HOW TO BECOME A CULT LEADER

On November 18, 1978, not many people knew much about the small South American country of Guyana. Even fewer outside of the San Francisco Bay area knew that a group of followers of the Reverend Jim Jones had set up a “model” community of believers in the jungles of Guyana. However, on that day 914 members of Jones’s People’s Temple committed mass suicide. A tub of fruit punch laced with cyanide and sedatives was brought out. Jones ordered his people to drink, informing them that they would soon be attacked by the CIA and that it would be better to die a revolutionary’s death. Adult members induced their children to drink first and then drank the mixture themselves.

The behavior of cult members is as mysterious as it is frightening. Members of Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church periodically engage in a mass marriage, being randomly assigned by Moon and his associates to mates whom they have never previously met. Members of David Berg’s Children of God willingly give all they own to the church. The backyard of one Children of God commune was filled with automobiles, buses, jeeps, and motorcycles that members, mostly teenagers and young adults, had donated to Berg. The followers of Swami Rajneesh turned over all of their worldly possessions to their leader and smiled benignly as he accumulated eighteen Rolls Royces for his personal use. One member of the Church of Armageddon jumped from a tree to his death believing that, because he had purified himself, he could fly. Other members of the cult sat hand in hand in a circle and connect themselves to electrical devices to see how much electricity their bodies can stand because “all substances are from God.”

Many claim that cult members are “brainwashed.” This rather frightening term was originally used to describe the persuasion tactics used on American prisoners in Communist Chinese prison camps during the Korean War. These camps were totalitarian environments in which the captors came to control the thoughts of the POWs by controlling all sources of information and by systematically rewarding and punishing appropriate and inappropriate thought. Since then, the term brainwashing has been used rather loosely and has taken on a meaning surrounded by mystery. It has come to refer to exotic (and often undescribed) persuasion tactics that are practically irresistible. Victims of brainwashing are depicted on television and in the movies as if they are in a hypnotic trance. This representation is extremely misleading.

Although they may seem mysterious, the persuasion tactics of cults are nothing more or less than the same basic propaganda tactics that we have seen throughout this book. Cults simply use these techniques in a much more systematic and complete manner than we are accustomed to. Simply because the end result is dramatic and bizarre does not require that the means to get there be mystifying. Indeed, in case any of you would like to be a cult leader, we can list seven mundane but nonetheless “proven-effective” tactics for creating and maintaining a cult.¹

¹. Create your own social reality. The first step in creating a cult is to construct your own social reality by eliminating all sources of information other than that provided by the cult. Cult headquarters should be isolated from the rest of the world—a farm in Oregon, a secluded house on the outskirts of town, a jungle in Guyana. Members’ mail should be censored. Family should be prevented from visiting members. Strict boundaries between “believers” and the “unredeemed” must be maintained. Such censorship can be physical, that is, forcibly excluding outsiders and physically restraining wayward members. However, it is much more practical to teach members self-censorship by labeling everything that is not “of the cult” as “of the devil.”
The second step in constructing a social reality is to provide a cult’s-eye view of the world. This picture of the world is then used by members to interpret all events and happenings. For example, Jim Jones taught that there is a constant threat of nuclear war and that the world is full of racism. To be prepared to live in this evil world, one must be ready to die. Suicide practice drills were conducted to prepare members for the inevitable attack on the Temple by this evil world. The Unification Church teaches the Divine Principle, a doctrine claiming that humanity must be restored to God’s grace through payment of indemnity (penance) and the advent of a new messiah (the Reverend Moon). The believer is thus prepared to atone for sins through service to the church and to accept the leader’s word as truth. David Berg, known as Moses to his followers, creates social reality for his Children of God through a series of “Mo Letters.” These letters purport to be revelations from God and describe the cult’s theology as well as providing guidance on how to interpret world events. For example, his letters advise cult members that they are special and thus above the law, that the world is rotten and thus it is acceptable to lie and steal for the church, and that sex with Berg is a good idea.

To get a real feel for the full power of a cult, imagine adopting their beliefs for just a moment. Try seeing the world as if you were a cult member. In a bizarre way, the world makes sense, perhaps for the first time in a cult member’s life.

