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I attended a conference at Morisset Hospital in 1977, when a psychiatrist associated with an ashram gave a lecture on the use of yoga to improve mental health. Specifically, techniques of relaxation (yoga nidra), breath control (pranayama) and meditation were advocated to overcome anxiety and to improve physical and emotional states. I later visited the headquarters of this ashram, near Gosford, to explore this further and also, as I was then working as a community psychiatrist, to see what this organisation had to offer as a resource.

This idyllic place provided support for all comers, even (initially at least) on a charitable basis, instruction in yogic practices, refuge, a structured environment suitable for chronic psychiatric patients, and a welcoming sense of community. That these were merely a facade was abruptly made obvious to me in 1987 when I questioned 7 teenage girls as to why their mentor (a senior female swami) had left under mysterious circumstances. The girls then admitted to me that the director and spiritual leader had sexually abused them for several years and that only recently their mentor had told them to tell their parents. Lengthy investigations by bemused police resulted in the gaoling of "Swami G" and various allegations of embezzlement of ashram funds. The ashram continues to function, but with a reduced number of swamis and several centres have closed as a result.

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While there is agreement in the literature about the characteristics of "destructive" cults, it is also noted that not all cults are harmful and that there is a grey area between benign cults, sects, and some religions. The narrow meaning of cult is worship of a person, thing or idea (LOTHANE). Common features include a hierarchical system with a strong figure(s) espousing an ideology that reduces ambiguities for a membership that is actively recruited. The new members subsequently become fervent followers, and are preoccupied with the group, which provides unique meeting places, rules and rituals (SCHWARTZ). Most psychiatrists would have no difficulty in applying these definitions to the Unification Church - the Moonies - or to Scientologists, but may be surprised to consider Lothane's suggestion that they also apply to Freudian, Kohutian, and Lacanian schools of psychology. Also, Jung mentions in "Memories, Dreams, Reflections" that when Freud announced his intention of identifying theory and method and making them into "some kind of dogma" he had no choice but to withdraw.

Margaret Singer has defined the "destructive" cult as an organisation in which:-

1. a leader claims divinity or special relationship with God;
2. a leader who is the sole judge of a member's actions or faith;
3. totalistic control over the members' daily lives;
4. totalitarian governance;
5. exclusivity and isolation;
6. development of deep emotional dependence;
7. prohibition of critical analysis and independent thinking;

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8. utilisation of methods of ego destruction and mind control;
9. exploitation of members' finances;
10. under-employment and exploitative working conditions.

A better term for so-called "brain-washing" is mind control. Lifton listed eight criteria for this from his studies of Korean war veterans. (The Unification Church originated in Korea, and Rev. Moon has links with the Korean CIA).

Lifton's criteria for mind control are:-

1. milieu control;
2. mystical manipulation;
3. the demand for purity;
4. the cult of confession;
5. sacred science;
6. loading of the language;
7. doctrine over person;
8. dispensing of existence.

There are various types of cults described by Singer, including:

OF CULTS
(SINGER)

- a. neo-Christian religious cults, eg. some Pentecostal groups,
"The Family" in Victoria;
- b. Hindu and Eastern religious cults - the Hare Krishnas,
Satyananda ashram;
- c. occult, witchcraft and satanism cults - Woy Woy;
- d. spiritualist cults;
- e. Zen and other sino-Japanese philosophical-mystical cults,
eg. Mahakari in A.C.T.;
- f. race cults - the Ku Klux Klan;

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- g. flying saucer and outer space cults;
- h. psychological cults - "Mind Power";
- i. political cults - Nazis;
- j. self-help or self-improvement groups which, over time, become transformed into cults.

The number of cults has dramatically increased over the last twenty years, yet there are well-known historical precedents - the Masada group suicide of 960 in 74 AD is usually seen as a courageous stand against Roman oppression, the Gnostics, Cathars, the Crusades, clashes between Shi-ite and Sunni sects for centuries, the fanaticism of Northern Ireland. These all developed in times of social upheaval and the present proliferation of cults is sometimes seen as a reaction to the cynicism following two world wars, then Vietnam.

