatic leader,
5. short-lived, and
6. concerned almost entirely with individuals' problems,
7. within a syncretic (uniting different, even opposing ideas), synthesized perspective packaged in new terminology and symbols,
8. portrayed as a new revelation or insight provided by a supernatural power, or the rediscovery of an ancient revelation that had been lost and unknown for many years

Yinger: A cult is a religious break from society that is even sharper, and more alienated, than any sect. Yinger calls cults "religious mutants," extreme variations from dominant religious themes.

Brian Wilson has expressed doubt about the usefulness of the term "cult." Alienation from traditional religion, and syncretism vary by degree. They probably characterize most sects in some measure. After a generation passes, a cult can claim its own tradition, as Eric Lincoln has observed in such cases as the Black Muslims.

However, there are too many examples where the term seems justified to abandon it, and classify cults as sects. Cults are sectarian movements with a difference, a difference that deserves our attention.

Geoffrey Nelson gave the concept of cult a searching review. He argues that we need to include some larger, longer-lived religious movements. Cults are an important source of new religion. "...all founded religions can be seen as having developed from cults." He suggests the term "permanent cult," to differentiate such long-lived cults from established sects. Under some circumstances, a cult may evolve into a dominant rather than a marginal belief system.

Generally, cults are embryonic religion, charismatically led, concerned almost wholly with the problems of the individual, with little interest in or regard for questions of social change and the social order. Under certain special circumstances, a cult may attract a wider following, and take on these previously rejected concerns, becoming a sect, and sometimes developing even "churchly tendencies."

Lofland & Stark's Model of Cult Conversion

Lofland and Stark, in their article "Becoming a World Savior," reported the results of their study of the process of conversion into a small cult called The Divine Precepts (popularly known as the "Moonies"), which at the time was a small, deviant, millenarian cult led by the Reverend Moon, who called himself the "Lord of the 2nd Advent" after receiving a revelation from God. He sent one of his converts to the U.S. In 1963 there were only 15 "Moonies" in the U.S. By 1965 there more than 150 converts.

They make a distinction between predisposing condition — attributes of persons prior to contact with a cult, and situational contingencies — social factors and influences that operate after contact with a cult has been made.

1. The first of three predisposing conditions is tension and emotional dislocation, endured for a relatively long time, at fairly high levels: For example, tension resulting from failing grades in school, a broken love affair, career uncertainties, etc. The potential convert experiences severe tension between his or her notions about the real world, vs. the ideal world they cling to and wish to see come "down to earth."
2. The second predisposing condition is that converts, for various reasons, do not avail themselves of available, conventional mechanisms for solving their problems and reducing tension, such as psychological counseling, immersion in political or public-service activities, a new love affair, a change in career direction, or avoidance-escape mechanisms such as drug or alcohol abuse.
3. The third predisposing condition is that, having found no psychological or social avenue for releasing their tension, they sought a religious solution in conventional religious organizations, and/or in reading self-help and other religious and quasi-religious literature all without resolving their problems.

The second and third conditions may be summarized by characterizing potential converts as experiencing their lives and problems within a *religious problem-solving perspective*. Such

people are *seekers, dissatisfied with their current religion, seeking an alternative religion, at a crucial turning point in life.*

Eileen Barker found that those who became Moonies came from families for whom religion is important. At a more general level, Snow and Machalek observe that some people are more inclined to believe than to doubt. A propensity toward belief is most apparent among individuals from a religious background — a background that predisposes those individuals to find religious solutions to serious problems-in-living.

4. The four situational contingencies begin first with an encounter with a cult curing a critical phase of a potential convert's life when he or she is ready for a fundamental change. Before or after such a crucial phase, contact with a cult will not result in conversion.

5. The second situational contingency concerns the existence, or formation, of an affective bond between a potential convert and one or more group members. An affective bond is a relationship of some meaning and significance to the potential convert.

6. The third situational contingency concerns an absence, or relative weakness of affective bonds with individuals who are not members of the cult. Usually, something has happened to weaken pre-existing relationships, though sometimes they have simply not existed to any meaningful degree. The potential convert spends more and more time with cult members, and less and less time with other people, perhaps dropping non-cult members as friends altogether. At this point, the potential convert is called a *verbal convert* by Lofland and Stark.

