

Los Angeles Times

THURSDAY,

Thursday, November 17, 1988

The Cult Wars

By BOB SIPCHEN, *Times Staff Writer*

Eldridge Broussard Jr.'s face screwed into a grimace of such anger and pain that the unflappable Oprah Winfrey seemed unnerved. It hurts to be branded "the new Jimmy Jones" by a society eager to condemn what it doesn't understand, the founder of the Ecclesia Athletic Assn. lamented on TV just a few days after his 8-year-old daughter had been beaten to death, apparently by Ecclesia members.

At issue were complex questions of whether the group he had formed to instill discipline in ghetto youth, and led from Watts to Oregon, had evolved into a dangerous cult. But Broussard couldn't have found a less sympathetic audience than the group gathered around the TV in the bar of the Portland Holiday Inn.

There last month for the annual conference of the Chicago-based Cult

Ten Years After Jonestown, the Battle Intensifies Over the Influence of 'Alternative' Religions

Awareness Network were people whose kin had crumpled onto the body heaps at Jonestown, Guyana, 10 years ago, and people who believed they or family members had lost not their lives, but good chunks of them, to gurus and avatars less infamous but no less evil than Jim Jones.

One group's cult is another's "new religious movement," though, and in the 10 years since Jonestown, a heated holy war of sorts has been mounting over the issues of how to define and contend with so-called cults.

The battle lines aren't always well defined. Ongoing guerrilla actions between those who see themselves as crusaders against potential Jonestowns and those who see themselves as the

persecuted members of outcast religious groups comprise the shifting legal and political fronts. On the outskirts of the ideological battleground is another loosely knit force that sees itself as the defender of a First Amendment besieged by vigilantes all too eager to kiss off the Constitution as they quash beliefs that don't fit their narrow-minded criteria of what's good and real. As one often-quoted definition has it: "A cult is a religion someone I don't like belongs to."

"It's spiritual McCarthyism," Lowell D. Streiker, a Northern California counselor, said of the cult awareness cause. To him, "the anti-cult network" is itself a "cult of persecution," cut from the same cloth

as colonial witch hunters and the Ku Klux Klan.

The key anti-cult groups, by most accounts, are CAN, a secular nondenominational group of 30 local affiliates; the Massachusetts-based American Family Foundation; the Interfaith Coalition of Concern About Cults and the Jewish Federation Council's Commission on Cults and Missionaries.

Although they contend that their ranks continue to fill with the victims of cults or angry family members, they concede that the most significant rallying point came in the fall of 1978 when the leader of one alleged cult put a rattlesnake in an enemy's mailbox and another led 912 people to their deaths.

Even though nothing so dramatic has happened since, cults have quietly been making inroads into the fabric of mainstream American life, and the effects are

Please see CULT WARS, Page 18

Los Angeles Times

18 Part V/Thursday, November 17, 1988

Los Angeles Times

CULT WARS: The Confrontation Heats Up

Continued from Page 1

potentially as serious as the deaths at Jonestown, cult critics say.

With increased wealth and public relations acumen—with members clothed by Brooks Brothers rather than in saffron sheets—the 1,000 or more new cults that some estimate have sprung up in America since the '60s have become "a growth industry which is diversifying," said Dr. Louis Jolyon West, director of UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute. "They have made steady progress on all fronts."

Uglier Connotations

In the broadest sense, Webster defines a cult as simply "a system of religious worship or ritual." Even before Jonestown, though, the word had taken on broader and uglier connotations.

To make a distinction, critics use the term *destructive cult*, or *totalist cult*. The issue, they say, pivots on the methods groups use to recruit and hold together followers.

CAN describes a destructive cult as one that "uses systematic, manipulative techniques of thought reform or mind control to obtain followers and constrict their thoughts and actions. These techniques are imposed without the person's knowledge and produce observable changes in the individual's autonomy, thoughts and actions. . . ."

A 1985 conference on cults co-sponsored by the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute and the American Family Federation came up with

this definition:

"A group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control . . . designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community."

The "manipulative techniques" in question are what cult critics call mind control or brainwashing.

To critics of the critics, on the other hand, brainwashing amounts to hokey.

And both sides say the weight of evidence is on their side.

New Beliefs, Personalities

Cult critics often point to classic surveys on brainwashing, which catalogue methods which they say are routinely used by cults of every color, religious and secular, to manipulate unsuspecting people into adopting new beliefs, and often, in effect, new personalities.

Among the techniques are constant repetition of doctrine; application of intense peer pressure; manipulation of diet so that critical faculties are adversely affected; deprivation of sleep; lack of privacy and time for reflection; cutting ties with the recruits' past life; reduction of outside stimulation and influences; skillful use of ritual to heighten mystical experience; and invention of a new vocabulary which narrows the range of experience and constructs a new reality for cult members.

