

Cults serve spiritual potpourri to students

Cults are dishing out their spiritual concoctions, and college students are their best customers.

"I think students are real susceptible," says Dick Beswick of Campus Interfaith Ministry. "They're idealistic, experimenting with values, and in many cases have just been weaned from the care and support of their family."

Because students are besieged by so much information and so many perspectives on life, they are looking for something or someone to unify their lives, adds Beswick, who teaches a yearly class on cults. "College is a good place to have your mind blown."

The cults cook up easy, simple answers to life's questions for students with dis-integrated minds, he says. Students are attracted by the concern — with no apparent ulterior motive — that cults show. Once a person is in the group, he tends to hang on to the love and acceptance even if he begins to notice untruth or immorality, Beswick adds.

And even with recent publicity about cults such as Jonestown, Beswick says people are still easily convinced to join cults. For example, two years after Congressman Leo Ryan was gunned down by Jonestown members, Ryan's daughter joined the Hare Krishnas.

Publicity has affected the recipes of cults, however. Beswick says cults have made two key moves: being less visible and using critics. "They're lying low a bit" but still actively recruit new members with their transcendental menus, he says.

"Cults want you, or your money, or both."

To cults, Eugene is a good place to pick up new recruits, Beswick says. "Eugene has been a haven for cults for at least the last ten years."

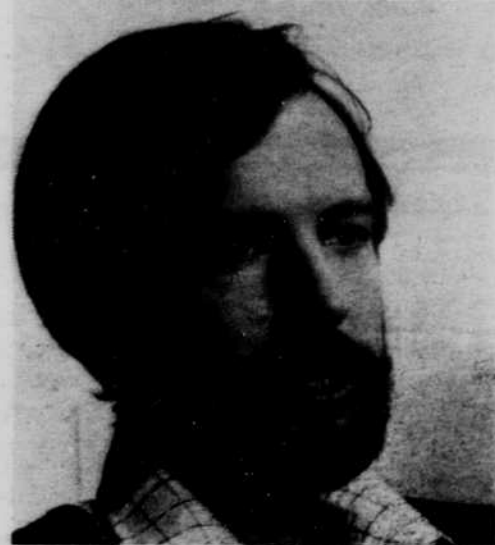


Photo by Mark Pynes
Dick Beswick

'Cults want you, or your money, or both'

Eugene is not alone, says Doug Groothuis, a staff member of McKenzie Study Center with a bachelor's degree in philosophy.

"We live in a cult-prone society," Groothuis says. "People feel futile in the midst of pluralism, the ocean of differing beliefs and spiritual overchoice."

The breakdown of the family contributes to the societal hunger that makes people seek a cult diet, he says, adding that people are looking for family-type relationships that include authority and stability. "Cults are like a surrogate family model in some ways."

Cults mix two major ingredients: sociological manipulation and theological twists, according to Dean Halverson of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project in Berkeley, Calif.

Theological components include a "false or inadequate basis of salvation" and a "false basis of authority," Halverson says.

There are three non-theological elements, he adds. First, cults tend to isolate their members from the outside world by controlling incoming information.

Second, an "enslaving organizational structure" is common, where members are required to turn over all money to the group. If someone wants to leave the group, he has no means to do so.

And third, there is usually an "inner circle" in the cult where leaders will share "deeper teachings" with a member when they think he is committed enough to stay with the group. For instance, Halverson says, a newcomer to Transcendental Meditation often discovers later the Eastern religious roots of TM.

Both theological ingredients must be in a group's cookbook to qualify it as a cult, and the others usually are there in varying degrees, says Halverson.

For example, Beswick says esf is a "different stripe of cult but just as deadly. The dynamics of their technique and the end result has a hold on people's minds."

Cults seek to control their members with a charismatic leader or an attractive doctrine that originates in the group, says Beswick, adding that questions are viewed by cult leaders as evidence of evil. "There's a no-exit kind of mentality."

A "powerful experience" is often used in addition to sleep deprivation, food deprivation and non-stop teaching to keep members under control, says Beswick. "Many of the cults have some way of inducing an experience which leads to a very profound hold on members."

Demonic activity is behind some of the more dazzling experiences, he says. "I don't see any other explanation for it." Psychological techniques take time to develop, but Guru Maharaj Ji "seems to zap people almost instantaneously," so they taste "secret nectar" and hear "heavenly music."

Spiritual twisting is essential to the cults and many bake their doctrines in an oven of Eastern thought.

"They deny salvation by faith and radically mis-interpret or usurp the authority of the Bible," says Groothuis.

Beswick adds, "When you deviate from the basic position that the Bible in its entirety is inspired by God, it's fairly easy to come up with almost anything."

In cults, experience is exalted over doctrine, with the leaders' experience enthroned as the authority, says Beswick. "Christianity always contains a real union of the Holy Spirit and the Bible. Christianity takes the burden of interpretation off of one particular man or group and places it on each Christian."

