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| How do cults thrive and function in the digital age? |
| Research Paper |
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Abstract

Cults, religious organizations with beliefs that differ from those of mainstream society, have been on the rise in the last decade. How do cults thrive and function in the digital age? Technology provides cults with myriad ways to organize and recruit while also depriving people of social experiences. In depth understanding of cults and specific reasons behind why cults continue to survive in the age of technology is required and obtained through extensive research into the various aspects of the allure of cults. Analysis of statistical data reveals that most people do not regularly attend religious services and therefore are not feeling spiritually fulfilled. Upon reviewing the data regarding specific cults, past and present, it is clear that cults are able to adapt quickly to changing times and thus find it easier to incorporate technology into their methods. Laws concerning religion protect cults as well due to a lack of legal definitions for religion and cults. The media does not cover cult related events unless they impact an entire community or are violent. Cults continue to survive and grow due to technology and the people of the digital age. Cults are able to operate for less money and on a larger scale, which makes them a more potent force than they were in the past.

Introduction

Why do cults continue to thrive and function in the digital age? Several reasons can be cited for their survival and growth as in the age of technology. The technology that is being produced can easily be adapted to function in ways that help cults recruit, spread their message, and organize events. As science has become more prevalent in the world, it has negatively impacted the spiritual aspect of life and has made the religious aspect of society seem less important. Due to this negative impact, the spiritual needs of many people are not being properly met and thus they are more likely to seek spiritual fulfillment from those that offer it, such as cult leaders. In addition, the decrease in media coverage regarding cults has created the image that cults either no longer exist or that the ones that exist are so insignificant and extreme in their beliefs that no normal person could ever be convinced to join such an organization. Accompanying the increase in the use of technology is a decrease in social interaction due to an increasingly sedentary lifestyle and an increasingly busy day. High school and college students also have the option of taking classes online, which limits the social exposure that would normally occur on campus. Religious freedom laws also serve to protect cult organizations and allow them to grow due to a lack of a concrete legal definition for religion. Initiatives meant to assist the government in providing aid to foreign countries have also helped cults to grow by funding religious organizations’ trips to areas recently affected by disasters such as Haiti.

Cults, religious organizations that are labeled as having extreme or unusual beliefs, have become more prevalent as the digital age has progressed and technology has assumed a more important role in the life of the average person. There are myriad reasons as to why cults have not disappeared, including the fact that technology has linked people of similar beliefs in ways that were not available during the late 1900’s. Cults can also be referred to as new religious movements, which are simply groups that have differing beliefs than mainstream religions. The option to be referred to as a new religious movement is a boon to cults due to the fact that such a label makes them seem less strange or dangerous, thus aiding in attracting new members. Not all cults are necessarily destructive in nature, some are just perceived as strange. Religions begin as cults because cults always have a new belief of some kind. Christianity was, in fact, considered a cult by the Jewish people for a very long time because its beliefs deviated from theirs.[[1]](#footnote-1) There are several types of cults, though a majority of the world is only aware of the destructive cults. Some cults can be classified as progressive groups that have differing views from those of mainstream religions. These groups are usually benign in nature and thus, few people are really aware of the existence of these groups. Many people consider the Jehovah’s Witnesses to be a cult due to their rules that do not allow them to interact with outsiders save for proselytizing ventures and also allows members of the religion to lie to non-members without fear of guilt or repercussions. Other groups are the seeds of a new religion that may or may not grow in popularity. Groups of the aforementioned type usually have a set of tenets that are somewhat similar to other religions, but have unique rituals, deities, and/or beliefs. Raëlians can be used as an example for this type of cult. Raëlians believe that immortality comes from transferring the mind to a different body, most often that of a clone. Their beliefs resulted in a hoax in France during 2003 regarding the claims of a cult member, which were that she had conceived the very first cloned human being. This claim, once investigated by newspapers and the government of France, was found to be entirely false. The last and most notorious type of cult is the destructive cult, which most often uses abusive mind control techniques and demand unquestioning loyalty from followers. This type of cult is dangerous to both its members and the world at large. A well- known example of one such cult would be the Jonestown cult, which was under the leadership of the charismatic Jim Jones until its eventual dissolution due to the mass suicide committed by a majority of its followers through poisoned Kool-Aid. A commonality between the destructive and progressive is that they have a tendency to branch off of an already existing and, more often than not, popular religion.[[2]](#footnote-2) Destructive cults, due to their extreme nature, are the most aggressive in their recruiting because they constantly lose members to kidnappings by family members of the cultists. The rise of technology has made the population as a whole more vulnerable to the recruiting techniques of cults. This has become especially true with the introduction of social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. In addition, the state of the global economy has caused a great many people to become disillusioned and thus, they desire to have an opportunity have the support that disillusioned people so often crave after a traumatic experience such as the loss of a job that they had held for a long period of time or the death of someone that was close to them.

