ADOLESCENT ATTRACTION TO CULTS

ABSTRACT

This article details the reasons behind adolescents' attraction to cults. It is recommended that parents, teachers, and counselors familiarize themselves with the warning signs. Suggestions are offered on how to make adolescents less vulnerable to cult overtures.

Adolescence is the transitional period between the dependence of childhood and the assumption of the rights and responsibilities of adulthood. It is a time when young people attempt to understand who they are, what they can do, and why they are here. Their freedom to make decisions greatly increases, but, at the same time, certain adult privileges remain inaccessible. Their lives seem to be filled with possibilities, restrictions, and uncertainties.

New and unfamiliar situations quickly generate unrest and crisis, arising during an important period of identity development. To establish a coherent identity, adolescents draw from models and ideals found within their environment. They may seek out reliable standards to achieve a sense of security, only to find confusing, paradoxical social rules. They therefore may have difficulty distinguishing between heroes and anti-heroes, and may end up seeing themselves only in negative terms, producing a severe identity crisis. Having sought independence, they find that they fear standing alone.

Thus, it is not surprising that adolescents, having encountered conflict, confusion, and frustration, often feel disoriented and anxious. Fearing rejection by a society that they do not understand, they may retreat into isolation, or demonstrate inappropriate emotional outbursts, aggression, and rebellion, and embrace radical causes. All of these are youthful cries of pain, cries for help and understanding.

Traditionally, young people have been critical of, and impatient with, the established values and behavior patterns of society. They desire change, and experience frustration when it does not occur. Their idealism leads them to believe that those in power, as well as established institutions, have failed to meet the legitimate needs of various groups. To them, social problems and their solutions stand out in stark clarity.

In addition, during adolescence higher-order thinking skills become engaged; it is a time of intellectual curiosity, of seeking truth. Youths are intellectually and spiritually open to new ideas. Unfortunately, they have not achieved the balance of experience and maturity that would enable them to sort truth from illusion and reality from fantasy in all situations. They have not gained sufficient sophistication to evaluate --critically and methodically--complex philosophies.

Many youth movements play upon this naive idealism and intellectual curiosity. The young person may be challenged to answer the clarion call to join a group that professes to offer a vision of a perfect society, one in which all injustices are rectified. After all, how could any self-respecting person, caring for the world and its people, not be willing to give this "new way" a try?

Group membership can lead to either positive or negative outcomes. For example, the Peace Corps and various forms of community service and mentor programs are excellent ways for youth to achieve self-actualization. On the other hand, gangs and cults suppress individuality and foster estrangement from society.
The personality profile of an adolescent susceptible to cult overtures might include identity confusion or crisis; alienation from family; weak cultural, religious, and community ties; and feelings of powerlessness in a seemingly out-of-control world. Studies have indicated that a surprising number of cult members come from democratic and egalitarian homes and upper socioeconomic levels, rather than over-permissive, overindulgent, dysfunctional, and poor families. In fact, Andron (1983) reports that many cults focus on the recruitment of gifted and creative adolescents. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to delineate a precise portrait of potential adolescent cult members.

In a review of the literature, Wright and Piper (1986) reported that alienation from family relationships precedes cult membership. Youths are compensating for unfulfilled needs (e.g., love, sense of belonging), the lack of which hinders the development of self-esteem, social competence, and mastery of life tasks. In turn, this generates attempts to gain approval and recognition. Wright and Piper indicated that the attraction to cults is strengthened by the fact that a cult's rules often are better defined than those of the family. Adherence to the cult lifestyle often results in radical behavior changes, along with "a loss of identity" compensated by an "enslavement to cult leaders" and further estrangement from family.

Parents, teachers, and coaches sometimes place excessive demands on youth. Such pressures frequently lead to undesirable outcomes, such as physical or intellectual burnout, drug use, or escape to what appears to be the safety of a cult. Adults must remember that there is a time for everything--a time simply to enjoy being young, and later, after normal adolescent development has progressed, a time increasingly for admission into the competitive, success-oriented adult world.

There has been a marked decline in the influence of the family and traditional religious beliefs, with a concomitant liberalization of personal values. The social climate has nourished rejection of cultural and moral standards. This has left adults and especially adolescents with the dilemma of finding values with which to fill this vacuum, so as to be able to resolve old problems and discover new solutions. Mike Warnke (1972), a former drug addict and satanic high priest who became involved in the anti-occult counseling program Alpha Omega Outreach, explains that a person "is constructed like a triangle, with one side representing his physical needs, the second his mental needs, and the third his spiritual needs. A person fulfilling only his physical and mental needs is not complete... [and] is consciously or subconsciously undergoing a search for spiritual fulfillment, wherever he can find it--in drugs, the occult." The loss of society's religious and social moorings leaves many youths adrift. The desire to become a complete person--to complete the triangle of their being--leads many, Warnke warns, into dangerous ways.

In the absence of authentic, stabilizing standards upon which youth can depend and trust, self-destructive tendencies quickly emerge. Adolescents become vulnerable to academic failure, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, risk-taking behavior, violence, and gang and cult membership.

