


**ENRICHMENT
ACTIVITY**
19**Is It a Cult
or Not?**

Directions: After reading the material, answer the questions below on a separate sheet of paper.

"...[I]n the early morning of October 5, 1994, forty-eight members of a group called the Order of the Solar Temple were found dead in a farmhouse and three chalets in the Swiss countryside. Five more bodies of group members were found dead in a small town near Montreal, Canada. Although many of the victims in Switzerland had been badly burned in a fire that appeared to have been started deliberately, others were unscathed because of a malfunction in the mechanism thought to have been used to start the blaze. Those people were dressed in red, black, and golden ceremonial robes and had met their deaths lying in a circle near an altar containing a cross and a rose. Twenty of the bodies had bullet wounds, most often to the head; many others had plastic bags over their heads. A local judge ruled that the deaths were mass suicide. Many people believe that the victims were inspired to take their own lives by Luc Jouret, the group's charismatic leader." (Porterfield, 1995)

What Is a Cult?

Most cult researchers agree that cults possess three distinct characteristics:

1. a living charismatic leader who claims to have ultimate wisdom
2. an authoritarian power structure
3. rigid boundaries

The Order of the Solar Temple gathered around Luc Jouret. Branch Davidians followed David Koresh, many to their deaths, when 86 perished in the May 1993 conflict in Waco, Texas, with a team of federal agents, local police, and National Guard.

Once people join the cult, they are expected to obey their leader without question. Followers may be told how to spend every minute of every day, what to eat, to wear, where to go, with whom to socialize, whom to avoid, what they can read, when to get up, and when to go to bed. Cult leaders make their followers' decisions for them. Followers who disobey can be punished, sometimes mildly by being subject to ridicule and rebuke, sometimes more severely.

Because the beliefs and practices of the cult are often very different from the surrounding culture, members are thought to be strange. If the cult wears distinctive clothing, or acts in ways that are noticeably different, society may treat them as outcasts.

From here it is a short step until the cult considers all outsiders as enemies. Cult leaders may foster this fear of nonmembers in order to strengthen members' ties to the organization. This isolation from the outside world increases dependency upon the cult leader and the cult group. The strict boundaries give members a closely shared identity and feelings of belonging, contentment, and security.

Is This a Cult?

On the surface, some cults seem like other social, civic, or religious organizations. Before labeling a group a cult, ask the following questions:

- Does the group's leader demand total, unquestioning commitment?
- Is the group focused on bringing in new members and making money?
- Are group members strongly discouraged from disagreeing with the leader?
- Does the group use techniques such as meditation, chanting, speaking in tongues, sleep deprivation, or indoctrination sessions to suppress dissent?

(continued)

- Does the group claim to have a special purpose or mission and elevate its leader above all others?
- Does the group have a persecution complex or believe that others are out to get them?
- Is the group's leader exempt from accountability or from the need to live by the rules demanded of other group members?
- Does the group's leader teach that the end justifies any means, including means that are illegal or unethical?
- Does the leader use guilt as a control mechanism?
- Are members encouraged to cut ties with family and friends who are not in the group?
- Does the group make excessive time demands?
- Are members required to live or socialize only with other group members?

Who Joins Cults?

Cult members include the young, the old, the wealthy, the poor, the educated, and the uneducated. No one profile fits all people who are likely to join a cult. However, research indicates that the majority of those who joined cults were experiencing significant stress in their lives. They found that their normal ways of coping with stress were not working for them, and they were seeking other ways to cope. When recruiters offered happiness or the ideal society, they were ready to listen. Certain types of personalities seem to be more susceptible to being enticed into a cult. These factors include low self-esteem, unassertiveness, naivete, and susceptibility to suggestion.

Cult recruiters look for someone who is lonely and vulnerable, and offer friendship and support. The feeling of acceptance and understanding lures the person into the cult. Gradually the cult's way of thinking, feeling, and acting becomes second nature, and the objections of friends and family fall on unhearing ears.

References

Porterfield, K.M. (1995). *Straight Talk about Cults*. New York: Facts on File, 3.

Questions

Directions: Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Research ways that you can resist the pressure of a cult recruiter, and create a one-page fact sheet that you could give to a friend who you think could be susceptible to a cult's allure.
2. Using the lists of questions of what defines a cult, classify each of the following groups as to whether or not you think they are cults. Research the characteristics of the groups that are unfamiliar to you.
 - Judaism, Christianity, or Islam
 - Marine Corps
 - Hare Krishnas
 - Wiccans
 - Alcoholics Anonymous
3. Why do you think cult leaders would authorize and participate in a mass suicide?
4. What might be some differences in the leadership styles of a cult leader and the leader of a church group or business organization? Explain how these different leadership styles affect group members.
5. What is the difference between the obedience of cult members to their leader and your obedience to parents, teachers, or police officers?