Technology

Cult organizations such as Scientology and Kabbalah use digital age technology to control their members in various ways. Scientology uses a device known as an E-Meter to assist in convincing members to divulge very personal and dark secrets in order to humiliate and blackmail them into staying in the cult. Scientology’s founder, L. Ron Hubbard, wrote several books on the topic of the E-meter. One of these books contains a detailed schematic of his first version of the machine, which was used during scientology’s infancy. It is revealed that there are no advanced components and it is just a basic machine designed to look advanced while doing very little in the way of actual performance. E-meters have no real function according to the manufacturer, however scientologists offer classes that allow a person to understand and interpret the various needles and gauges present on the machine.[[3]](#footnote-3) The E-Meter is the device used by Scientologists to determine how pure the person is through various sets of questions and a measure of one’s progress on the path to becoming an operating thetan.[[4]](#footnote-4) Scientologists believe that humans are thetans, immortal alien souls that were trapped on earth after they were murdered by the intergalactic lord Xenu. Scientologists also believe that the concept of God, Jesus, Heaven, and Hell are all due to Xenu brainwashing the thetan souls with movies.[[5]](#footnote-5) The cult known as Kabbalah, which includes various performers such as Sacha Baron Cohen and Britney Spears, focuses on the utilization of mind control techniques and the acquisition of funding from prominent members of the organization. This cult is based loosely off of the sacred mystic teachings found in the Jewish faith, which is part of the reason they have been classified as a cult by the general populous as well as many theologians. This cult was popularized by Madonna in the late 1990’s and has since become popular amongst celebrities, thus earning it a good deal of exposure as a positive spiritual organization. Kabbalah recently has obtained illegal “mind-reading” software, which observes facial expressions and uses FMRI scans to determine what someone is thinking in real time. FMRI, functional magnetic resonance imaging, is able to measure thoughts to a certain degree by tracking the presence of the sugars used in the brain when one is thinking. Thoughts are determined through the analysis of which parts of the brain are active during a person’s exposure to certain sounds, images, or while answering questions. They use this to their advantage, in combination with hidden cameras and listening devices, to convince members and outsiders that the higher members are able to read their minds. This use of technology is used to psychologically assault their victims and batter them into submission, which causes serious mental illness and allows the cult to assert near complete control over the lives of its members. This misuse of newly developed technology has been a major factor in the recent rise of dangerous cults over the last decade.[[6]](#footnote-6) A well-known example of this sort of activity is Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese cult that orchestrated the sarin gas attacks in Tokyo subways back in 1995. Sarin gas is a highly toxic substance that is much more potent than cyanide and can do permanent damage even with the inhalation of an extremely small, non-lethal amount. The gas can be toxic in very small concentrations and can easily penetrate the pores located on the surface of the skin. The attack was conducted with relative ease due to the fact that security was rather lax and the surgical masks worn by the perpetrators were not questioned due to it being common practice during cold and flu season in Japan.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Dangers of Destructive Cults

Aum Shinrikyo has made it abundantly clear that they desire to institute a new world order and have access to the technology to make it happen due to criminal activities. They have broken into Mitsubishi’s development lab and stolen valuable trade secrets in order to further increase their influence. Another expressed desire of Aum Shinrikyo is the development of laser weaponry in order to give the cultists an edge should a battle ensue between the authorities and members of the cult or in any general combat situation. The technology they have gathered, in addition to those developed by the cult itself, is intended to be used in an attempt to overthrow the Japanese government and provide a safe haven for their cult to be able to spread. Cults such as Aum Shinrikyo target scientists and software engineers to assist them in hacking as well as developing software to be sold for profit to fund other unsavory acts. In one such case, a front corporation for the cult developed new security software for the Japanese government and a new database for the Japanese police force. The software was a mere twelve hours away from implementation before someone realized who was behind the development of the product. To better put this into perspective: Aum Shinrikyo almost had access to all government files as well as those kept by the police, which would have given them nearly unlimited power within the country of Japan. Following the brush with a near cataclysmic event, the Japanese government made it a primary goal to find and imprison Shoko Ashara, the leader of the cult. Soon after a serious effort was made, he was discovered and caught. Ashara is currently awaiting his execution date, which has yet to be set, where it has been decided that he will die by hanging for treasonous actions against the government. The capture of Ashara has done very little to stop the activities of Aum Shinrikyo, due in part to the fact that he stepped down before his trial and named a successor to act in his place. His stepping down avoided the dissolution of the group and allowed them to continue to operate relatively unhindered[[8]](#footnote-8)

