

Let us pay

THE SECRET WORLD OF CULTS: Inside The Sects That Take Over Lives

by Jean Ritchie

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“By the late Seventies the [news] letters often contained pictures of Mo David himself indulging in sexual activity. ‘If you look at Bible history you’ll make the shocking discovery that most of God’s greats had oodles of wives, women, mistresses, harlots and what have you,’ he wrote. One letter, called ‘Jesus and Sex’, showed a woman squatting over a man and holding his penis. ‘Receiving Jesus is like sexually going all the way ... Of course we promote sex. And so does God. He created it! He himself made those organs and nerves to feel so good.’ ”

The word ‘Moonie’ conjures up unfavourable images to most people, usually of brainwashed adolescents abandoning their families, friends and studies to take up the worship of some obscure deity under the watchful eye of the charismatic Reverend Sun Myung Moon. Hardly any better received are the Hare Krishnas with their colourful robes, monotonous chanting and euphoric grins. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness and the Unification Church are two of the better known and most controversial religious cults, but there are literally hundreds of others dotted up and down the country. A few of them are home grown, but the majority are imported, either from the United States or from the Orient, usually India, and often then via the States where Eastern mysticism has very successfully had grafted onto it the trappings of Western materialism.

In *The Secret World Of Cults*, Jean Ritchie takes a long, hard look at the best known and a few of the more controversial cults, their *modus operandi*, their gurus (Bhagwan means ‘Master of the vagina’), and the machinations behind the scenes. In so doing, she reveals a web of subversion, crackpot dogma, pseudo-science, drug taking, empire building and mayhem, including criminal intrigue, fraud and murder.

The cults are not all quite as scandalous as they may sound from that description; in every large organisation, religious or otherwise, human nature dictates that such things will happen. What is difficult to understand though is how people can be introduced to a cult, and, in the course of a few days, sign up, donate all their worldly goods to it, ostracise their families, pack in their jobs or studies, eschew worldly pleasures and work long hours, virtually as slaves, for their new masters, whom they may not even have met.

Or maybe it’s not so difficult; those who join cults fall, overwhelmingly, into one fairly narrow category: they are young (though

not necessarily adolescent), of above average intelligence, often graduates or undergraduates, from middle to upper middle-class backgrounds, and, in the West, overwhelmingly white. Most if not all of them seem to be searching for something, if not the meaning of life then an end to war, hunger, suffering and everything else that angry young men of both sexes and all ages have sought in vain since recorded history began.

Ritchie interviews a number of ex-members, describes the often duplicitous ways in which they were recruited into the various cults, and outlines the techniques of ‘mind control’ by which they were converted and consolidated. These include sleep deprivation, mindless and mind numbing meditation, fatigue – both physical and mental – induced by working long hours, low protein diets, (in some cases) verbal abuse, and (in all) peer group pressure. Many neophytes are persuaded not only that their particular cult is the only path to salvation, but that

anyone outside it is in league with the Devil, and therefore there can be no rational debate with concerned friends, relatives or even parents who try to persuade them to leave. It is difficult to credit that any intelligent young person can be so gullible, but more than enough cases have come to light in recent years to substantiate Ritchie’s extraordinary claims.

Most of the cults consider that their end goal justifies any means – it’s all right to lie for Jesus. This applies especially to the dishonest way many of them raise funds from the public, funds which go, ostensibly, to relieve poverty in the Third World or for religious education, but in reality often go towards the upkeep of ‘the Master’s’ private yacht. She also classifies sects like the Jehovah’s Witnesses as cults, even though their members seldom give up their jobs to work for the cause, but lead, outwardly, normal if austere lives. Most cults do preach austerity and are outwardly non-materialistic, which is one of their great attractions to the dreamily idealistic young in a world where everyone knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. However, the higher echelons of most cults, and the leaders of practically all, have a penchant for Rolls Royces, personal jets and designer houses.

Around the Mormons hangs the taint of racial prejudice. It was only in June 1978 that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints decided to admit Negroes. Up until then they had believed that the whites were a favoured lineage who were sent to Earth to support Jesus. This obviously reflects the prejudices and social customs of the era, early 19th century America, when Joseph Smith and his perjured witnesses claimed to have found their “divine tablets”, gold plates on which was inscribed the Book of Mormon.

Another cult known for a prejudice of a different kind is the Jehovah’s Witnesses. No, they still will not give or accept blood, and in places their dogma is just as whacky



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as that of the Mormons. Founded in 1879, they have only been known by their present name since 1931, and the fortunes of the group have fluctuated. Membership picked up prior to 1914, when the end of the world was forecast, but when the year came and went and Armageddon failed to materialise, recruitment slacked off. So the goalposts were moved and 1925 was predicted as the next 'year of doom'. Incredibly, many true believers sold their homes and businesses, and "farmers did not bother to plant crops – confident that there would be no need to harvest them in the new kingdom..."

The groups that come in for most criticism, though, are those like the Moonies, which lure people away from their homes and families physically as well as spiritually, but Ritchie discusses other fringe movements including Scientology, which is ex-posed as being nothing more than the creation of a successful but third-rate science-fiction hack with a vivid imagination. How many Scientology neophytes realise that they have an immortal soul called a "thetan", that thetans created the universe and are "quadrillions" of years old?

Therapy cults, witchcraft and Satanism are also discussed, as is the topical and controversial subject of ritual child abuse. It is here that the book is flawed; Ritchie appears to take the current hysteria about young children being defiled, having snakes inserted in their stomachs (and so on) as evidence of ritual abuse on a massive scale, even though the legal authorities are sceptical to the point of being dismissive. The idea that children as young as four cannot be fantasising about such things may seem plausible enough but it is simply not true. However, the jury is still out on ritual abuse, and the recent cracking of a nationwide ring of homosexual paedophiles and child murderers may yet cause the sceptics to re-evaluate the evidence.

The other flaw the book has (but not a serious one) is that although there are numerous references in the text, it lacks a bibliography and relies too much on anecdotal evidence and unsupported testimony. Ritchie certainly does not go over the top in putting down cults, and although the reader is most definitely left with the impression that they are to be avoided like the plague, this is not a hysterical book by any means. Perhaps in the next edition, Ritchie will add a bibliography and thoroughly reference all testimony.

And perhaps she will also include what is arguably the looniest cult of the lot: the Fulham-based Aetherius Society, which was founded by self-styled Primary Terrestrial Mental Channel and Archbishop "Dr Sir" George King. His book *Life On The Planets* is still in print. Another excellent if somewhat dated book is *Cults of Unreason* by the late Dr Christopher Evans; this is still available from Prometheus. □