Zimbardo and Hartley (1985) reported that approximately 50% of the high school students included in their survey had been approached to join a cult. Wright and Piper (1986) have indicated that cults are most successful in recruiting individuals between 18 and 23 years of age, when persons are most likely to be seeking "perfect" answers to life's questions and problems. Because of their immaturity, they fail to take into account the long-term consequences of cult membership.
Rudin (1990) defines cults as "groups or movements exhibiting an excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing. Such cults employ unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders to the detriment of members, their families, or the community." Cults attract youths experiencing psychological stress, rootlessness, feelings of emptiness and of being disenfranchised, and identity diffusion and confusion. Such youths come from all walks of life and from all classes of society. Cults seem to offer confused and isolated adolescents a moratorium--a period of dropping-out, or a "time-out"--as well as a highly structured sense of belonging and a means of escape from being "normless."

The terms "church," "sect," and "cult" should be distinguished. Church usually is applied to specific religious organizations. A sect is an offshoot of a particular religious body, whose members prefer to follow doctrines or teachings that differ from the parent group. A cult exhibits many of the characteristics of a sect. However, it represents a major and abrupt break with the past. A cult is viewed by its members as the climax of history, and often emphasizes devotion to a single person. Legitimate movements withstand the test of time to prove their authenticity.

A distinguishing characteristic of cults is that they prey upon a person's fears through a systematic process of "brainwashing" and "programming." They recruit aggressively. Strong efforts are made to separate members from family and former associates--to cut them off from their past--in order to establish new values and standards requiring total dependence on, and devotion to, the cult itself. There is usually an all-powerful authoritarian leader. Members may be psychologically, physically, or sexually abused, with discipline maintained through fear. Rudin (1990) states that "what makes a group a cult is the deception and manipulation of its members and the harm done to them and to society, not its ideals or theology." Notable examples have been the mass suicide of the followers of Jim Jones in Guyana (1978), the holocaustic climax of the disciples of David Koresh in Waco, Texas (1993), and most recently the group suicide of the Heaven's Gate believers in San Diego (1997).

Davidowitz (1989) has stated that an increasing number of adolescents are falling under the influence of Satanism. Evidence includes the desecration of cemeteries and the theft of bodies; the appearance of satanic symbols and themes in contemporary literature, art, and music; and in an extreme case, the satanic, ritualistic murders in Matamoros, Mexico. Belitz and Schacht (1992) have indicated that male youths from abusive families are especially vulnerable to satanic cult recruitment. Adolescents seeking a sense of power over their own lives as well as over others are susceptible.

According to Rudin (1990), this process has several stages. Initially it begins as a fun experience, with adolescents involved in fantasy and role-playing games based on occult ideology and incorporating an obsession with violence. These adolescents are usually deeply involved in heavy metal rock music and, frequently, brag about their activities to boost their self-image. This type of involvement tends to make the individual receptive to satanic activities. A "dabbler" stage follows, in which satanic literature and paraphernalia are acquired. The transition from fun-and-games to serious interest opens the door to satanic recruitment through clubs, hangouts, and private parties. As involvement deepens, cruelty to animals, rape and molestation, drug use, and even murder may follow.

It is the responsibility of society in general and the family in particular to be alert to the danger signs, especially during the early stages of youth involvement. However, with society fractured and unable to fulfill this role, educators, social workers, and psychologists must rise to the
occasion. In addition, the cooperation and support of religious institutions, civic organizations, and government agencies must be enlisted.

School and youth organizations can be particularly helpful. The sensitive teacher or counselor can be watchful for the warning signs—confusion, alienation, sudden changes in personality or behavior, withdrawal from home and social activities, the development of antisocial attitudes, a decline in academic achievement, the assumption of an unusual style of dress, and preference for music with satanic themes—and intervene in a timely fashion.

However, caring adults must be proactive rather than merely reactive. They can help adolescents to develop a strong self-concept, one that is not vulnerable to the harmful attractions of a cult. They can assist youths to formulate positive, realistic life goals, and ease the emotional impact of inevitable frustrations. Adults must be willing to discuss—knowledgeably, frankly, and honestly—the various personal and social issues confronting adolescents, such as substance abuse, AIDS, teenage pregnancy, as well as the insidiousness of cults.

Adolescents seek self-identity and acceptance as unique individuals. They search for standards and values upon which to model their behavior. Educational and social institutions must be made welcoming places in which young people feel a sense of belonging, places of understanding and trust, places of stability in a rapidly changing world. Adolescents should be shown ways to achieve a richer and more meaningful life, to attain their natural potential, and to become contributing members of society. The meeting of these challenges and opportunities is what education for life—not for death—is all about.

Reprint requests to Brother Eagan Hunter, C.S.C., Professor of Education, St. Edward's University, School of Education, 3001 South Congress Avenue, Austin, Texas 78704.

REFERENCES


By Eagan Hunter