An organization that is much closer to home is the cult of Rama. Though it began as a yoga class in a small community center in New York, it has grown to become a very influential organization with powerful ties to Silicon Valley, the technological mecca of the United States. The cult puts great emphasis on the recruitment of people who are adept in the use of computers, especially the various hacking techniques. Even those coming into the cult that are not as technologically savvy as the cult would like them to be are required to gain a basic understanding of computers, the internet, and the Ada programming language. Ada is named after Ada Lovelace, who is considered to be the world’s first computer programmer and is the primary programming language used by the United States government, including the military, for encryption of files and is also heavily used in U.S. security programming.[[9]](#footnote-9) This particular cult uses several businesses based in New York as fronts for spreading their message and gaining revenue through computer-related activities. These businesses also allow the cult to inconspicuously recruit people who have a thorough understanding of various elements of technology. The cult leader, Rama, also requires his members to live in housing that is owned by the cult. These buildings contain surveillance equipment that allows him to observe his followers at all times in order to maintain order. In addition to maintaining order, it also convinces his followers that he is instilled with divine knowledge.[[10]](#footnote-10)

A better known, though no longer active, cult would be the Manson family. The Manson family became very well-known around the end of the 1970’s because of the string of brutal murders that were associated with its members and allegedly orchestrated by the cult’s leader, Charles Manson. Of course, the cult formed during the 70’s, a time that emphasized countercultural movements, love, and family. This made it very easy for Charles Manson to recruit young men and women and convince them to denounce their ties to societies in order to live in a commune out in a desert located in California. The secluded area made it relatively simple for Manson to build a relationship with all of his converts and obtain their complete and total loyalty. Manson himself was a fairly talented man in terms of musical ability and had even worked with the Beatles, which contributed to his influence among the younger generation. Despite his talents, Manson was, and still is, incredibly mentally unstable and as a result, he ordered the murders of several prominent people including actress Sharon Tate. These events were perhaps the first that truly alerted the public of the existence of cults and their dangers. Since then, a web site has been established by one of the former cult members paying tribute to Charles Manson and spreading his message.

The incident in Waco, Texas in April of 1993 between the Branch Davidians, led by David Koresh, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation provides further evidence of the dangers that malevolent cults pose to themselves and others. David Koresh was a fanatical Christian that believed he was a chosen man of God and the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. He took control of a sect that branched off of the Seventh Day Adventist movement and bought the cult’s compound, Mount Carmel.[[11]](#footnote-11) The followers of the cult were only allowed to marry Koresh, while other men in the group were told to remain celibate. Koresh sexually abused many of the children in his group as well, claiming that God had told him to do so. The United States Bureau of Tobacco, Alcohol, Firearms, and Explosives laid siege to the compound in February of 1993 and ended the siege in April of the same year. Near the end of the siege, the compound caught fire, which was most likely Koresh’s doing in an attempt to keep the agents out. Koresh and many of his followers died in the blaze, while a few women and children escaped or were released through hostage negotiation.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The constant flow of information across the Internet may make it seem like it has divine knowledge because it appears to have all the answers one could ever be looking for. Society has grown to rely on the Internet for most of its information, topping the television as the source most people use to receive their information. It is very plausible that the Internet may be used by cults as a sort of “terrestrial god” to influence people. The ease of access for people and the inexpensive aspect draw cults to it like moths to an open flame. The Internet is also highly unregulated, making it a playground for people to express whatever they wish without fear of ridicule because the Internet allows them to remain completely anonymous to the public. Those that use the Internet most often may be more likely to perceive it as a god-like entity due to its massive amount of knowledge and interconnectedness. The global span of the Internet makes it appear to be all powerful and all knowing, but in reality it is just a compilation of code. The Internet also allows cults to bring in funding through technology based businesses such as website design. The use of businesses as fronts for funneling monetary resources to support cult activities has become more commonplace as of late. [[13]](#footnote-13)