7. Genuine conversion is the result of the fourth situational contingency, total or near total immersion in the cult, a period of intensive interaction with cult members, often while residing with them in a communal dwelling. Such interaction is thorough and probing, aimed at an in-depth change in the convert's values and beliefs. The convert is absorbed into the cult group, putting his or her life at the disposal of the cult.

The entire process can be called a religious career — taking time, involving progression through stages, a progression from one level to another, a blending of predisposition and subsequent events. There are three criteria indicating genuine cult conversion:

1. belief in the doctrine
2. joining in proselytizing (converting others)
3. one's new life totally revolves around cult matters

Criticisms: Critics have suggested that the process may be more complex, and have more stages. Sometimes, stages may be skipped. Not all conversions are exactly alike. In response to criticisms, Lofland elaborated on six different *motifs*.

1. Intellectual — individual consciously investigates religious alternatives, and almost converts himself, or at least, consciously places himself into the reach of cult members, in effect "asking" to be influenced.
2. Mystical — the most familiar motif, where there is a high level of emotional arousal. The person is

conscious of change coming on with a rush, and is "taken over" by the cult's god—the "born again" or "Damascus road" conversion, usually in an intense, private way.

3. Experimental — the individual experiments with the faith of the cult for some period of time, gradually learning it and becoming familiar with it.
4. Affectional — Positive relations with cult members over an extended period of time, usually several weeks or more, integrate the convert into the group.
5. Revivalist — similar to the mystical, but public and dramatic, as the convert, in a state of ecstasy, heeds an "altar call" and publicly demonstrates his rejection of evil or error and acceptance of the new way.
6. Coercive — being brainwashed, programmed, exposed to intensive brow-beating by cult members, sometimes kidnapped, or held somewhat against one's will, made to feel guilt for previously held beliefs, and to embrace a new ideological system.

Notes on *The Cults are Coming!* by Sheldon Streiker

Cults have a negative image in the minds of most people. Yet they are a facet of culture, connected with certain patterns of family and religion. Some parents stress achievement to their children without nurturing them, without forming an emotional, loving relationship with them. This tends to drive children away, sometimes into the arms of this or that cult.

The cult's message is threatening to society because it devalues secular life. It tells people to ignore what society teaches. Cults welcome self-sacrifice and persecution at times, especially among youth cults, as it gives meaning to the cult, and is an expression of anger and rebellious urges.

A hallmark of cults is their repudiation of the competitive, acquisitive materialism of our society. Parents usually don't understand why their children are drawn to a cult, and usually feel rejected.

History of Youth and Cults Since World War II

In the 1950's, young adults wanted to fit in to society. They assumed they would achieve status in a society that appeared stable, viable, and normal. The United States had just emerged from World War II, strong, productive, yet in the 1950's Americans were paranoid about communism. For the first time in our history, the political and economic systems were placed on a more or less permanent wartime footing.

Women had entered the job-market in unprecedented numbers during the war. After the war they were called back to home and hearth. A huge baby-boom ensued after the war.

Journalism maintained a relatively distant, non-judging stance from politics during the 1950's, perhaps as a continuation of the patriotism generated during the war. A great war hero, Dwight David Eisenhower, was elected president. Young people cared mainly about the new music, rock and roll, about dating and mating, about snazzy cars and recreational independence.

Adulthood loomed ahead, but little thought was given to what it would entail.

College Students in The 1960's

College students questioned the cozy assumptions of their parents, stressing non-conformity as a sign of independence and dignity. The Viet Nam war gradually mired down the U.S. in an escalating, seemingly endless war. The press began to question the government's wisdom and behavior in conducting the war.

The reinstatement of a military draft system made young men fearful, and motivated many to go to college to obtain a deferment, when some considerable proportion of them might not have gone to college. In college, these students encountered liberal professors who had been, as a class, seriously wounded by the McCarthyism of the 1950's.

Suspicious of government, convinced of their own wisdom, and of the ill-conceived policies of the war-makers, these professors increasingly sewed dissatisfaction among their students. Though they were not, by any means, solely responsible for the rising radicalization of students at that time.

The Viet Nam War fueled rebellious emotions, giving students a focal point for expressing their general dissatisfactions with a meaningless society.

Affluence was taken for granted. Feeling comfortable in a secure future, students protested against what they saw as the immorality of the war, the triviality of American culture, unjustifiable sexual suppression, and a host of infringements on personal freedom. They were profoundly idealistic, and experimental concerning relations between people, such as in defining the meaning of marriage or parenthood. They were impatient with the pace of social change. They were also hedonistic, depressed, and lacked work-motivation.

