
Q What characteristics define a cult?

A Cults, or more specifically, destructive cults, are characterized by the following differences from mainstream groups:

1) In religious cults the leader is the central focus of belief. In mainstream religions, G-d is the central focus.

2) Cult recruitment includes deception and concealment of identity and requirements of affiliation. Mainstream groups use no deception and new members are fully aware of the teachings and expectations before they make a commitment.

3) Cults use mind-control techniques and forms of hypnosis to indoctrinate followers. Emotional needs are exploited and people are held psychological hostages through peer pressure, guilt, and fear. Mainstream groups do not resort to unethical means to persuade members.

4) Leaders of cults make their own rules and laws which are often contrary to the rules and laws of society. They often reframe criminal acts (cheating, lying, stealing, even murder) as the will of G-d. Mainstream groups uphold and value the laws of society.

5) Cults separate and alienate people from family, friends, and society. Mainstream groups value healthy involvement with family, friends and society.

6) Cults are self-serving, often amassing financial fortunes for the leaders at the expense of the followers. In mainstream groups, leaders serve the people and contribute to the welfare of society in general.

Q Do cult leaders really believe what they preach?

A We can't know what they really believe, but their acts speak for themselves. Many leaders of religious cults claim to be G-d's special messengers, prophets, Jesus, the Messiah, or G-d Himself. For example, Jews believe that "the messiah" will bring about peace for mankind. This appears to be a noble and serious task. One cult leader who claims to be the messiah goes to Las Vegas and gambles huge sums of the hard-earned money that his followers collect, for 10 to 15 hours a day, on street corners. Other self-proclaimed "messiahs" sexually abuse men, women, and children in their groups. Most cult leaders have made slaves of their followers, and caused considerable damage to minds and bodies and lives. Families too have suffered great harm.

Q What happens to cult members 10 years after they join?

A A number have left in disillusionment. Most are still in the cults. These days we hear people say that their sons and daughters (and sometimes mothers and fathers) have been in cults 10, 12 and 15 years.

Q Is "Jews for Jesus" a cult?

A Most Hebrew/Christian groups, like Jews for Jesus, do not fit the specific definitions of cults. However, many of them use cult-like tactics in their recruitment.

Q Are Hebrew/Christian groups as big a problem as the cults?

A Both cults and missionary groups continue to grow at a rapid pace. Twenty years ago there were a few thousand members of a handful of cults and not more than a few thousand Jews in missionary groups. It is estimated that more than 20 million people have been involved in cults since the 70's and as many as half a million Jews are now involved with missionary groups.

Q How do people join cults and missionary groups?

A "Joining" is a gradual process that starts with a personal contact by an appealing, friendly individual. Recruiters look for lonely, depressed, confused, vulnerable people. They offer help, friendship, love and "quick answers" to complicated problems. The vulnerable may feel that their needs are being met and come to depend upon this new source for support. The one-on-one relationship expands to an entire group. For a lonely person, instant acceptance by a friendly group of people is very enticing.

Q Are people who join cults weak people?

A Stressful circumstances such as school problems, loss of a romantic relationship, confusion over career goals, financial pressure, disillusionment, etc. can cause sudden vulnerability. Needy people are not as discerning as they might ordinarily be, and are easy prey for a deceptive, alluring recruiter.

Q Are people who get involved in cults less intelligent than others?

A On the contrary, cultists are bright, idealistic, caring individuals. They get “hooked” because they believe they will be doing important work for the betterment of mankind. *Nobody joins a cult; they join a cause!* Intelligent people also have needs, frustrations and disillusionment. It is more a matter of feelings than intelligence. If people always dealt at an intelligence level, we would not have the divorce rate we have, nor would anyone ever make mistakes. How often do we ignore what we know and act on what we feel?

Q Is there any way a person can avoid getting involved in a cult?

A We hope so! The first and most important safeguard is to realize that anyone can end up in a cult. Momentary crisis situations make people vulnerable. When you acknowledge that it can happen to you, you will be more aware and less gullible. This is especially significant considering the deceptive, seductive and extremely persuasive tactics of recruiters.

Second, if you are going through a rough time and you are far from home, be especially careful who you place your trust in to help you. Call home. Let your parents or siblings know you are having difficulty. Contact a friend.

If you are in school, contact the Hillel or a local rabbi; go to counseling services on or off campus. Cult recruiters are not always friendly strangers; they can be classmates, people in your dorm, even professors.

If you are asked to go to a lecture or free dinner, don’t yield to the pressure or go out of curiosity without knowing the nature of the group. Don’t give your name, address, or phone number. If you are considering accepting their offer, take their phone number and tell them you’ll be in touch after you check them out. Then check them out with your local Jewish community, a local rabbi or call the **Jews for Judaism** office.

If the recruiter pressures you, walk away. Cult recruiters count on your good manners to listen politely which gives them the opportunity to persuade you.

Q Those are things we shouldn’t do. What can you tell us to do?

A Care about yourself as a person and as a Jew. Caring about yourself as a person means that you will not allow anyone to take advantage of you, that you will not be victimized, that you will not be compromised. Caring about yourself as a Jew means that you will accept being part of the continuity of your people, that you will know what Judaism stands for, and what it means to you.

For further information, or a private consultation, contact:

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10
FREQUENTLY-ASKED
QUESTIONS
ABOUT
CULTS
&
MISSIONARIES