One useful technique for constructing social reality is to create your own language and jargon. For example, Divine Light Mission members refer to their services “satsang” and “darshan.” The Unification Church refers to lying to the unredeemed as “heavenly deception.” Scientology teaches that the “thetan” (soul) is impeded in its many lives by “engrams” (aberrations) that result from wrongdoing. A good vocabulary is useful for putting the “right” spin on things. By teaching a battery of clichés such as “bourgeois mentality,” “Krishna consciousness,” “of the world,” and “in the Lord” any event is quickly defined as good or evil and critical thinking is abruptly terminated.

When it comes to teaching your social reality, here is one additional point to keep in mind: Repeat your message over and over and over again. Repetition makes the heart grow fonder, and fiction, if heard frequently enough, can come to sound like fact.

2. Create a granfalloon. The granfalloon technique requires the creation of an in-group of followers and an out-group of the unredeemed. The technique allows you to control members by constantly reminding them: “If you want to be a chosen one, you must act like a chosen one. If you are not chosen, then you are wicked and unredeemed. To be saved, you must act like you are supposed to act.”

Love Israel, head of the Church of Armageddon, teaches his followers that he is the “king” and “Christ’s go-between connecting the members with heaven.” He tells his followers, “Don’t use your little mind inside. Use your big mind, the collective family’s mind. We’re your mind.” Love Israel understands the granfalloon technique.

The essential ingredient in establishing an in-group of believers is the creation of a social identity—an image of who “we” are. Joining a cult represents a break from the “other” world and the acceptance of this new identity. Many cults require a “baptism” or other initiation to indicate acceptance of the new identity. A new name can be given; all the members of the Philadelphia-based group MOVE took as their last name “Africa;” the members of the Church of Armageddon use the last name “Israel.” Hare Krishnas adopt distinctive orange robes and eat a special vegetarian diet. Moonies do not possess their own clothes, but share among themselves; when their clothes get dirty, they turn them in to be washed and take another set from the commune’s supply. Thus a simple indicator of one’s personal identity—what one wears—belongs to the group. The Divine Light Mission “satsang,” or religious sermon, is designed to encourage new members to start answering the question: “What is a premie [the term for a member]?” Church of God followers adopt new biblical names. To further increase the cohesion of the group, all new recruits must learn three Bible verses in the morning before any of the new recruits can eat breakfast.

The outward trappings of the believer—the new name, distinctive garb, a special diet—all confirm that the member is indeed a chosen one. To retain this valued membership, all one needs to do is continue to grow in this newfound life and, of course, continue to obey.

The reverse side of the granfalloon tactic is the creation of an out-group to hate. The Children of God teach members to hate their parents. One Mo letter states that parents are evil; they are not your true family; we are your family now. Chinese prison wardens taught
Americans POWs that the capitalist system is corrupt. The Unification Church teaches that only believers will be resurrected at the final coming. The Church of Armageddon teaches that the “world” is bad. The creation of an evil out-group serves the dual purpose of making members feel good about belonging to the group (“I’m glad I’m not like them”) and increasing their fears about leaving the group (“I don’t want to be like them”).

If granfalloon techniques are correctly applied, then you should be successful in creating fear of the “outside” world and the belief that the cult is the only solution to a happy life. Life is thus impossible outside the cult—the only solution to life’s problems.

3. Create commitment through dissonance reduction. Cults can insure members’ obedience by establishing a spiral of escalating commitment; the cult member, at first, agrees to simple requests that becoming increasingly more demanding. Jim Jones used such a technique, extracting great trust from his followers one step at a time. Some light can be shed on what led to the final mass suicide if we look at it as part of a chain of events.

Let’s start at the beginning. Jim Jones was a dynamic speaker and preacher. It is easy to understand how a charismatic leader like Jones might extract money from the members of the church. Once they had committed themselves to donating a small amount of money in response to his message of peace and universal brotherhood, he was able to request and receive a great deal more. Next he induced people to increase their tithes to support the church. Jones would often ask his members to perform loyalty tests, such as signing a blank confession of “sins” and admitting to feelings of homosexuality or the commission of aberrant sexual acts. Jones would tell members that “if you were really committed you would be willing to do anything for the church.”