THE 1970'S

Economic problems of inflation and oil shortages, ecological problems of pollution, and the political problems of an America that seemed less powerful are associated with the rise of a very different set of attitudes among young people. Oil shortages, real or contrived, and inflation that was primarily the result of the spending policies of the Johnson administration that conducted war, and increased social spending through deficit financing — these overlapping problems shut down the age of Aquarius abruptly.

A large-scale reaction set in. Richard Nixon was elected, based partly on a "secret" plan to end the war, and partly in reaction to the excessive cultural wanderings of the 60's. We left Viet Nam in defeat, licking our wounds, rushing to forget, and swearing never again. Our will to shake and move the rest of the world was broken. The consortium of oil-producing nations, called OPEC, held the Western world in thrall, as they increased oil prices at a dizzying rate. The large-scale of transfer of wealth from the U.S. to other nations began in earnest.

The youth of the 1970's were uninvolved, cool, believed in the status quo, worried about jobs, were status conscious, less accepting of rules, and motivated primarily to achieve economic security in an economically insecure system. They wanted middle-class security but lacked the values of accomplishment and work, and they distrusted leadership. The 1970's was a time

of waiting for some new energy, some solution to the devolution of American Power and wealth.

The 1980's

As a cultural phenomenon, the 80's begins with the election of Ronald Reagan. Americans' faith in capitalism sprung back magically with the reassertion of traditional values, especially by disenchanted males, working class and middle-class, who voted with their hearts for bygone traditions instead of their wallets. The cultural changes of the 60's and 70's had threatened the traditional superior status of the white, Anglo-Saxon male, and they, more than any other group, swung hard to the right in electing someone they believed would save America from impoverishment, powerlessness, and drifting values.

What were the middle-class young people of the 1980's like? Some say they were self-centered yuppies, unconcerned about the poor and disadvantaged, materialistic, and unrealistic concerning what they were likely to earn and achieve. The past was of no concern to them. They had not learned about much of American history. They knew little of the struggles to achieve what America had become, saw an America of limited horizons, and wanted to make their own while the making was still good.

Within this historical socio-cultural matrix cults, especially young people's cults grew rapidly. The types of cults that were popular, to the extent that such a term is justified, changed with the changing sense of troubles and solutions among the young.

In the 1950's there were few notable cults. In the 1960's, various values and groups achieved cult status. Drugs and loose sex, and apocalyptic dreams permeated the sub-culture of the young, and were influential even among young adults.

Out of the dissatisfactions of the 1960's came a fascination with imported value systems and religious ideologies. Many Americans became enchanted with Eastern mysticism, mixed with drug practices and sexual libertarianism. New life styles were experimented with. Young people left family and community in droves, immigrating to cult centers such as the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco, or Greenwich Village in New York.

In these places, and sometimes elsewhere, they encountered small, tightly organized groups of individuals dedicated to new, exciting ideas. Many individuals took these ideas seriously enough to place their lives, temporarily at least, at the disposal of these groups. Cults grew by leaps and bounds, and America began to sense the presence of an alien presence in its midst.

The young who joined cults were not all alike, but they tended to share certain characteristics that made most of them recognizable, psychologically and socially. Cult members were seekers and drifters, intelligent and confused, sincere and hypocritical. They were dissatisfied, but felt powerless, and therefore resented society. There were various outlets for such attitudes, outlets that were primarily negative, such as drugs, and political alienation, as well as cults.

Who Joins Cults?

Cults are usually joined to escape self-dissatisfaction, loneliness, and boredom. These feelings make people susceptible to the ideology of a cult. When we are unhappy, especially with

ourselves, or with our lives; when the pressure to succeed is great and our resources to succeed seem small, when the future looks dull and murky, religious conversion to a cult ideology temporarily solves these problems. Frustration and disappointment make us ready to accept a protecting power.

Cults impose harsh standards of discipline. Not only must you choose them, they must accept you. You must merit your membership by wholehearted devotion. If you fail, you will be disciplined or expelled. If you remain, you will know that you belong to the chosen, the elite, those set apart from ordinary mortals. You will be accepted as a member of a new family, attaining status, knowledge, and power over your destiny. In place of aimless self-indulgence you will learn self-control. Instead of self-hatred and depression you will gain self-respect and a sense of purpose. Where there was inner confusion there will be transcendent authority that cannot be doubted.