Many of the young workforce and college age people have to spend a majority of their time on the computer and the only real connections they get to develop are with other people on social networking sites. This has allowed the workforce to become vulnerable as well. The lack of exposure to the social situations outside of a computer chat room or a social networking site that comes from prolonged computer usage results in a very lonely, gullible, technologically adept individual. The availability of online courses removes the social aspect of high school and college, which serves to further the depth of the social ineptitude of the rising generation. Such people can easily be likened to the Holy Grail in terms of prospective cult members. The inherent lack of cognitive faculties that are required to operate computers and other technology like it instills a sort of mindless state in those that use it often. This mind set makes these people incredibly easy to manipulate and lure into cult life. Cults recruit people that feel like they are lacking something in their lives, but are generally normal people that could easily be any face in a crowd. They use techniques that surround the person with the ideals of the cults while simultaneously providing them with intense amounts of love and affection, which encourages the victim to open up and form intimate relationships with members of the cults. Once this is done, the cult replaces your original identity with that of one that is wholly dependent upon the group and cannot stand to be away from it, which creates a fear of being removed from the group for not following their orders. Since these people are already highly dependent upon technology, it is much easier for them to be made dependent upon human interaction, since they receive so little of it during their work. The ease of the instillation of dependency plays a major role in the recruitment process. “Love bombing,” a classic cult tactic that involves the instant companionship and affection of those already in the cult, becomes much more effective when the victim is starved for interaction.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Legal Protection

The First Amendment guarantees every citizen of the United States the right to believe and practice whatever they wish within the limitations of the law. However, there is no clear definition of what qualifies as a religion. The beliefs of cults can technically qualify as a religion and can therefore be protected by the guarantee of religious freedom. Cult communities can retain a large degree of autonomy because of these laws. The lack of government regulation gives these communities the chance to develop into a more malign entity with tendencies and ideals that may be harmful or destructive in nature. Allowing for significant growth in the community may lead to the indoctrination of second generation cultists should members have children with one another. By starting at a younger age, the brain washing becomes more effective and much more difficult to reverse.[[15]](#footnote-15)

As established by the court case *United States v. Ballard*, religious freedom extends to all beliefs regardless of whether or not those beliefs seem outlandish or farfetched. In this case, Guy W. Ballard was accused of soliciting funds through deceitful practices because he had claimed he was gifted with divine powers for his piety and could cure any disease with said powers. The courts charged him defrauding the public using false pretenses. Charging Ballard with the collection of funds under false pretenses blatantly questioned the validity of his beliefs and was an egregious violation of his First Amendment right. The issue of religion could not be brought into the proceeding and thus they were unable to successfully charge him because the sincerity of his beliefs could neither be proved nor disproved. The ruling of *United States v. Ballard* has clarified the First Amendment rights of U.S. citizens and has prohibited any legal body from officially questioning the legitimacy of any religious statement. Any group that claims to be a religion of some kind may conduct operations such as fund raising or the holding of meetings without fear of persecution so long as their actions are not harmful or illegal.[[16]](#footnote-16) Cults can claim to be a legitimate religion without great difficulty because of the aforementioned case. So long as there is no connection between the cult and any illegal activity such as robbery or murder, there is no real way to deal with a cult or to distinguish it from a less extreme religious organization. Cults can use the legal system to their advantage and even obtain government assistance in their activities.

Faith-based Initiatives

Faith-based initiatives are programs implemented to grant funding to religious organizations to send members to help victims of disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes. These programs, set in place by former President of the United States, George Walker Bush, were meant to increase the number of people helping in disaster areas to alleviate pressure on Red Cross workers and the governing body of the disaster area. This measure was also meant to provide extra assistance to the ailing countries which may prove difficult if there are multiple disasters. The reasoning behind the program is logical; given that the United States is well known for the aid it provides to countries following natural disasters or other events of major upheaval, however, this also opens various doors for organizations to abuse the funding in order to further their own ends. This has proved to be controversial because it is believed that having workers from religious organizations may put unnecessary pressure on non-religious victims and victims with differing views than the workers. These workers may treat those with beliefs that conflict with their own with less care or even refuse to help them unless they convert. In addition, there are very few instructions or restrictions that come with these grants, which allows for significant flexibility in the use of the money as stated earlier, any organization may claim religious status and in doing so, may obtain funding from the faith-based initiative programs.[[17]](#footnote-17) The Church of Bible Understanding has taken advantage of these programs. The Church of Bible Understanding is a cult led by Stewart Traill, who claims that he is the reincarnation of Elijah and is the only one who can comprehend the true meaning of the Bible. His cult is hostile toward non-members and uses various mind control techniques such as humiliation in front of one’s peers in an extremely effective manner. This cult uses the funding obtained through the faith-based initiative programs to send members to assist in the Haiti relief effort. Their presence in Haiti could cause lasting damage to the fragile psychological state the majority of the residents are in following the disaster. The cult may even capitalize upon the weak influence of the government in Haiti to make their stay in the country more permanent than was originally intended and possibly even gain some manner of influence over government activities.[[18]](#footnote-18) With cults able to capitalize on the fact that these programs provide significant funding, they can spread their influence through a more personal medium than the Internet. This advantage provides cults with a more potent method of proselytization.