Margaret Singer, a former professor of psychology at UC Berkeley, describes psychological problems that have been attributed to cultic experiences, ranging from the despair that comes from having suddenly abandoned ones previous values, norms and ideals to types of "induced psychopathy." Other psychologists and lay observers list similar mental and emotional problems linked to the indoctrination and rituals of cults.

Sociologist Dick Anthony, author of the book "Spiritual Choices," and former director of the UC Berkeley-affiliated Center for the Study of New Religions, argues the exact opposite position.

"There's a large research literature published in mainstream journals on the mental health effects of new religions," he said. "For the most part the effects seem to be positive in any way that's measurable."

He and other defenders of new religions discount so-called mind control techniques, or believe the term has been misappropriated by anti-cult activists.

"Coercive Persuasion is a bombastic redescription of familiar forms of influence which occur everyday and everywhere," said Streiker. "Someone being converted to a demanding religious movement is no more or less brainwashed than children being exposed to commercials during kid- dy programs which encourage them to eat empty calories or buy expensive toys."

Please see CULTS, Page 19

CULTS

Continued from Page 18

"An attempt to persuade someone of something is a process protected by our country's First Amendment right of free speech and communication," said attorney Jeremiah Gutman head of the New York City branch of the American Civil Liberties Union and an outspoken critic of the anti-cult groups. "What one person believes to be an irrefutable and obvious truth is someone else's errant nonsense."

'Fraud and Manipulation'

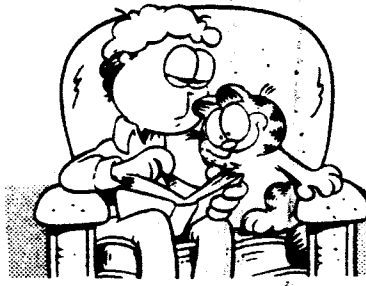
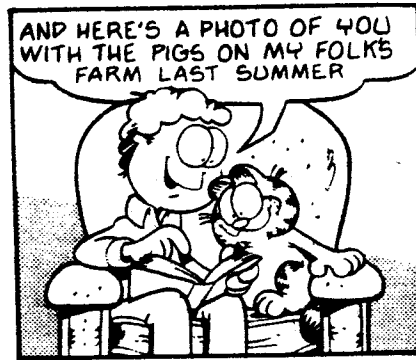
But anti-cult spokespeople say they have no interest in a group's beliefs. Their concern is when destructive cults use "fraud and manipulation," to get people to arrive at those beliefs, whatever they may be. Because people are unaware of the issues, though, cults have insinuated themselves into areas of American life where they are influencing people who may not even know where the influence is coming from, they contend.

The political arena is the obvious example, anti-cult activists say.

Followers of the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh had a major impact on the small town government of Antelope, Ore., and Jim Jones had managed to thrust himself and his church into the most respectable Democratic party circles in San Francisco before the exodus to Guyana, for instance.

But recently the process has expanded, with the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church the leading example of a cult that is

GARFIELD®



© 1988 United Features Syndicate Inc.

by Jim Davis



JTM DAVIS 11-17

quietly gaining political clout, they say.

"What Jim Jones did to Democrats in San Francisco, Sun Myung Moon is doing to Republicans all across country now," Kissler said.

Moon's most obvious stab at mainstream legitimacy, critics say, was his purchase in 1982 of the Washington Times, a D.C. daily newspaper, and his financial nurturing of the paper's magazine Insight—both of which have an official policy of complete editorial independence from the church.

In September, 1987, the conservative American Spectator magazine published an article titled "Can Buy Me Love: The Mooning of Conservative America," in which managing editor Andrew Ferguson questioned the way the political right is lapping up Moon money, citing, among many examples, the \$500,000 or more the late Terry Dolan's National Conservative Alliance accepted in 1984. When the church got wind of the article, the Spectator received a call from the executive director of the Unifica-

tion Church's World Media Assn. warning that if it ran, the Times "would strike back and strike back severely," Ferguson wrote in an addendum to the piece.

'Everyone Speaks Korean'

Therapist Steven Hassan, a former "Moonie" and the author of the just-released book "Combatting Cult Mind Control," estimates that the church now sponsors 200 businesses and "front organizations."

Moon "has said he wants an automatic theocracy to rule the world," explained Hassan, who, on Moon's orders, engaged in a public fast for Nixon during Watergate and another fast at the U.N. to protest the withdrawal of troops from Korea. "He visualizes a world where everyone speaks Korean only, where all religion but his is abolished, where his organization chooses who will mate, and he and family and descendants rule in a heroic monarchy."

Moon "is very much in support of the democratic system," counters John Biermans, director of public

affairs for the church. "His desire is for people to become God-centered people. Then democracy can fulfill its potential"

Besides, he said, "this is a pluralistic society, people of all faiths inject their beliefs into the system on every level . . . Using terms like 'front groups' and 'insinuating,' is just a way to attack something. It's not even honest."

Some observers dismiss concern about alleged Unificationist infiltration as self-serving hysteria whipped up by the anti-cultists.

