

# Religious cults, religious leaders and the abuse of power

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## Abstract

The abuse of authority by religious leaders, accepted as persons of authority and upholders of moral values, has led to violations of human rights within religious cults. This article discusses the means by which cults obtain undue authority and influence in society and create an illusion of utopia while causing harm to believers. I propose measures to ensure that instead of remaining “untouchable”, religious leaders take responsibility for their own practices, ensuring that no harm will be caused through internal rules of conduct. If such behaviour comes under the guise of religious freedom, governments are put in a dilemma of simultaneously safeguarding both religious freedom and the well-being of its citizens.

**Keywords** Freedom of religion, religious abuse, cults, abuse of trust, religious leaders.

The right to religious freedom sounds idyllic. However, although cults present a picture of “utopia,” those that lead them can succeed in abusing this right, to the detriment of cult members and of broader society. This situation warrants to be addressed not only in the interest of those caught up in these groups but also for the harmonious functioning of society in general. The question presents itself: How do these religious leaders conceal the misuse of their positions of authority?

## 1. Religion and its dynamics

The fact that there are many religions makes it difficult to formulate a single definition of religion. Each religion has its own belief system, and the premise on which religions rest gives rise to doctrines and practices that are not measurable against “earthly” standards. Believers have the right to participate freely in the rituals and practices associated with that particular religious belief. Moreover, a religion is generally evaluated through comparison with a believer’s own belief system.

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As societies became aware of the importance of protecting citizens against different kinds of abuse, including the atrocities at times committed under the banner of religion, international conventions such as The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (HDHR) of 1948 and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) of 1976 were established.

Over recent decades close attention has been paid to the dynamics of religious cults believed to be harmful to, and even disruptive of the harmonious functioning of society. In this article I will focus on some of the dynamics of religious cults that have given rise to extreme and harmful actions<sup>2</sup> by some cults in the past and continue to pose a threat to the well-being of their followers and of broader society.

### 1.1 Dynamics of religion that pose a challenge

Human beings feel comfortable with hierarchy that in turn makes them vulnerable to domination. According to Naff (2010:1) it is also important for human beings to have status. Some aspire to be kings or leaders others are rebels, outlaws, or committed followers. An important driver to get people following a political or religious leader is an ideology of passion. Passion is a powerful emotion that can range from raw hatred to pure love, from self-denial to total surrender. The ultimate goal of religion to obtain salvation or enlightenment inspires passionate commitment of the believer and displays a number of generic traits that account for its far-reaching impact on the mental ability, actions and well-being of humans (Cleary sa: 1–4; Leiter 2008; Engel 2011):

- The prescriptive nature of a belief system of a religion can dull the mind and weaken the senses. Some religions override common sense, human reason or a usual sense of proportionality. Think of the catastrophic cruelty, as was witnessed on 11 September 2001. Religion can create a mental illusion of what is believed to be the “will of God.” One thinks here of the Christian and anti-Semitic crusades in history as expressions of “God’s will,” and the Islamic jihad, engaged in demonstrating that “Allah is great.” Religious extremism is characterized by the belief that any action performed in the name of God denies primary and foundational preservations of life and does not value human life, as is evident in the case of a suicide bomber.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, more than 900 followers of Jim Jones of the People’s Temple died in 1979 in Guyana, most of cyanide poisoning after ingesting the substance in a drink. The followers of David Koresh in Waco, Texas died in an attack by the FBI on their compound in 1983. The sarin gas attack staged by the Aum Shinrikyo cult in a subway station in Japan in 1985 left a number of citizens harmed. Three hundred followers of the Restoration of the Ten Commandments cult died in 2000 in Uganda. The suicides of the followers of The Solar Temple and Heaven’s Gate in Europe in the early 1990s inspired government action.

- Some religions suggest that financial contribution in the form of tithes and offerings guarantees blessing.
- A universal characteristic of religion is the belief in unseen forces that have an impact not only on their human existence, but also in the life hereafter, more powerful than earthly goods, money, political power or earthly institutions (Engel 2011:2).
- The transcendental nature of religion defies proof and the tenets of their religion have infinite value, surpassing earthly goods, and may not be compromised (Engel 2011:10).
- Believers know that there are unexplained aspects to their belief, but faith is a substitute for what is not known (Engel 2011:6). In some religious groups tangible punishment can be inflicted on members for disobeying commands.