Cults generally attract intelligent, middle-class, adolescents and young adults who are searching for some identity. In our culture, fathers have generally not fulfilled a role of nurturing, nor of spiritual guidance, so gurus (usually male) are very attractive to those seeking a spiritual meaning. Some authors quote a higher incidence of psychiatric morbidity but many stress vulnerability at developmental life stages, with the use of deception, induction techniques and thought-stopping rituals such as chanting, speaking in tongues and concentrated praying techniques.

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"Thought stopping is the most direct way to short circuit a person's ability to test reality. Indeed, if someone is able to think ONLY positive thoughts about his involvement with the group, he is most certainly stuck. Since the doctrine is perfect and the leader is perfect, any problem that crops up is assumed to be the fault of the individual member. He learns always to blame himself and work harder." Steve Hassan, ex Moonie, in "Combatting Cult Mind Control."

From my ten year experience with a local ashram, it is now obvious to me that it fulfills the criteria for a cult and various "mind control" techniques were used. However, I would like to stress that I still consider yogic techniques as valuable, effective, complementary to western medicine and sometimes superior - for example, the use of relaxation techniques and breath awareness instead of the doubtful benefit of prescribing benzodiazepines for panic disorder. Also, that chanting and praying techniques can be used to advantage.

Sine 1987, I have been looking at why this organisation failed to live up to the high ideals and long traditions of the Sannyas life. A leader who is idealised is then devalued when followers leave the group. This appears to be a necessary part of "de-programming" and is shown in books published by ex cult members - "The Dark Side of the Moonies" by Erica Heftmann, "Bhagwan - The God that Failed" by Hugh Milne, and "The Serpent Rising" by Mary Garden. While some of their criticisms are certainly valid, it is also important to look at the psychological

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reasons for people joining cults and the psychopathology of the leaders.

No doubt some cults attract borderline personalities, by offering a stable object, an auxiliary ego, and the fantasy of love and affection. Some can be beneficial in offering a structured environment for seriously mentally ill patients, so long as exploitation is minimal. Many followers go through their cult experience and gain considerably from it.

Cult leaders are often narcissistic, charismatic and paranoid. The special relationship between follower and guru may resemble those between narcissistic patients and their therapists, (and between trusting patients and narcissistic therapists).

An analogy is given by Marie-Louise von Franz in "The Way of The Dream" when she analyses a dream of King Gilgamesh, recorded 4,600 years ago when Gilgamesh was king of the Sumerian walled city of Uruk.

"In the middle of the night I walked proudly up and down among my people. There were stars in the sky. Suddenly, one of the stars of the sky-god Anu fell upon me. I tried to lift it, but it was too heavy for me. All Uruk assembled around this star and the people kissed its feet."

Marie-Louise von Franz goes on to say that Gilgamesh is the hero-king, fulfilling a collective role of power. The star represents his uniqueness and his soul, and is what the people

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worship, not his power. Humans tend to project the uniqueness and the greatness of their own inner Self onto outer personalities - it is easier to do this and follow a guru rather than one's own star. Gifted people often attract projections, and the devotion of others creates a temptation to develop an inflation, suffering "the madness of Caesars". Feelings of inferiority are just veiled inflation too.

If the Self is projected onto a superior, wise person, then this can be beneficial. If the Self is projected onto a healer, then by the faith shown in that healer, people are healed. Unfortunately, more frequently this fascination is negative, and one loses oneself in an infantile way, leading to fanaticism and fusion with the glory of the master.

Although sexual abuse of children by a spiritual leader/teacher/guardian/father figure is a gross betrayal, the ultimate betrayal is as described by John Hillman in "Loose Ends". In projecting their Self, the followers were denying their own uniqueness and failing to follow one of the main tenets of yoga - i.e. that answers are found within oneself.

The implications for psychotherapists are many - that the psychotherapist has to be aware of the dangers of the guru role, especially with patients who have a highly idealising transference. Also that the uniqueness of the individual must be respected, that our task is to assist the patient discover her/his own solution and not to impose a cultish dogma. The literal translation of "guru" is dispeller of darkness, and surely that is our aim too.

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Perhaps the last word can go Swami Satyananda, who has stated that the function of a guru is to lead one to the guru within. This experience has forced me to do just that.