"How much actual influence [the Unification Church] has seems questionable," said David Bromley, a professor of sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, and the author of the 1981 book "Strange Gods, the Great American Cult Scare."

Bromley estimates, for instance, that the church brings \$200 million a year into the U.S. from abroad. But he sees no evidence that the money, much of it spent on all-expense-paid fact-finding tours and conferences for journalists, politi-

cians and clergy people, is money well-invested as far as political impact goes.

The church, he estimates, is losing about \$50 million a year on its Washington Times newspaper and the ranks of Unificationists, and most other new religions, in America are thinning as well.

Veterans of the anti-cult front, however, say that the appearance that cults are fading is an illusion. "Like viruses, many of them mutate into new forms," when under attack, West of UCLA said. And new types of cults are arising to fill the void, they say.

Cult critics point, for instance, to the rise of such groups as the est offshoot called Forum, and to Lifespring and Insight—all of which CAN characterizes as "human potential cults" and all of which are utilized in mainstream American business to promote productivity and motivation.

Observers such as Gordon Melton of the Institute for the Study of Religious Institutions in Santa Barbara explain that many of these New Age-type trainings have their roots in the old fashioned motivational pep talks and sales technique seminars that have been the staples of American business for decades.

But critics see the so-called "psychotechnologies" utilized by some of these groups as insidious. For one thing, they say, the meditation, confessional sharing, and guided imagery methods some of them use are more likely to make employees muzzy-headed than competitive.

Other critics say the trainings violate employee's rights. Richard Watring, a personnel director for

Budget Rent-a-Car, who has been charting the incorporation of "New Age" philosophies into business trainings, is concerned that employees are often compelled to take the courses and then required to adapt a new belief system which may be incompatible with their own religious convictions. As a Christian he finds such mental meddling inappropriate for corporations.

He and other cult critics are heartened by recent cases, still pending, in which employees or former employees, have sued their employer for compelling them to take trainings they felt conflicted with their own religious beliefs.

Most observers scoring the action on the broader legal battlefield, however, call it a toss-up, and perceived victories for either side have often proved Pyrrhic.

Threats of Litigation

Richard Ofshe, a sociologist at UC Berkeley, fought three separate legal battles with the drug and alcohol rehabilitation organization Synanon over research he published on the group. Although he ultimately won the suits, he said the battle wound up costing the university \$600,000. And evidence obtained in other lawsuits showed that Synanon had skillfully wielded threats of litigation to keep several other critical stories from being published or broadcast, he said.

Similarly, a recently released book "Cults and Consequences," went unpublished for several years because insurers were wary of the litigious nature of some of the groups mentioned, said Rachel An-

Please see CULT WARS, Page 20

CULT WARS: The Controversy Heats Up

Continued from Page 19

dres, director of the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles' Commission on Cults and Missionaries and the book's co-editor.

But the most interesting litigation of late involves either a former member who is suing the organization to which he or she belonged, or a current member of a new religious group who is suing a deprogrammer who attempted unsuccessfully to persuade the person to leave the group.

The most significant case, everyone agrees, is last month's *Molko* decision by the California Supreme Court, which anti-cult groups have cheered as a major victory.

In that reversal of lower court decisions, the justices agreed that David Molko and another former member of the Unification Church could bring before a jury the claim that they were defrauded by recruiters who denied they had a church affiliation and then subjected the two to church mind control techniques, eventually converting them.

Mainstream religious organizations including the National Council on Churches, the American



Associated Press

Vat of poisoned Kool-Aid beside the bodies of victims.

Baptist Churches in the USA and the California Ecumenical Council had filed briefs in support of the Unification Church, claiming that allowing lawsuits over proselytizing techniques could paralyze all religions.

"What they're attacking is



Associated Press

Rev. Sun Myung Moon speaks to supporters in New York.

prayer, fasting and lectures," said Biermans of the Unification Church. "The whole idea of brainwashing is unbelievably absurd. . . . If someone had really figured out a method of brainwashing, they could control the world." The church plans to appeal the ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court if necessary.

Paul Morantz, the attorney who was struck by the rattlesnake placed in his mailbox by the "Imperial Marines" of Synanon, gave *pro-bono* assistance to the plaintiffs in the Molko case.

"For me, it was a great decision

for freedom of religion and to protect against the . . . use of coercive persuasion," he said.

Morantz currently is defending Bent Corydon, author of the book "L. Ron Hubbard, Madman or Messiah" against a lawsuit by the Church of Scientology. He said he's confident of how that case will turn out.

But he shares the belief of others on several sides of the multifaceted cult battle, in concluding that education rather than litigation should be the first defense of religious and intellectual liberty.

He's not, however, optimistic.

"If anyone thinks they're ever going to win this war, they're wrong," he said. "As long as we have human behavior, there will be sociopaths who will stand up and say 'follow me.' And there will always be searchers who will follow."