It is evident from the abovementioned dynamics of religion that reference to a higher cause and redemptive reality may inspire a passion and zeal that can cloud the judgment and discernment of believers, internal processes which would otherwise safeguard them from falling prey to abuse. Participation in internal religious practices of the group in order to find favour with God or obtain salvation is characterized by a wholehearted commitment to enduring whatever consequences or impact this may have on the well-being of the believer.

This clearly indicates a grey area in the harmonious functioning of religion. Despite members' rights to freely participate in the practices of their religion, the possibility of the subtle abuse of this right within religion as a result of the dynamics of religion must not be ignored. The abuse of this freedom creates an environment conducive to exploitation by some religious leaders through their positions of authority and trust.

## 1.2 What constitutes religious abuse?

Abuse in general refers to a person having "power over another person or persons, and using that power to cause hurt or harm" (Blue 1993:12), it is when a person's "sense of well-being and spiritual and emotional growth is diminished" through the actions of another person (Watts 2011:2). Abuse can be physical, sexual, emotional and spiritual, to name but a few forms, and all kinds of abuse leave scars on a person's psyche. Religious abuse specifically is "inflicted by persons who are respected and honoured in society for their role as religious leaders and models for spiritual authority" (Enroth 1992:29). The status of religious leaders as trustworthy people makes believers vulnerable to their authority and abuse and can lead to the manipulation and abuse of followers (Blue 1993:14).

Religious abuse occurs across denominations, in non-denominational churches, in religious groups and across faiths. One form of religious abuse, however, takes place in cults when a believer is coerced under the guise of religion through a particular

belief system to act in such a manner that his/her dignity and ability for self-attainment is numbed or overridden for the sake of a selfish or ideological cause of the cult leader or cult. Some believers will stop at nothing to attain the goals set by the group, even if it leads to the infringement of basic human rights, and a forsaking of loved ones, family and own ambitions, even to the point of death. The demands of these groups at times also include actions that are considered unreasonable and unacceptable by the rest of the population, such as name changes, plastic surgery, and surgical castration or sterilization (Davis 2000:257). It can further entail people's refusal to obtain medical attention when they are ill<sup>3</sup> or the surrender of all personal possessions.

Religious abuse displays three important elements, namely the misuse of a position of authority, the misuse of trust and the misrepresentation of the truth.

### 1.3 Abuse of religious freedom

The need for the protection of human rights originated as a result of the abuse of human beings in different spheres of life and is based on the fundamental belief that each human being must be treated with dignity and respect and has equal rights. What is meant by human dignity?

For Snyder et al (1976), "human dignity" refers to various basic values. Kelman (1977:531) believes that human dignity refers to the "status of individuals as ends in themselves, rather than a means to some unrelated end." Individuals are part of an "interconnected network of individuals who care for each other, who recognize each other's individuality, and who respect each other's rights" (Kelman 1973:48–49). Two components of human dignity can be distinguished, namely the identity of the person and his/her position in the community: Each individual is accorded identity as a worthy and valuable person. In the community context, an individual's life must be valued by others. A person's sense of dignity thus entails a perception of self-worth and to be valued by others (Kelman 1977:532). This further means that a person enjoys individual freedom and social justice which is inseparable and interdependent. Societies are evaluated in terms of their consistency with human dignity by how effectively they provide identity and community for their constituencies (Kelman 1977:532).

For Kelman (1977:534), social institutions fail to uphold the human dignity of their citizens when:

- Such institutions fail to provide adequately for the needs and welfare of the population and when equal access to benefits are only provided to some segments of the population;

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<sup>3</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses for instance refuse blood transfusions, even if a person's life could be saved through this procedure.

- Individuals do not have the freedom to express their views and participate in decision-making. Even the views of dissenters are important as “a mechanism to alert society to the shortcomings in institutional functioning.”

Although religious freedom is the right of each world citizen, the permissible scope of the expression of religious freedom remains a bone of contention all over the world. The universal right to freedom of religion is based on the premise that religious exercise must be free and voluntary, and that it should in no means pressure, harm or coerce anyone into action or participation. In this article particular emphasis is placed on religious groups also known as cults that through their practices and functioning contravene the fundamental principle of human dignity. This is accomplished through the employment of techniques and practices that deny believers their right to freedom to live their lives according to their own choices or goals.

## **2. The challenge of abuse in cultic groups**

Cultic groups can display specific traits and function in a manner resulting in the abuse of members and the violation of their dignity. As was indicated already, believers are not necessarily protected from abuse in a religious setting but are equally or even more vulnerable as a result of the dynamics of religion. In religious cults additional aspects to dynamics of religion contribute even more in creating an environment conducive for abuse as will be explained below.

