

BOOK REVIEW

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A Review of *Cults and Personality*

REFERENCE: MacHovec, F. J., *Cults and Personality*. Charles C Thomas, 2600 South First Street, Springfield, IL 62794-9265, 1989, 195 pp., \$34.75.

Cults, especially satanic cults, have sparked much interest in recent years. Cult leaders inspire morbid fascination. Concern is expressed for the followers, who may have been proselytized with subterfuge and induced to join with subtle coercion. When an innocent person with no interest in cults is victimized in a violent cultic ritual, the community reacts with horror and indignation. On the other hand, society values religious independence from the state and the individual's right to make personal choices. So many questions beg for answers, particularly regarding the interplay between cults and individual personalities. Regrettably, hard data are lacking because cultists, especially members of secret cults, elude investigative research and because serious researchers in sociology and psychology eschew mysticism and concentrate their efforts on more easily observed behaviors, both normal and abnormal.

A cult is defined by the author as "a group of persons who share in a special interest differing from the established majority or current religious, social, or cultural values, who meet regularly to continue and extend their purpose or mission, independent of previous relationships with family, friends, religion, school or career, with beliefs, practices, and rituals which reinforce cult values and norms" (p. 10).

Cults can be religious, psychotherapeutic, serving personal growth, political, popular, or faddist. Some, but not all, cults are harmful.

Cults and Personality attempts to clarify the relationship between cults and human psychology, to distinguish fact from fictional ideas about cults, and to address both professional and popular interests. The book "steers a middle course between what is known and what is unknown" (p. vii). It is not limited to methodical research findings—this kind of information concerning cults is sadly sparse in this book, or anywhere, for that matter.

The author, Frank J. MacHovec, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist who has, over the years, attempted to apply Eastern philosophies to psychotherapy. Posttraumatic stress disorders are of special interest to Dr. MacHovec, who is also skilled as a hypnotist. The most singular feature of his written works, and, specifically, *Cults and Personality*, is his attempt to draw upon many diverse disciplines of study to understand cultural and psychological phenomena.

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His collection of various theories and concepts for understanding the interplay between cults and the personalities of cult members is the book's strength and weakness. The value of this multiple-theory approach lies in the attitude of the reader. Some will find his expansive eclecticism refreshingly free of theoretical bias and conceptual constriction. Authors on human behavior cited in this work include, among many others, Bandura, Dollard, Erik Erikson, Finichel, Frankl, Freud, Fromm, the Gluecks, Goffman, Jung, Kohut, Laing, Lifton, Maslow, Skinner, and Yalom. The book offers a brief introduction to some key concepts of many of the world's best known scholars of the mind. The rich variety of theories and concepts which may assist in understanding cult phenomena is indeed interesting.

Undoubtedly, other readers will not be enchanted by the theoretical expansiveness offered here. Those wedded to a particular orientation may regard the conceptual adulteration as excessive and of dubious coherency. Even readers who enjoy an integrative approach may strain to discern meaningful interconnectedness between such concepts as disculturation, life script, ego states, operant conditioning, twinship, and syzygy.

The author's concept of science is very inclusive. "With respect to cults, we must see truth in total context, across history and culture, beyond the seeming reality of the moment. That in essence is the *scientific method*" (author's emphasis, p. 6). Serious scientists are familiar with another, more specific definition of the scientific method.

Cults and Personality is organized into only four, not-so-short chapters: Chapter 1, "Cults: What are they?" Chapter 2, "Cultists: Why are They?" Chapter 3, "The Cult Experience: Beliefs, Practices, Rituals," and Chapter 4, "When Cults Hurt." Each chapter covers a wide range of tenuously associated topics which might have been more effectively handled as separate chapters: for example, emotional trauma, cults, experience in court, and therapy and deprogramming.

The forensic expert interested in legal issues will find this topic handled concisely, if not parsimoniously, in less than two pages. When legal action is taken against a cult because of alleged harmful effects, the cult typically will claim First Amendment protections. However, a body of case law is developing which supports some actions for wrongdoing, even when the harmful conduct is supported by religious beliefs. Here the discussion could have been expanded to include other legal claims which can be made against cult leaders, including violation of federal antipeonage law, kidnapping, and civil claims of fraud and unlawful imprisonment.

Legal conflicts arise between concerned parents and their adult cultist children. Parents occasionally petition the court for temporary conservatorship to permit "deprogramming" their unwilling children. These efforts usually fail because the cult-induced children are regarded as mentally competent adults who do not have serious mental illness.

Cults and Personality does not present original data on cults. Nor is the material here based on direct research of cults or cultists. Even the case examples of therapeutic hypnosis do not involve cultists. Again, accurate information about cults and cult members, especially secret cults, is understandably difficult to obtain. Indeed, the author urges that more information is needed.

Even with its deficiency in direct information about cults, such a book provides interesting reading. Several examples of notable cults that have shaped world history are described. The author briefly discusses a wide range of theoretical concepts which may further understanding about the curious relationship between the cult, the cult leader, and the cult member.