Next, Jones induced members to sell their homes and turn over the proceeds to the church. Soon, at his request, several of his followers pulled up stakes, leaving family and friends, to start life anew in Guyana. There, not only did they work hard (thus increasing their commitment), but they also were cut off from potential dissenting opinion; they were surrounded by true believers. The chain of events continued. Jones took sexual liberties with several married women among his followers, who acquiesced, if reluctantly; Jones claimed to be the father of their children. Finally, as a prelude to the climactic event, Jones induced his followers to perform a series of mock ritual suicides as a test of loyalty and obedience. Thus, in a step-by-step fashion, the commitment to Jim Jones increased. Each step in and of itself was not a huge and ludicrous leap from the one preceding it.

After making an initial commitment one does not feel comfortable reneging on the deal. To justify the sensibility of the initial commitment, the member is often willing to do more and then still more—to make increasingly demanding commitments. In this way, the resolution of dissonance and maintenance of one’s self-image as honoring commitments form a powerful rationalization trap.

Cults employ other rationalization traps as well. The guilt of a sinner can be reduced by a gift of everything one owns to the cult; embarrassment over forced sex with a leader can be relieved by thinking that one needed such self-sacrificing “discipline” cruelty to outsiders such as parents can be justified by seeing the need for even more cruelty; a feeling of stupidity for giving all to the cult can be overcome by rationalizing it as devotion to a noble cause. Note also that the member, after having done all these things, is faced with a dilemma: “How can I explain all that I have done to those outside the group?” This requires the creation of a sensible, coherent justification that is not easily forthcoming. The rationalization trap is sprung.

4. Establish the leader’s credibility and attractiveness. Most cults have leader myths—stories and legends passed from member to member concerning the life and times of the cult leader. Unification Church biographers compare Moon’s birth in Pyung-buk, North Korea, with Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem—both were at night, both were in small unknown villages, and both marked the dawn of a cosmic transition. When Moon was 16 years old, Jesus appeared and told him, “You will be the completer of man’s salvation by being the second coming of Christ.” According to Divine Light legend, Maharaj Ji, as a young child, was already a great spiritual leader and teacher and was thus appointed to head a holy family in India. In answer to the question, “Just who is the Guru Maharaj Ji?” premies will often answer, “The Guru Maharaj Ji is God.” After an initial period of indoctrination, wardens in Communist Chinese prison camps strove to maintain an
wayward prisoner in the ways of the truth. Children of God leader David Berg, blessed in his mother's womb so he would be like Moses, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and his namesake David, is the fulfillment of many biblical prophecies. David Berg's powers, described in his pamphlet "The True Story of Moses and the Children of God," are so great that, "You can even rebuke the devil in the name of David and he will flee. No power in the world can stand against the power of David."

What is the purpose of such myths? It is hard to disobey a person believed to be "the son of God" or, at least, blessed by a divine purpose. Anybody in their right mind should seek to identify and be like a holy person.

5. Send members out to proselytize the unredeemed. Witnessing to the unconverted has the obvious advantage of bringing in new members. Perhaps just as important, proselytizing can ensure that members are constantly engaged in self-sell, or self-generated persuasion. The act of witnessing requires the member to state anew to many different people the positive advantages of being in a cult. In arguing to convince others, members convince themselves. Evangelical activity also strengthens resolve. Each witness is likely to elicit many negative responses or an attack on the cult. In defending their beliefs, cult members learn to refute a wide range of attacks, thus inoculating themselves against counterarguments and thereby maintaining belief in the cult.

6. Distract members from thinking "undesirable" thoughts. Most cult doctrines are hard to take seriously, much less accept. The cult member, especially a new recruit, is likely to question and counterargue such basic points as the value of giving all one owns, especially a new sports car, to the cult and the merits of working sixteen-hour shifts and turning over all proceeds to the cult leadership. The old advertising saw "If you don't have anything to say, sing it," probably never applied more. How, then, does a cult leader distract a member from carefully scrutinizing and questioning the cult's doctrine?