### **2.1 Dynamics in cults**

Cults portray the world as bad and the particular group as good (Salande & Perkins 2011:382). Cult members are therefore taught that to be free from contamination by the evil world, they must be separated from it. To ensure separateness two important principles are required, namely, isolation and insulation. Isolation can be consciously created through group dynamics and unconsciously accepted by the members, and can entail physical isolation, as is the case with a commune. It can also be social isolation established through discouragement to socialise with outsiders. This isolation will ensure that cult members are “unsullied by the world” and an ideal environment for control is created (Wilson 1959:10) and that members are progressively alienated from support systems (family and friends) outside the group (Salande & Perkins 2011:383). Separation from families and other support systems is progressively obtained through the belief that the leader and group deserve their unwavering commitment that is in stern competition with the member’s loyalty towards family. The constant pressure to value group commitments over family and other social considerations slowly drives a wedge between believers and family ensuring spontaneous isolation (Whitsett & Kent 2003:492). The language used in cults is often character-

ized by family images, with cult members being referred to as “brothers” and “sisters”, and parental roles being attributed to the cult leaders (Deikman 1994:76–79). In the Unification Church, for example, the now deceased leader Sun Myung Moon was referred to as “true father” and his wife as “true mother.” The leader of another group known as The Family was referred to as “father” or “grandpa” (Kent 1994:39). The cult family thus progressively replaces the biological family, and the family system is replaced by the authoritative cult system (Galanter 1990:544).

Isolation is further ensured through a busy programme offered by the group that ensures that believers devote the largest proportion of their time to the activities of the group.

Insulation refers to a set of prescriptive behavioural rules intended not only to protect the values of the cult but also to defuse so-called negative influences when contact with outside influences does occur (Wilson 1959:10–11). The belief that one has been specially chosen, acts as motivation to withstand temptations from outside and remain pure.

With believers isolated from the outside world, these groups are able to function unimpeded. While other mainstream religions function within society, and their practices and doctrines are visible and known to the general public, cults are more secluded and hidden from the public eye. The isolation of cults provides a breeding ground for all kinds of abuse ranging from coercion, intimidation, threats, physical and verbal abuse, manipulation and sexual bullying, to forfeiture of personal finances (Salande & Perkins 2011:382). Jim Jones of the People’s Temple abused his followers and punished them with harsh work schedules, humiliation, solitary confinement and non-consensual and non-medical injection of psychotherapeutic drugs (Hall 1987:240-241). Marshall Applegate, leader of Heaven’s Gate, formulated his asexual doctrine, which led to his own as well as other male followers’ surgical castration (Davis 2000:257).

Extreme religions claim to have the exclusive truth and demand that their followers adhere to the prescriptions of their distinctive faith. Any deviation from their doctrines is condemned, dissenters are shunned as apostates and the outside world is repudiated. Most cult members are also subjected to a special diet, dress code, own language, isolation, limited or no socializing with other churches or religions, and persecution.

The strictness of cults advances cohesiveness, shared belief and thought and behavioural conformity and a strong sense of camaraderie amongst members, thus securing greater control over believers and their lives. The isolation and strict adherence to the cult commands mould the believers’ minds and redirect their thinking to such an extent that their own ideas are suppressed and their own ambition whittled away. Isolation and insulation ultimately result in cult members suppress-

ing their own identity to make room for the group identity that functions according to the strict instruction of the leader.

## 2.2 Manipulation of the concept of religious freedom

If the right to freedom of religion unduly empowers any religion to exceed the boundaries of reasonability and humanity, infringes on the basic human rights of followers, strips any follower of his or her human dignity or exploits susceptible followers, the situation requires intervention.

Apart from the dynamics, cults can also obtain acceptance, influence and undue authority through their wealth (Rudin 1981:21), obtained through property, businesses, contributions from members and other donors, high fees charged for lectures or assistance, and the subtle take-over of financial assets of members that is largely tax exempted because of their status as religions or non-profit organizations. The People's Temple of Jim Jones had over ten million dollars in various bank accounts at the time of the mass suicide in Guyana (Rudin 1981:22) and The Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon is believed to be very wealthy and influential as a result of many business ventures. Money buys power, and some cults can afford the best legal assistance to fight their opponents. They instil fear into journalists, academics and others who dare to write about them and campaign against legislation aimed at curbing their activities. The Unification Church for example, has even hired journalists to write for their newspaper, *Newsworld*. The combination of wealth, influence and sophisticated techniques of influence indeed make cults a force to be reckoned with.