Religious conversion is not a new phenomenon. On the negative side, conversion increases the intensity of belief to an exaggerated point, producing intolerance of others, a zealous drive to convert others, and a masochistic need for some form of martyrdom and self-punishment. On the positive side, conversion can give one's life a sense of center, of meaning, and identity, an experience of integration of faith and life.

William James wrote that conversion is a process of inner healing, or unification of the self. Others have concluded that conversion is regressive, encouraging dependence on a group, a pseudo-solution to personal failure and guilt.

Religious conversion in the 19th century took place at revivals — public shows characterized by drama and emotion. Modern, cult conversion takes place in more private settings, but still drama and emotion are present.

Cults are regarded with suspicion and hostility by the families of converts. Cults are harassed by the institutions charged with social control and conflict resolution — the courts, police, mental health services, and other public agencies. At an earlier time in our history, mob action, lynchings, beatings, and arson were common responses to cults. In the two years following the 1940 Supreme Court decision that upheld the constitutionality of expelling the children of Jehovah's Witnesses from public schools for refusing to salute the flag, hundreds of acts of violence were committed against the Witnesses.

At Kennebunk, Maine, their Kingdom Hall was burned. At Rockville, Maryland, the police assisted a mob in dispersing a Bible meeting. At Litchfield, Illinois, practically the entire town mobbed a company of some sixty Witnesses who were canvassing it. At Connersville, Indiana, several Witnesses were charged with riotous conspiracy, their attorney mobbed, beaten and driven out of town. At Jackson, Mississippi, members of a veterans' organization forcibly removed a number of Witnesses and their trailer homes from the town. In Nebraska, a Witness was lured from his house, abducted, and castrated. In Richwood, West Virginia, the chief of police and deputy sheriff forced a group of witnesses to drink large doses of castor oil and paraded the victims through the streets, tied together with police department rope.

Leo Pfeffer

Barely three years later, the Supreme Court reversed itself, ruling that children could not be barred from schools for refusing to salute the flag. But between 1940 and 1942 the Jehovah's Witnesses were the victims of nearly uninterrupted violence and persecution. Today, the omnipresence of news media have tempered public reactions. Violence against cults is now more subtle and psychological, though still very real.

Most converts see their conversion as due to some sort of holy spirit, beyond human understanding. Psychological studies show that the personality type that tends to convert readily is the so-called *self-surrender* type, usually somewhat, more hysterical than normal, subject to mood swings, excitability, and fearfulness, tending to over-respond emotionally to various implications of beliefs, and to under-respond to the rational implications of beliefs. They also tend to be emotionally and sexually less mature than people resistant to conversion. They are naive and moralistic.

Critics of the studies these findings are based on the argument that this portrait fits only a certain sub-group of converts, those that have come into contact with psychologists who have renounced their conversions. Other converts have not been studied because they have not been available as research subjects.

Only 1 out of 10 converts come from non-religious backgrounds. Converts are usually rebelling against traditional, structured religion, finding a cult that expresses and embodies an appealing form of difference from how they grew up. They are not always "radical," i.e., choosing a belief system utterly opposed to the cultural commitments of their families. They are in a search of self, usually dissatisfied with their family and cultural origins, coming from families in which religion was a grim, repressive, and compulsive matter in their own, or in their parents' childhood.

Converts are rebelling against a background of either parental domination, or seeming parental indifference and ineffective religion, not against atheism or some other non-religious perspective. A strict religious upbringing can make converts. A permissive religious upbringing can also make converts. Converts' religious views are opposed only to certain facets of the religious views of their parents.

Cults appeal to the children of religiously conservative parents who had themselves been brought up very strictly, religiously speaking, and who are either repeating the pattern, or are determined not to treat their own children so strictly. Parents that don't require their children to acquire religion, don't give personal guidance in religious matters, and are saying, in effect, "I don't know" to religious questions, so "make up your own mind," these are the parents of a certain type of cult converts. These converts are reacting, to an extent, to a lack of parenting.

Those individuals most susceptible to cults have been found to be unhappy, lacking in self-confidence, and searching for an escape. Most cult converts are from the middle-class, but lacking in a sense of purpose. Working class youths rarely get involved in cults.

