

LEAPS OF FAITH

Students explore alternative religions

BY PAMELA HARRELL

PHOTO AT RIGHT BY PAUL KOTZ, U. OF KANSAS

PHOTO AT BOTTOM BY GARY ROTUNDA, THE WAY INTERNATIONAL

SORRY NIETZSCHE — TODAY, THE PHRASE "GOD IS DEAD" holds as much water as a stale Communion wafer. From the Bible Belt to the D.C. Beltway, Net-heads discuss the meaning of Baha'i while television viewers bear witness to CNN updates from assorted holy wars.

Some students would like to forget the religious regimen dictated by well-meaning parents. To many of us, God was someone who held up dinner and wasn't too keen on coveting.

But according to Cynthia Kisser, executive director of the Cult Awareness Network (C.A.N.), more college students are turning to less-structured or nondenominational religions. Kisser reports an increasing number of complaints about Bible-based groups preying on this resurgence of student interest in spiritual issues.

"College students are at an open point in their lives intellectually," Kisser says. "They're questioning. They're searching." The new pressures and freedoms associated with college may increase a student's vulnerability to membership in religious cults, she says.

Marks of a Destructive Cult

- Thought reform — Members are manipulated, coerced or persuaded to act or think in accordance with the cult.

- Charismatic leadership — One person or a small group of individuals at the top makes all of the decisions and filters selective information to the lower levels.

- Deception or hidden agendas (often financial)

- Isolation of members — Members often dissociate themselves from family and friends who are not involved in the organization.

- Exploitation of members — Members may be required to give an excess amount of money or energy to special projects.

- Special or divine purpose — The rights and independence of members are secondary to the goals of the group.

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Cult or not a cult?

But don't confuse cults with alternative religions, says Carol Giambalvo, an exit counselor for individuals trying to leave a cult. "The issue is not one of belief systems — it's one of psychological coercion and thought reform," she says.

According to C.A.N. representative and former cult member Martin Butz, cults are groups that use some means of coercive persuasion or deception to recruit and maintain members.

"We estimate that there are 2,500 to 5,000 destructive cults and that as many as 5 million people are affected by the cult issue," Butz says.

A consensus on cults, their number and their impact is unlikely. According to J. Gordon Melton, director of the Institute for the Study of American Religions in Santa Barbara and author of *The Cult Experience* (Pilgrim Press), "reports of cults numbering in the thousands and involving people in the millions contain grossly exaggerated figures circulated by anti-cult groups to promote a climate of hysteria."

Melton estimates that there are only 700 "alternative" religions in the United States and Canada; 75 have been identified as cults. About 25 of those groups are considered controversial, and the remaining 50 are only involved in passing controversies.

For more than 15 years, C.A.N. has been collecting articles on the controversial ministry The Way International, a Bible-based Christian group with headquarters in New Knoxville, Ohio.



Outlining the spirit or losing your religion?

Bill Greene, director of public relations at The Way International, says the ministry has no members, although there are fellowships in every major city in the United States and 37 countries. "People are free to come and go as they wish," Greene says. "You do not join. It's a free-willed decision."

Will and The Way

Ramona Meraz, a 21-year-old Arizona State U. senior, is a "follower" of The Way International. According to Meraz, the Way teaches followers how to ask questions and find answers in The Word (God's).

"Anyone who has been to a Way fellowship or meeting can tell you that nothing strange goes on," Meraz says.

Witnessing, evangelizing, pioneering — whatever the term — makes up part of the weekly work for followers. Meraz asks new friends to come to at least one fellowship service.

"A lot of friends I've brought to fellowship do come back," Meraz says. "They don't necessarily have the same commitment I do, but they see that they've been blessed."

Giambalvo says that new members typically devote only a few days a week to the group, but with time, the commitment involves more peripheral activities, such as picnics, date nights and Bible studies.

Greene counters that people who fellowship with The Way work only three to four hours per week.

In addition to doing course work for The Way, attending fellowship meetings and reading The Word daily, Meraz supports herself and receives grades worthy of grants and scholarships.

Meraz is considering dedicating her life to ministry in The Way Corps, but her postgraduate plans aren't set in stone.

Equally confused about postgraduate life is 23-year-old Jennifer Steedly, a former Jehovah's Witness and recent U. of Oregon graduate.

Steedly was a Witness before she started college. As a Witness, she was-

not allowed to date, celebrate birthdays or participate in sports or extracurricular activities.

"I was socially atrophied," Steedly says. "At first it was easier having people know I was a Witness because it excused my ignorance. Now only my close friends know."

During high school, Steedly pioneered door to door for 60 hours a month. After graduating, Steedly pioneered 90 hours a month and had a part-time job to pay for living expenses.

Emergency exit

Getting out can be as difficult as being in a cult, but many do eventually leave. Exit counseling is a voluntary method of intervention. With deprogramming, members are forced to listen to a counselor.

Steedly was a Witness for a year before her father, who was not a Witness, got her exit counseling. He became concerned when Steedly decided not to attend college.

"Going to college was deeply frowned upon," she says. "They felt the end of the world was near and your highest priority should be proselytizing."

At first, Steedly refused to speak with the exit counselors. Eventually, she watched a succession of videos about mind control, cults and the Witnesses and became convinced Steedly that she had been deceived by the leaders of the Witnesses.

Her faith in God was the only thing that kept her sane after leaving the Witnesses, Steedly says. By leaving, she lost contact with all of her family and friends still involved with the Witnesses.

"I've learned that there's a huge difference between believing in God and being religious," Steedly says. "I don't consider myself a religious person, but I still believe in God."

Destructive cults and myths go hand in hand, according to Kisser. One of the predominant myths is that people who get involved in these organizations are weak-minded or have some sort of psychological problem.

"We [at C.A.N.] want to emphasize that everyone is a potential recruit," Butz adds. "There are plenty of good people [in cults] — good people caught up in a bad thing."

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Ramona Meraz, a senior at Arizona State U., has found The Way.