

Cults Under Fire

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...

—First Amendment,
U.S. Constitution.

First of three parts
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The Pilgrims and Quakers and other religious cults left their homes in England and elsewhere to come to America. They took their lives in their hands for their beliefs.

Religious cults, offshoots of the great mother religions, continue to form and take their lives in their hands today.

The impact of 914 deaths at Jonestown, Guyana, in South America sent a shiver of fear through many Americans. Religious and non-religious alike were shocked at the magnitude of the murder and suicide of hundreds upon hundreds of men, women and children.

News coverage of the grisly event, followed by a suddenly-important examination of the Peoples Temple of Christ

in San Francisco, has been massive.

Almost simultaneously, the search began for other groups, other cults, whose fanaticism might lead them to commit similar crimes. Synanon, a drug-rehabilitation organization turned religious, came under the publicity glare when its leader was accused of causing the near-murder of a critic by rattlesnake attack.

Television broadcaster Walter Cronkite was moved to comment that "something" should be done about the cults.

Reactions to Jonestown have caused both embarrassment to other Christian religions and fear among small, specialized religious groups that they will be labeled "cults," and subjected to a popular witch-hunt reminiscent of McCarthyism and its search for Communists in the 1950s.

"They're after us!" complained one spiritualist church member. "They are putting the blame on anything that sounds like a cult."

One couple, followers of an Eastern religious master, canceled a planned vacation trip with their leader after their parents hysterically begged them not to

go when they heard of Jonestown.

Santa Cruz, with its history of both mass murders and off-beat religious and spiritualist groups, has undergone intensive scrutiny from investigative reporters and concerned persons looking for groups similar to the Peoples Temple.

Despite instances of such gruesome rites as cat-and-dog skinning at the time of the Kemper and Mullin killings six years ago, there seems to be little in the way of such violence here today.

With one or two possible exceptions.

"The potential for violence among very religious, meek-seeming people can be surprisingly high," said Father Michael Zaharakis, a worker priest with the Mesbasrim Eastern Orthodox church.

The very desire to rid themselves of evil and follow only the ways of God can lead to demonic possession, psychic phenomena, mental illness and violence, Zaharakis said.

"They gunny-sack their emotions. They submerge natural feelings of aggressiveness under a cloak of love, sweetness and light," he said he has found in his work as church exorcist. Zaharakis

SEE BACK PAGE

Cults Under Fire

FROM PAGE 1

has had mental health training at Mt. Hood College, Oregon, and directed his church-sponsored group home for disturbed teenagers.

The result of constant efforts to be passive — to not allow themselves resentment and anger while at the same time submerging themselves in the "fight against evil" eventually causes the passive-aggressive person to "flip out, and suddenly go berserk," Zaharakis said. "Some small incident will be the straw that breaks the camel's back. They will become mentally ill, violent or possessed, saying 'The Devil' made them do what they subconsciously wanted to do: display their anger."

He points out that a large percentage of Jonestown residents were big-city black people, disadvantaged and oppressed, and hoping for salvation through religious affiliation with the People's Temple.

It made them candidates for the ultimate act of anger: self destruction and murder.

"Fortunately, Santa Cruz County has few groups like that," said UCSC professor of religious studies Donald Nicholl. "Our groups here are for the most part very non-violent. In spite of everything, they have maintained an atmosphere of gentleness, openness and understanding."

"This is still a small county, too, and the fact your neighbors know much of your business sort of keeps the air clean. It takes a big-city atmosphere for these people to get lost in, fester, and grow."

But sheriff's deputies, police officers, social workers and government officials don't agree there are no such groups in Santa Cruz County.

It's not the occasional "crazy" or "5150" (named after a code section on mental commitment) that marks a possible source of a "problem" group, but instance after instance of trouble: run-

away children, or those battered repeatedly; threats of violence by not one person but several; repeated violations of law or complaints by a variety of citizens.

Strange and bizarre ideas or actions may annoy or anger neighbors: One San Lorenzo Valley household of followers of a spiritual leader was told doorways were evil, so they were seen crawling in and out of the windows of their home. But this is not illegal nor necessarily an indication of danger.

Other persons complain of spiritual "rip-offs" when they were offered enlightenment but asked for money and property.

Others may fear talk of "translation" to another plane of existence means death or suicide for a spiritual group. But the group normally goes on talking — and living.

Bizarre sexual practices may outrage families and friends — and these practices can range from total abstinence and sexual separation of men and women, husbands and wives, to total indulgence or homosexuality.

Seldom does any one of these things attract more than passing attention from police authorities or the local community. In a society filled with trouble and violence, such "cult" ideas are usually minor problems.

It takes much more to create the kind of fanatical loyalty and total commitment to a group or leader that would lead to mass murder or suicide.

For one thing, the group must be large — large enough to isolate its members and insulate them from the influences of outside family, friends and neighbors. A group with open membership is not likely to generate the intense energy necessary for violent action. This isolation was a mark of the Guyana settlement of the Peoples Temple.

Of course, the same isolation can give

an intense religious experience without violence — and the sense of community can offer people a feeling of belonging and purpose and protection not available in the rough-and-tumble "outside" world.

Cult experts and psychologists like Dr. Margaret Thaler Singer have pointed out this is what has attracted young people by the thousands to the "Moonies" (the Unification Church of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon), the "Hari Krishnas" (Krishna Consciousness Movement), the Divine Light Mission and the Church of Scientology.

When followers of such movements give up their way of life, their property, and offer their personal dedication, the quality of the organization's leaders and organizers becomes critical. While any outside authorities are viewed with suspicion — including parents as well as government authorities — no real questioning of the group's authority or its leaders is allowed. Pressure to conform is enormous and members often feel powerless and even fearful any independent action will lead to direct retribution by group leaders.

And if the taste for power corrupts the leaders, often regarded as saints, prophets, or near-gods by devoted followers, the results can be disaster.

Communal living groups which offer that isolation and protection do exist in Santa Cruz County. But almost none have shown the intense commitment, resentment of outside authority, and leader god-worship that spells possible danger.

Yet there is one name that sheriff's deputies, district attorneys, county officials, probation officers, and local citizens say comes up again and again when the word "cult" is mentioned. That name is Christ Circle School.

Tomorrow: The Story of Christ Circle; a cult under attack.