Science’s Influence on Belief

The digital age has brought with it a plethora of new technology. This rise in the popularity of technology and science has had a negative influence on religious thought in more developed areas of the world. An excellent example of this influence is the rainbow. Once thought by many to be God’s promise to man, it has since been deconstructed and is now known to simply be the prismatic reaction between light and water droplets in the air. The lack of belief caused by the prevalence of science conflicts with the core need of humans to believe in something higher than themselves. Since the dawn of time, humans have worshipped a force of nature or deity, which displays this basic need that has been ignored as society has evolved and changed.[[19]](#footnote-19) Since this basic need is not being met in this new age, people subconsciously seek something higher than themselves. Around 30 percent of high school and college age students, those most vulnerable to cult recruitment, claim to regularly attend religious services.[[20]](#footnote-20) With the number of irregular attendees and those who do not attend church so high, there is greater clarity provided in regards to the mystery of why people join cults. Sadly, most people simply do not have time to attend scheduled church services because of their jobs or home life.

Lack of Media Exposure

Awareness of the presence of cults in the digital age has also greatly decreased due to a decline in the coverage of cult activities by the media. Television, an important part of the average person’s daily life, is the primary source of information for a majority of people. The media has abandoned any reports on cult activities for the more lucrative stories concerning foreign wars, the economy, and the ever changing world of politics. Little to no media exposure allows cults to operate without much attention drawn to them. In addition, no media exposure may give off the illusion that cults no longer exist. The stereotypical cult member was usually portrayed as a crazy person and overly friendly wearing a blue jogging suit. While these representations are only the end result of a few cult mind control techniques, they at least spread awareness that cults were in existence and were able to recruit members.[[21]](#footnote-21) The belief that cults no longer exist is a very potent advantage to be given to cults because they will be more likely to let down their guard if asked to a small gathering or activity; a common method for cults to recruit new members.

People of the Digital Age

There are many reasons why people join cults, including feeling lonely or desiring spiritual guidance. More people have joined cults in the last seven years than ever before. The state of the global economy, which has caused massive layoffs in many parts of the world, has also served to create a state of disillusionment that makes them more likely to join cults because they provide the sense of security that people desire during unsure times. Other people are looking for the family they do not feel like they had during their childhood or that they do not have now. Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace may also be used as media through which cults may recruit. People often have the habit of accepting friend requests from people they do not know simply because they find that they have a mutual friend or two. That kind of attitude towards who one allows into their social circle makes it easier for one to be recruited into a cult. These sites also make it significantly easier to plan events and have these events publicized through digital invitations by member to non-members in an attempt to increase the numbers of the group. The instant friendship and constant presence of others around each other provides the feeling of love and affection that some people crave. The foot in the door method, the process of using simple activities such as sports or meetings to allow the cult to bring people in through a slow conversion, is often the most popular method of recruiting due to its relative ease and high success rates. This method also allows people to be recruited more easily with cash incentives due to their familiarity with those making the offer. Al Qaeda has capitalized upon that fact when recruiting well educated college students and professionals for their cause. Several college professors have been approached by wealthy individuals and have been offered large sums of money in exchange for their help in fighting Al Qaeda’s global jihad. They were also offered the chance to start their own business because their advanced computer skills would give the business a competitive edge.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Conclusion

Cults will, more than likely, continue to increase in number as time passes during the digital age and as technology becomes an integral part of the everyday lives of people across the globe. The media has greatly decreased its coverage of cult activities and because of that, it is a common belief that they have begun to fade away as a relic of the 60’s, 70’s, and 80’s. That misconception has led to a lack of study in new age cult recruiting techniques. Various ways and means used by cults to further their ends and gain influence continue to develop. Further study of the various reasons why cults have continued to thrive and function is crucial because cults, like living organisms, evolve to fit into the changing times. This means that, if there is ever to be any effective way of curtailing the destructive capabilities of cults with ill intentions while simultaneously allowing benign cults to operate relatively unfettered by the interference of government, extensive knowledge must be gained to ensure that catastrophic events can be averted without violating the religious rights of cult members.[[23]](#footnote-23) Greater attention must be paid regarding cult activities to ensure that tragedies such as the Jonestown massacre and the Manson Family murders cannot reoccur in any way in the near or distant future. Non-invasive monitoring is necessary to maintain the safety of people both within and outside of the cult. Cults have continued to survive and thrive in the emerging era of technology by adapting and evolving to the new environment set before them. The people, lifeblood of any successful cult, have become more likely to join a cult because of the lack of social experience that comes from the use of technology

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