Cults' main thrust is "the idea of secret, hidden knowledge, disclosed only upon initiation," says Beswick. "The Bible is there for anyone to read."

Cults usually mix the Bible with other sources, Halverson says. "Any group that is going to find credibility in the United States is going to use the Bible as at least one source."

Using Christian terms may make a cult easier to swallow even if the heart of the group is anti-biblical, says Groothuis. "There are cults that are clearly Eastern, while some are a mixed bag often with a Christian residue."

Eastern influence is quite common to cults, especially the concept of "all is one," and each person is a god who needs the secret of divinity revealed to him, according to Beswick.

There is no right or wrong if "all is one," says Groothuis. "Ultimately they say that any right/wrong distinction is an illusion." Charles Manson thought if he was god he could do anything, says Groothuis.

Traditional Christianity says God is a moral being, and right and wrong are determined in reference to him, Beswick says, reciting, "Woe unto those who call good, evil, and evil, good."

Cults also discount the historic Christian view of Jesus as fully God and fully man, according to Groothuis. "All cults will re-define the person and work of Jesus."

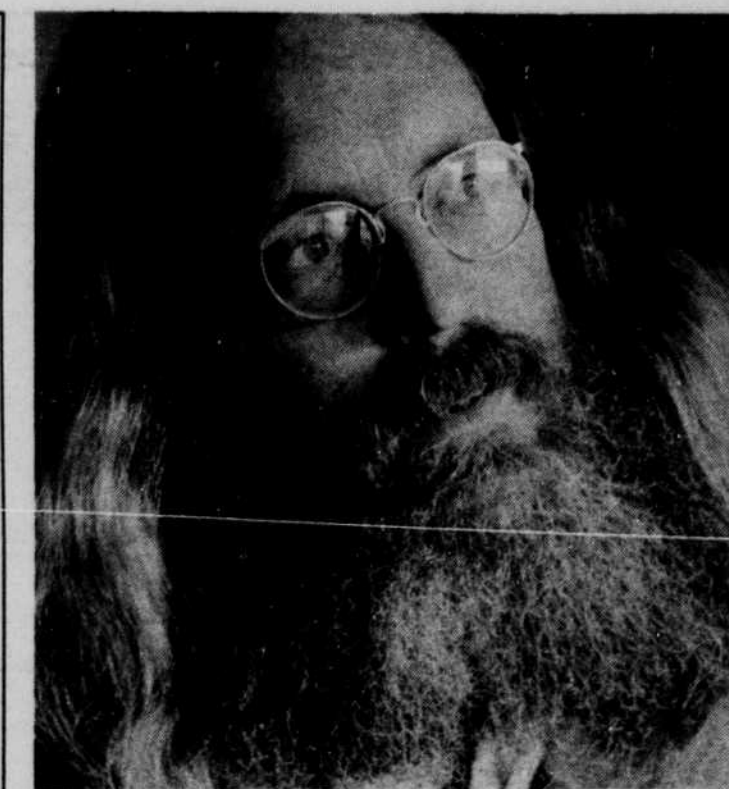
Both Beswick and Groothuis say the proliferation of cults do not detract from the truth of Christianity.

"All of this can't be explained on purely psychological terms but reflects spiritual realities. People should evaluate the actions of all groups," says Beswick.

Groothuis says the Bible itself warns against false teachers and "plurality of error doesn't invalidate what is right."

"Go to the documents themselves. Realize the claims Christianity makes. Go to them with an open heart."

Story by Ron Hunt
Graphic by Max DeRungs



Thomas Brown

'Do I look like Jim Jones?'

'We're not a cult,' says Brotherhood

Cult is not a nice word.

It conjures up images of lifeless bodies near an empty Kool-Aid vat, glassy eyes, zombie-like behavior, kidnapping by de-programmers and the anguish of parents cut off from their children.

And it's a word now being used to describe the Christ Brotherhood commune in Eugene, a religious group that made national news this week when state officials took custody of 15 commune children and charged brotherhood member Thomas Brown with sexual child abuse.

"Do I look like Jim Jones?" asks Brown, a self-described elder of the group, with a snort of disgust. "How about Hitler? That's just ridiculous. We're as far from being a cult as you can get."

"It's absurd to try to categorize us as a cult," agrees Bob, another member of the group. Members go by their first names only.

But former members of Christ Brotherhood and two University experts on religious movements say it's not Brown's appearance but his beliefs that justify the label "cult."

"I definitely think they're a cult," says Doug Groothuis, a staff member of McKenzie Study Center and the teacher of a SEARCH class on worldviews. Groothuis and others point to the group's lifestyle and religious beliefs to back up the categorization of the group as a cult.

The group integrates its counter-culture lifestyle with the New Testament gospels and several gnostic (a combination of Christianity with Greek and Oriental philosophies) gospels.

"The gospel is the fulfillment of the flower child," Bob says. "Christ was the ultimate flower child."

"Jesus is a hippie role model for them," says Groothuis. "They're Jesus names only."

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