

Applied Unificationism: My Daughter Asks - Cult or Community?

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My daughter asked me recently, "Mom do you still think you were *not* part of a cult?" She had just finished watching a show about a dubious, if not dangerous, social media cult, and she caught me off guard. We've had these conversations before but now that she is in her thirties and I, recently turned 70, wisdom has hopefully given us a little perspective.

Cults hold an unending fascination with the American public since the infamous Jim Jones and the diabolical Charles Manson came on the scene during the searching 70s. When I joined the Unification church in 1973 the 'cult' word was not a part of the daily lexicon. The language I was drawn to in that flowered-power era were terms like *kibbutz* and *commune*, which in my youthful longings would include: sewing, farming, baking bread, and doing yoga (and eating yogurt which was only sold in 'health nut' stores as my mother called them).

As a teen living in a lazy American suburb where neighbors were strangers the idea of greater connectedness appealed to me. But so did a deeper understanding of Christianity. I was enamored with the rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar and C.S. Lewis and disillusioned with my Catholic upbringing, although I appreciate aspects of that now especially when the next world crisis nearly brings to my knees in prayer.

Today, cult-like groups offer people a sense of belonging in a world where despite our ability to connect like never before through social media, ironically, we feel more alienated than ever.

"Were you able to visit home?" she continued to query me. This question has been lobbed at me before as if it were a litmus test for being held captive in a cult.

"Yes, I was." Our church was based in New York, and since I was from Delaware, I could pop home on occasion. Not sure I wanted to more than any other self-involved eighteen-year-old. But there was, in the church milieu, the unspoken: *you're all in, or you're not*. The Unified Family, as we called ourselves, circled the wagons against deprogrammers and focused exclusively on the 'mission' to save America. Although members were repeatedly instilled with the importance of family values, we often sacrificed those values in service to a higher purpose.

There existed an underlying tension, a twixt and between inside the church/outside the church. There were A members and B members. Home members weren't really considered members by those in the mainstream movement. And children born outside the faith were in a separate category altogether. Ouch.

Through the Unification Church's evolution and outreach work, primarily in the form of interdisciplinary conferences, this cognitive dissonance between inside the community and outside grew less jarring over time but never completely dissipated. Traces of identity crisis as a movement still reverberate from Korea to Las Vegas. It's challenging for an international organization whose pride is in diversity to create one defining cultural experience where everyone - in or out - can feel welcomed.

What makes an organization cult-like?

Does the answer lie in belief or behavior?

What is a cult – as differentiated from a community of believers or just another church? And especially a dangerous cult that morphs into a mind-controlling, manipulative phenomenon where adherents are motivated to cast reason aside, drink Kool-Aid-laced poison, and get branded to prove they belong? We can dig through the history a bit and find that 'cults' did not always carry a sinister connotation, although they've certainly well-earned this reputation in recent years.

The Cult of St. Olaf in the 1050s employs an early use of the word and refers to the king who brought Christianity to Norway. The word cult during that time was associated with the word identity - in this case, the spread of a Christian identity to the Scandinavian countries from England. If the word 'cult' had been used 2,000 years ago, surely Jesus's followers would have been labeled as such. Furthermore, does one denomination, as opposed to another, define the true Christian identity? What is the true church?

A modern-day cult may not be limited to just factional religious sects—think of some of the political groups out there chanting sound-bite slogans or sports teams who paint their faces, or concertgoers whipping up a frenzy in a sound-deafening stadium. (I'm thinking of the one who famously sings about karma.) A friend refers to her innocuous public speaking group as cult-like due to its special language and its carrot-on-a-stick motivational tactics.

The internet definition of a cult is this: *a small religious group that is not part of a larger and more accepted religion and that has beliefs regarded by many people as extreme or dangerous.*

But cults and other groups - even your Aunt Tilly's parties - can spawn a similar effect: the treatment of people as insiders and outsiders, which can translate as less preferential treatment toward those deemed as 'others.'

Then my daughter shot me with the elephant in the room question: Do you still believe Rev. Moon is the Messiah? (This would fit under the category of cult of personality.)

