

What is a Cult?

By Sandra Tanner

Mormons object to the application of “cult” to Mormonism, but it fits many of the basic elements. There are two ways to look at the word cult, in the social/psychology sense or in the Christian/religious sense.

A social scientist would list marks of a cult as:

The Doctrine is Reality

There is no room in a mind control environment for regarding the group’s beliefs as mere theory, or as a way to interpret reality or to seek reality. The doctrine *is* reality. . . . cult doctrine always requires that a person distrust his own self. The doctrine becomes the “master program” for all thoughts, feelings, and actions. . . .

Reality is Black and White, Good Versus Evil

Even the most complex cult doctrines ultimately reduce reality into two basic poles: black versus white; good versus evil; . . . us versus them. . . . The “huge conspiracies” working to thwart the group are, of course, proof of its tremendous importance. . . .

Elitist Mentality

Members are made to feel part of an elite corps of mankind. This feeling of being special, of participating in the most important acts in human history with a vanguard of committed believers, is strong emotional glue to keep people sacrificing and working hard. . . .

As a community, they feel they have been chosen (by God, history, or some other supernatural force) to lead mankind out of darkness into a new age of enlightenment. . . .

Group Will over Individual Will

In all destructive cults the self must submit to the group. The “whole purpose” must be the focus; the “self purpose” must be subordinated. . . . Absolute obedience to superiors is one of the most universal themes in cults. Individuality is bad. Conformity is good. . . .

Strict Obedience Modeling the Leader

A new member is often induced to abandon his former behavior patterns and become “dedicated” by being paired with an older cult member who serves as a model for him to imitate. . . . One reason why a group of cultists may strike even a naive outsider as spooky or weird is that everyone has similar odd mannerisms, clothing styles, and modes of speech. . . .

Happiness through Good Performance

. . . The cult member learns that love is not unconditional but depends on good performance. . . . Competitions are used to inspire and shame members into being more productive. . . . Relationships are usually superficial within these groups because sharing deep personal feelings, especially negative ones, is highly discouraged. . . .

Manipulation through Fear and Guilt

The cult member comes to live within a narrow corridor of fear, guilt, and shame. Problems are always the fault of the member and are due to *his* weak faith, *his* lack of understanding, . . . He perpetually feels guilty for not meeting standards. . . .

No Way Out

In a destructive cult, there is never a legitimate reason for leaving. Unlike non-cult organizations that recognize a person’s inherent right to choose to move on, mind control groups make it very clear that there is no *legitimate* way to leave. Members are told that the only reasons why people leave are weakness, insanity, temptation, brainwashing (by deprogrammers), pride, sin, and so on. . . . Although cult members will often say “Show me a way that is better than mine and I will quit,” they are not allowed the time or mental tools to prove that statement to themselves. They are locked in a psychological prison. (Steven Hassan, *Combating Cult Mind Control*, Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1990, pp. 78-84)

Many people coming out of the LDS Church report just such things in their experience as a Mormon, especially the returned LDS missionary.

Briefly, a Christian perspective on marks of a cult would be:

They add to the Bible.

They may have additional books of scripture or their leaders are the only spokesmen for God. These are considered more reliable than the Bible.

They subtract from the person and work of Jesus.

Mormons claim to be the same species as Jesus, with the same potential. He is literally their older brother, all born in a pre-mortal life to Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother. Jesus is “a” god, but not “the” God of the Bible. They subtract from the atonement by adding temple work as a necessity for eternal life.

They multiply the requirements for salvation.

Jesus' atonement on the cross is not enough, a person must add all sorts of works for the organization to merit eternal life, such as temple marriage.

They divide between themselves and Christianity.

Mormons say they are "the only true church" and the only ones who represent God on earth. They thus divide themselves from the Christian community. They do not recognize any Christian baptism as valid, only those performed by the LDS priesthood.

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