

# Greater Manchester Humanists

## Humanist Discussion Group

**16 February 2021**

**(Zoom meeting 7.30-9.00pm)**

### **Cults – The Dangers of Undue Influence**

(What cult-like organisations have we encountered?)

Cults are groups or organisations that exert undue influence over their members. Undue influence can come in several forms, it may:

- Encourage behaviours based on irrational or unproven ideologies which are accepted as true by the members.
- Cause financial or other loss (which seems entirely justified to the cult member).
- Divert life effort from more worthwhile causes (while fooling members into thinking that the cult is in fact the best way to spend their lives).

The history of the most extreme religious cults is well documented, and I do not intend to dwell on them here. More interesting is the presence of cultish features in seemingly more moderate organisations not all of which are religious in nature. There can be, for example, political cults, business cults, therapy-based cults, alien cults and multi-level marketing cults.

But what distinguishes a worthwhile cause from a cult? No-one inside a cult identifies it as such. So how can we tell the difference? For example, how would we compare followers of political movements led by Donald Trump, Jeremy Corbyn and Martin Luther King?

To better understand self-replicating belief systems please watch the following TED video in which Dan Dennett explains Memetics:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzGjEkp772s&t=937s>

There are many analyses of why people join cults and I have recommended some sources at the end of these notes. The following list is a compilation of reasons why cults attract members. Not all cults have all these features depending on the method of influence used.

*Appeals to vulnerable persons and/or wish to change their old values systems. Sometimes people will have suffered a personal or professional loss. Others may be lazy and looking for someone else to guide them and make life decisions. Cults target such individuals.*

*Offers answers to life's great questions. Sometimes a great truth or even the one and only truth. Gets you closer to god or the ultimate truth.*

*There is a charismatic leader or, if that leader is dead, a powerful governing body of some sort (usually all male).*

*A high level of commitment is required and often this limits free time to do other things or explore other world views. This can separate members from other people. Some organisations change people's names or move them to distant locations.*

*Involves intense (often group) experiences often induced by meditation, visualisation, prayer, singing or chanting. (Very often these have known explanations such as hyperventilation, trance induction or hypnosis but followers think they are transcendent in nature).*

*Members may also be subject to subtly coercive persuasion such as guilt, shame, or fear of punishment in future lives. In the most extreme cults members who leave are subject to harassment, threats or abuse.*

*Suggests we do not place too much faith in our own minds but instead submit to god or the leader or the teachings.*

*Doubts are our own fault – for example due to our imperfect understanding or bad karma. People feel pressured to pretend that ‘they ‘get it’. People who disagree are flawed or even ‘ill’. The teachings fall on ‘deaf ears’.*

*Critical thinking is encouraged but only if it leads to the correct conclusions. (No cult admits it tells you what to think without your evaluating the teachings). Criticism is restricted. Outsiders can see the cult member exists in a closed system of logic.*

*It is acceptable to mislead the flawed people to promote the greater good.*

*There are threats in the outside world (eg Satan, Demons or Worldly people)*

*Members are an elite/ chosen/ especially fortunate. Members exist in a ‘state of grace’. Leaving means the loss of that elite and special status.*

*A state of dependency is fostered. The prospect of leaving may induce powerlessness, anxiety and fear. Members have nowhere to go or no skills to use in the outside world.*

*Cult members (especially the leaders) cover up immoral acts that seem terrible to normal people (eg Archbishop Carey or Cardinal Nichols covering up child abuse).*

*Leaving the group will have social consequences either through loss of friends or deliberate shunning.*

*The apocalypse is just around the corner.*

*Ex members describe themselves as having been in a psychological and intellectual prison. Current members have no understanding of that fact.*

*Family relationships are enlisted – for example the leader is ‘Father’ or ‘Mother’ and fellow cult members are ‘Brothers’ and ‘Sisters’.*

*The belief system elicits new behaviours, and old behaviours and attitudes are suppressed.*

*Cult members seem strange to outsiders.*

*Members may be put on a path of progressive revelation and may not realise that there is a hidden agenda.*

Recommended Sources:

- The Chair of Dorset Humanists Reflects on the Alpha Course (Start at 23 minutes if short of time) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfWPK-biOzI&t=1561s>
- Margaret Singer on the Characteristics of Cults <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8bRBFhMEQFk>

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