Cults emphasize community among a small group of converts, they have strong norms, they are highly structured, providing a totally organized life-style, dedicated to the cult goals.

The cult members surround converts socially, overwhelming converts with repetitious ideological education, preventing contact with others, controlling potential converts behavior and expressions of faith. Until they have proven themselves trustworthy, converts are not trusted. They are not allowed privacy or opportunities for reflection. They are not allowed to travel alone. The cult controls every aspect of the convert's life. Most other members speak only the words of the founder in the presence of new converts. Traditional religion can't compete with cults because churches don't offer such a firm structure of existence.

Converts stay with a cult for an average of 3-5 years. Therefore, cults have considerable turnover in membership, especially at the lower levels of organization. Only the leaders tend to stay on indefinitely.

Cult leaders begin movements with a high moral purpose. As their power grows, they very often use their power for personal gratification, financially, sexually, and symbolically.

Cults flourish in an atmosphere of rapid social change and personal stress. Converts are looking not only for something to believe in, but SOMEONE to believe in. Ultimately, you have to know something about the founder-prophet to understand the essence of a cult. The faith of the followers, the reverence and worship that disciples invest in their leader, transforms the person into an object of veneration.

The commonplace term *charisma* is usually understood to mean a person with a powerful personality that draws people to him. On closer examination, the phenomenon of charisma can not be divorced from the needs and perceptions of followers. Charisma is actually a relationship between leader and followers, not a characteristic of a leader. To worship a human being, to treat him or her as a god, to find freedom from stress in the adoration of a cult leader requires a very different form of consciousness than most Americans have as they go about their daily rounds. This is exactly what cults offer — a change in consciousness — altered perceptions of reality, intense emotional states.

Ironically, American society seems to have an almost unlimited capacity for absorbing symbols and interests of groups who peddle culturally and religiously alienated ideologies, stripping away the threatening, critical aspects, playfully indulging in the positive fantasies of such belief systems as psychodramatic retreats, feminist criticism, encounter sessions, assertiveness training, transcendental meditation, primal therapy, holistic health, scientology, biofeedback, massage workshops, and more. All have incorporated elements into them that originated in belief systems that directly challenged society. Yet cults themselves are highly unpopular with the overwhelming majority of adult Americans. The slightest mention of them evokes expressions of criticism and hostility.

Robin Williams, an American sociologist, says that our culture is marked by a *central stress upon personal achievement, especially secular occupation achievement. The 'success story' and the respect accorded the self-made man are distinctly American.* In America, the "self" has achieved mythical, heroic

status, as part of our secular religion of success. Cults preach abandoning all secular and materialistic aspirations, telling its followers to ignore what the world thinks of them and to welcome persecution and self-sacrifice.

In the 1950's young people wanted to fit in. In the 1960's young people wanted to stand out, to avoid the unquestioning conformity of their parents' generation. In the 1970's Americans discovered that America was not all-powerful, that education no longer guaranteed upward mobility. So many of the youth of the 1970's were, more than anything else, depressed about their future, lacking enthusiasm, interest in work, or self-discipline. They were insecure, having internalized despair. And it was in the 1970's that cults became a commonplace phenomenon in American life.

The 1970's witnessed a wide-spread upsurge in cult activity and membership. The lack of restraint and career-orientation that characterized so many youth of the 1970's were a mix conducive to cult conversion. The 1970's was a difficult time to come into adulthood. Some rejected society as beyond redemption, choosing to drop out and seek some private salvation through drugs, violence, oriental philosophy, or life in a commune. Some adopted a negative identity, rejecting everything their parents taught them to value, and valuing everything their parents taught them to reject. Most flowed from one immediate dissatisfaction to another, and many became converts.

The typical converts of the 70's did not suffer from physical deprivation. They suffered from anxiety and depression, and a terrible emptiness, an overpowering sense of *ennui*.

The cults of the 1970's were aggressively proselytical. They seized upon potential converts, exposing them to a regimen of influences not unlike the brainwashing techniques developed by the Chinese communists in the Korean War. Conversion to the cults of the 70's, and the brainwashing practiced on American prisoners of war during the Korean War were both crisis experiences that involved:

1. maintaining one's sense of identity
2. creating an inner state of harmony
3. going through an emotional upheaval that produces changes in an individual's thinking and behavior
4. caused by group pressures involving interrogation, confession, and intense, focused discussion
5. within a highly structured organization and time-schedule
6. introducing the convert to a new vocabulary and new ideas
7. relentless sessions producing exhaustion and a corresponding mood of suggestibility
8. inducing self-criticism, doubt, fear, and guilt
9. repressing the convert's usual psychic system of self-control
10. replacing it with another psychic system of self-control

In summary, a conversion-prone personality is placed into the context of a crisis-causing process, resulting in a dramatic transformation of the individuals' beliefs, values, and conduct.