I bumbled my response, saying my faith is about a teaching and not contingent on what one person says or does. "I joined - as many of us proclaimed back in the day—because of 'the truth'; albeit a 'truth' that has been open to interpretation in ways we never envisioned at the start. What I *could* have told her was that if Sun Myung Moon and his wife, Hakja Han were not the embodied examples of the Divine Principle in action, then their teaching probably would not hold the same appeal. After all, there are lots of teachings, past and present, in circulation. The living reality of True Parents - their love, dedication, and sacrifices—to young members in the 1970s was infinitely more inspiring to emulate than dry diagrams on a dusty chalkboard.

When is a cult manipulative?

After forcing myself to watch several cult documentaries in order to understand better what makes them tick, it was obvious that a powerful leader was always at the helm. All things flow from the top. At first glance, a narcissistic leader can seem charismatic, but it will become apparent through their actions whether they are self-serving or membership-serving.

Coercion, arm twisting, sales tactics: If you pay this, you will achieve a higher level of consciousness; if you do this, you will gain this. Promises. Promises. Goals one can never reach hang tantalizing in a distance that keeps on disappearing, whether it means achieving self-realization or magical states such as being freed, cleared –insert any state of being here - that, in fact, cannot be bought, prayed for, or guaranteed.

Americans love shortcuts: express check-out lines, fast cars, and instant gratification, but they also value honesty, George Washington, who could not tell a lie, and Honest Abe Lincoln. Americans can pivot to a variety of viewpoints but they don't like being deceived. So be upfront as to what you offer - and more importantly be unconditional. In these hard-to-trust times, people are understandably wary of hidden agendas.

When is a cult no longer a cult?

One theory is that when a cult's practices are commonly known, and its achievements are well regarded by society, it no longer appears threatening. I'm not so sure. There are lots of accomplished, powerful organizations out there that still beg the question, are they a cult or not?

So where is that line? When is a dazzling ring in a jewelry store proven to be a two-bit cubic zirconia, and when does it sparkle? Is it a diamond in the rough? In these confusing times when the jewelry store has

been ransacked and upended, how can anyone possibly discern the difference?

Mainstream impact can be proven over time. Naturally, if the Unification Church's message is going to ignite the world and bring peace and unity on the Korean Peninsula—it's hard to wait and watch the world go to hell in a torrent of climate change and war. It takes a billion years to create a diamond naturally. Feeling the urgency of the world's situation, I find it hard to resist being pushy. Yet, that type of drive, if not softened by unconditional love, has sabotaged outreach efforts in the past.

The root words of cult and culture are similar

The words cult and culture share a Latin root, cultus, which has multiple meanings, including "tilling, cultivation," "training or education," and "adoration". Both words can also refer to worship, and culture can also refer to a community's aesthetic expression.

A belief system rooted in the ideal of the parental heart demonstrates unconditional giving without expecting a result. Rob Sayre, a founding member of Camp Shehaqua, once reminded me, "People do not want to join a cult; they want community."

And here is a quote from Dr. Tyler Hendricks* who defines culture according to Unificationist ideals.

"A lineage naturally spawns a culture. The lineage Reverend Moon envisions combines all races, nations, and religions. Reverend Moon calls this universal culture of God's lineage the "culture of heart."

New York Times journalist David Brooks echoes the power of community in his new book, *How to Know a Person. The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*. According to Brooks, the answer to today's polarization lies in hearing and validating one another. Listening - not preaching - is the hardest task of all.

Back to my conversation with my daughter. "I can see why you might have joined to have a sense of community," she said. (But I didn't!)

"So I'm glad you and Dad met in the Unification Church and had me and..."

"I know, think of it, you were born because of the Unification Church."

"Yeah, and I guess I'm glad I was part of it in some way. It's interesting."

"Endlessly fascinating," I replied.

So which is it? Cult, community, or another denomination?



It all comes down to the culture of heart

How often do we talk to someone we don't know at church? Or do we gravitate towards those we've bonded with over the years? Do we repeatedly use insider language not only in our conversations with others but in our writings as well? Do we judge congregants based on status, category, or accomplishment?

"You belong to the 'good cult' she told me. "And I love you - no matter what."

And whether it's a cult, community, or culture of heart remains to be seen.

Eileen Williams joined the Unification Church in Wilmington, Delaware in 1973. As a teenager, she remembers riding in the car with her mother by the local church center and wondering what that big word "Unification" meant. She's still pondering. Eileen taught high school for several years including at the Bridgeport International Academy. She currently serves as a Guardian ad Litem in Vermont.