The charisma of their leaders and the cunning use of words and body language to manipulate situations (Enroth 1992) should not be underestimated. When confronted about practices perceived by outsiders to be harmful, these leaders often resort to a "victim versus oppressor" strategy. Those who warn about the practices and dynamics of these groups are termed "hate groups" and castigated. Cult leaders are trying to silence opposition either by legal action or attempts to instil fear. They are skilled at using people around them to obtain their desired results, while themselves leaving no trace as manipulators.

Dunlop (2001:1-3) explains how powerful the dynamics of these groups are, affording them undue authority and making them virtually "untouchable":

- Legally cults largely misuse the provisions for religious freedom to protect them from outside investigation or regulation.
- Morally their questionable actions are justified by their own internal moral codes.
- Philosophical or theological criticism is not entertained, "since a cult belief system is formulated based on its own internal logic, and is impenetrable to an outsider."

- Empirical or scientific criticism is inappropriate because the tenets of a cult belief system are beyond reproach.
- Criticism by ex-members is deemed worthless and rejected as attempts to “badmouth” cults and hold unresolved issues against them.

Unjustified religious immunity to outside criticism obtained by hiding behind religious freedom increases the possibility of deceptive or psychological techniques for gaining control over adherents. In such cases it would seem that the provisions for religious freedom are focused on the protection of religious groups and organizations rather than on the individual rights of their members (Dunlop 2001:1-3).

In the light of the aforementioned almost “untouchable” status of cults, family and friends of members in these groups and members of society become suspicious of the true intentions of cults and question them. Unfortunately, many of the reactions by family and friends to cults are emotional reactions that result in providing an even stronger case for the justification of cults. Many cultic groups counter by resorting to or threatening legal action. In South Africa, RIGHT (Rights of Individuals Grant Honor To), an organization that studied the dynamics of these groups, was threatened with legal action because it was believed to be guilty of making defamatory comments about certain groups in South Africa. RIGHT’s website was also taken down twice when it reported that a particular religious group was involved in practices believed to be harmful to its members (see Afrihost 2010). Another group in South Africa has laid a complaint at the South African Human Rights Commission (see SAHRC 2012) against authors who have published academic literature about them which allegedly violates its right to freedom of religion.

In recent times, groups and human rights organizations have increasingly advocated for society simply to accept these cultic groups. One such organization is Forum for Religious Freedom Europe (FOREF) (Zoehrer 2008, FOREF). There is an attempt to pressurize society into growing accustomed to cultic groups and to stop being vigilant and cautious about them. Some academics also refer to cults as “new religions” or “new religious movements” in order not to be offensive, others even downplay the concerns about the dangers of cults as “moral panic” (Jenkins 1998).

The evaluation of cults must be done in a balanced manner that will not lead to generalization. The evaluation should not be hampered by fear or other threats exerted by cults in order to silence information that alerts society to the harm inherent in the culture and dynamics of some of these groups.

### **2.3 The dangers of religious abuse in cults**

Pointing out the dangers posed by cult dynamics to the well-being of believers and society is not intended to deny any religious group its right to religious freedom. It



is rather an attempt to draw attention to the subliminal inherent power of religious dynamics at times to be exploited by supposedly trustworthy and respectable leaders in authority.

Dangers include the following (Rudin 1981):

- Cults are authoritarian and anti-democratic and can pose a danger to society since members are often encouraged to disobey laws that are believed to be subordinate to the higher cause of the group (Rudin 1981:31).
- A danger to the well-being of believers. Despite some believers finding happiness in these groups they are exposed to extreme and at times harsh conditions such as insufficient diet, long working hours without remuneration because the work is said to be for God, sleep deprivation, unsuitable clothing, strict behavioural prescriptions, alienation from support structures and family and unsanitary conditions (Goldberg 1997).
- Psychological and emotional danger to members caused by the culture of the cult referring to the irrefutable instructions of the leader and tenets of the group that progressively result in the erosion of intellectual abilities including their reasoning power, critical thinking and decision-making ability that in turn also diminishes their self confidence and own ambitions (Goldberg 1997; Morse & Morse 1987).
- Threat to life itself. This is demonstrated by the reports of disappearances and the suicides of members, as in the cases of the People's Temple in Jonestown, Heaven's Gate and the Solar Temple to name a few.
- Cults' misrepresentation of what they stand for is also a danger resulting in people being lured into cults (Zimbardo 1997) believing that they are joining a legitimate group that will not abuse them (Almendros, Carrobbles & Rodriguez-Carballeira 2007).
- Danger to family bonds as pillars of a healthy society. "The dynamics of cults subtly erode family bonds and subtly drive a wedge between families through demonization of cult members' previous or "old" life, restriction on social contact and strict financial and time commitments that constantly increases the pressure on members to value group commitment above family considerations" (Whitsett & Kent 2003:492).