In the typical cult, there is a daily routine that encompasses every thought, feeling, and act. From the moment the potential convert awakes in the morning until he or she retires at night,

every ounce of energy is directed toward the goals of the group. The Cult members project an homogeneous happiness to the converts. Personal idiosyncrasies are suppressed as undesirable. Cult members often apologize for manifestations of individuality. For example, at the Children of God headquarters there was a sign in the kitchen *There Is No Room for Self Here*. Total fulfillment is received, total obedience must be given.

Cults equate poverty with purity. The adherents of cults are models of sacrificial asceticism. They give up everything to follow the group, give it up TO the group. And their lives are given over, primarily, to raising funds for the cult.

The founder-prophets of cults, on the other hand, flaunt spectacular wealth. For example, before Sun Myung Moon visits a local Unification Church, his followers raise enormous sums of money through the sales of candles, flowers, or other objects, to purchase a suitable domicile for him. While his followers slave 12 hours a day to raise money for the church, he lives like a Greek shipping magnate.

The Children of God, most of them personally destitute, surrender all to Moses David, the leader of that cult. While he lies in the lap of luxury, they support themselves through the sale of literature and artifacts. The opulence that surrounds Swami Proabhupada astounds outsiders, but delights his followers.

In almost every case, the wealth of a cult belongs to the organization, not the leader. But what glorifies the leader brings honor to the rank-and-file members. Disciples feel neither exploited nor underprivileged. The leader asks nothing for himself, at least overtly, and offers followers total fulfillment. Therefore, no gift is too great for the leader. Disciples often compete with each other in offering the leader the most, often returning from fund-raising activities flushed with a sense of victory, eager to give the money to the leader as an offering.

Disciples often disguise themselves, or dress as ordinary people, in order to approach people for money. Donations are requested for non-existent purposes. Disciples skillfully work crowds like charlatans and confidence men. Cults often teach their members various deceitful practices to raise funds. E.g., "Buy books for needy students!"

Cult conversion is usually shallow, revealing a one-track mind. Converts are often annoyingly immature. They indulge in hero-worship, in spite of the fact that cult leaders are often crooked and exploitive. They have abandoned the search for truth in favor of the search for a good fantasy.

Converts have been traumatized, thrown out of emotional balance. They have sublimated their instinctual feelings, choosing to deal with a projected image of their dreams in the person of the leader. Redirection of their feelings has given them a feeling of intense relief, release, and purification, stimulating their sense, transfiguring their world.

People who fall in love, who are born again, who first use psychedelic drugs, who achieve a breakthrough in psychotherapy, who strike it rich in the lottery, or who first confess some significant sin all share a pattern of response. The "object" of their experience, the focus of their attention, is

endowed by their minds with a quality of "numinosity," of "charisma," of a holy, or other-worldly difference, quite beyond the sphere of ordinary perception and feeling.

The leader seems to be a "living force" as an almost electric energy seems to fill the convert. The convert is attached to a "communion" that transforms his or her life, and at the same time the convert feels an overpowering sense of obligation, debt, and unworthiness. Such experiences are among the most intense people can ever have.

The need for belief, and for the experience the belief generates, causes most converts to ignore any information or reasoning that discredits the source of the experience. Negative information is characterized as inspired by Satan, or by evil opponents in "this world."

Above all, the cult member needs to believe in belief itself.

Belief in belief is incredibly American. Our society believes not so much in God, as in believing itself. Religion is regarded as a magic solution that instills moral values, dispels fear and guilt, creates confidence, mends broken hearts, rears perfect children, liberates us from anxiety, and comforts the afflicted.

The whole nation is a sect that believes in religion even though the vast majority of us have only the most fleeting acquaintance with the doctrines or ritual practices of any specific religion.

We are intolerant of cults because they challenge our own nationalistic belief in simple rules, the inherent goodness of Americans, and happy endings when the play is over. Asians and Europeans say *Americans have no soul*, that *Americans are philosophically naive*.