The Children of God use a combination of techniques. First, they never leave new recruits alone to think for themselves. Bible verses are played continually on a loudspeaker, and a trainer follows the new recruit around preaching Bible verses and Mo letters—even as the new recruit goes to the bathroom. The new recruit is deprived of food, water, and sleep. It is difficult to think when you are hungry and thirsty and fatigued. Famed deprogrammer Ted Patrick went through this indoctrination; having been deprived of sleep for forty-four hours, he describes his feelings:

At first you are frantic for silence—just five minutes of peace and privacy. Then your senses begin to get numb—you grow accustomed to the constant noise. You also, as you get tired, stop really registering what they tell you. You don't hear individual words anymore, just a stream of babbling and shrieking. I guess that's when the programming starts becoming effective—when the conscious mind stops functioning out of weariness and all that propaganda begins to seep into your unconscious."

There are other ways to disrupt counterarguing in a cult. Chanting and singing prevent thinking about anything else but the chant and the song. Meditations such as those performed by the Divine Light Mission, in which the premie spends hours trying to visualize light, hear music, taste nectar, and speak the primordial vibration of existence, prevent the meditator from focusing on other, more worldly concerns. Nonstop activities such as proselytizing, working, and cooking and cleaning for other members further limit the opportunity for careful thought and personal reflection.

Once the recruit has accepted the cult, the task becomes one of preventing further close scrutiny and thought about the merits of membership. This can be done by teaching that any "disagreeable thought" is evil and from the devil. For example, if a member doubts a leader's command or starts to wonder about the merits of a particular theological point, he or she is counseled that this is "out of the Lord" or "from Satan" and should be rebuked. Hare Krishnas are required to take frequent cold showers to eliminate thoughts about sex. Members thus become their own mind police. Should this fail, more overt tactics may be necessary. For example, Jim Jones required a female member of Jonestown to have sex in public with someone she disliked as punishment for wrong thoughts. Observers get the message too: Control your own thoughts, or at least the expression of those thoughts.
7. Fixate members' vision on a phantom. The successful cult leader is always dangling a notion of the promised land and a vision of a better world before the faithful. Unification Church members follow and attend to the teachings of the "Lord of the Second Advent" so that they can be resurrected to the perfection state during the third and final testament stage. Jim Jones offered Jonestown to poor residents of San Francisco as a place that would, of course, require hard work, but would afford members the opportunity to "live comfortably—you’ll have your own home, get a good school, college, swim, fish." Similarly, the nineteenth-century Oneida commune was working to build "heaven on earth." Divine Light Mission faithful are striving to see a light during their meditation and thus become a premie. It can be accomplished by service and devotion to Guru Maharaj Ji. Hare Krishnas believe that their chanting and dancing is a way to stave off the inevitable decline and downfall of humanity. In L. Ron Hubbard’s Church of Scientology, members are working for a state of "clear." To become a "clear," members pay a high tuition to attend Scientology classes; devoted members may spend $10,000 to $15,000 in a matter of months.

By fixating a member's gaze on a future phantom, you provide a powerful incentive to maintain service to the group. Believers will be afraid to stop working, fearful that they or the world may lose the desired prize if they take even just one break. The average Moonie puts in an estimated sixty-seven hours a week working for the cause. It is also likely that most new recruits will be in a state of despair. Phantoms can establish hope—a powerful motivator of human behavior—by providing a sense of purpose and mission.

Our purpose in presenting these seven tactics is, quite obviously, not to have readers of this book go out and start their own cults. Because “brainwashing” can be viewed as “hocus-pocus,” some people are apt to deny the very real power of cult tactics. Others are likely to attribute all sorts of magical powers to the cults, standing in awe and fear of their abilities to control minds. By discussing the persuasion tactics utilized by cults, we are attempting to remove some of the mystery and ultimately reduce the danger of cults.

But there is another reason for understanding the persuasion tactics of cults. Cults use the same persuasion tactics often used by other propagandists; cults just use them in a more thorough and complete manner. It may be useful to reread this discussion and, instead of thinking of cults, consider your everyday social groups such as family, church, country, or place of work. We bet you’ll find that there is a touch of cult-like behavior in much of our social lives.