#### 2.4 How to deal with leaders who abuse positions of authority

Attempts to point out that some religious groups are more likely to abuse followers through their psychological dynamics, their isolation from broader society, and their strict adherence to the prescriptions of their belief have been met with opposition and caution (Richardson 1993; Barker 2002; Richardson & Introvigne 2001). Despite this opposition it cannot be denied that legitimate religion encourages honesty, trans-

parency, critical thinking and well-considered actions. If cults through their misrepresentation of truth present a threat to the well-being of members of society, heightened by the secrecy with which they conduct themselves, society must be alerted.

Unfortunately, society and governments tend to take notice of what really happened inside a cult only following a tragic occurrence, either because they are not informed or because these groups function on the periphery of society and were initially presented as honourable. It is the right of citizens to know whether a religious group has abusive tendencies, just as it is their right to be protected from such a situation. If any government fails in allowing some form of monitoring of religious practices that are harmful to members of society through nongovernmental organizations, it has forsaken its duty to ensure that the human dignity of each citizen is protected. It is not suggested that government must interfere but that it should acknowledge watchdog organizations acting on behalf of society. However, because some religions allege that their freedom is infringed upon by those who would accuse them of abusive practices, it is hoped that the following proposals will assist in creating a workable practice of intervention. The following measures as interventions are proposed:

- Each religion must take responsibility for its actions and practices through the establishment of “voluntary codes of conduct that can serve as tools to prevent and resolve conflict” (Richards, Svendsen & Bless 2010:68).
- Religious leaders as figures of authority who are trusted and act as moral societal role-models familiar with the vulnerability of religious dynamics must be sensitive to possible abuse and must ensure that their actions and practices are always within the framework of fairness and reasonableness.
- Religious leaders who believe in the right to freedom of religion must take action when they observe abuse of this right.
- Members of society should report abuse to a religious leader or consult with knowledgeable persons who have studied cults.
- School curricula should include a subject dealing with religious practices in order to educate children about the dangers of abusive religious leaders.
- Non-governmental watchdog organizations must be established that conduct research and distribute information on the possibility of harmful practices.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Different organizations of this nature exist in Europe and other parts of the world some of them even federal offices in countries like France, Belgium, and Austria. There is also an umbrella organization for these organizations in Europe known as *Fecris Fédération Européenne des Centres de Recherche et d'Information sur le Sectarisme* (Federation of European Centres for Research and Information on Sectarism). One such organization in South Africa is *Cultism Dialogue* ([www.cultismdialogue.com](http://www.cultismdialogue.com)), *Care South Africa* ([www.aserac.co.za](http://www.aserac.co.za)) is another, similar organization.

Watchdog organizations in broad terms must warn against religious practices that present a threat to mental or physical health, threaten the integrity of family life, display extreme focus on financial contributions of members to their own detriment, limit freedom of movement in and out of a group and jeopardize the safety and well-being of minors and children.

### **3. Conclusion**

Religion can be dangerous. Religion can either encourage and strengthen, or else destroy people's lives. The difference lies in the application or misuse of the dynamics of religion, making followers vulnerable to influence. The religious leaders who exploit followers into taking extreme measures ensure that a general negative connotation may be attached to religion. The abuse of the vulnerability of believers by some religious leaders cannot and should not be tolerated.

It will remain the task of watchdog organizations to alert and warn about such groups. They have a responsibility not to stand back and allow pressure or cult lobbyists to undermine them, thus placing cults beyond criticism.

Society has the right to voice its opinion and critique religious groups if it feels that religion is becoming abusive and is being used for purposes other than the edification of believers. Watchdog organizations should be in place in any society to act as counterweights to abuse, for the sake of the protection of citizens.

Religious leaders, on the other hand, as respected members of society and exemplars of morality must be aware that they cannot escape criticism from society and must ensure that they do not abuse their positions of authority to exploit vulnerable followers, and must be willing to speak openly about their groups to ensure a harmonious society. Each person must be afforded the right to make his/her own choices and be entitled to live his/her life on the basis of his/her own goals, values and ambitions, and in so doing remain an individual with human dignity, identity and individuality intact acknowledged as valuable members of society.

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