CULTS: A THEOLOGICAL COUNTEROFFENSIVE

— WHAT WE SHOULD TELL OUR YOUNG PEOPLE

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People are troubled by cults. Much of this anxiety focuses on the young. In May of this year, Seventeen magazine ran a lead article, "Cults: Are Teens Being Brainwashed?" The same month, Ladies Home Journal carried a similar story: "Cults on Campus: Alarming Threat to the Young and Lonely."

The mood is one of foreboding. "Cults, according to experts on these quasi-religiou movements," the Journal articles tells us, "have infiltrated almost every campus in the country. If your child is in college or high school, the chances are good that sometime this year, he or she will be approached by a cult recruiter." Then the Journal story gives us a picture of the spiritual seduction of lonely youth, brainwashing, even suggestions of physical torture. If we are to believe such reports — and the media have been full of them recently — no young person in America today is safe from the insidious influences of cults.

As if this were not ominous enough, the Journal article suggests even more dire possibilities. Quoting Dr. Margarent Singer, professor of psychiatry at the University of California.at San Francisco, whom the magazine identified as "one of the foremost experts on cults in the country," the Journal story portrays the cult movement as undermining the very foundations of the American way of life, in particular the family and the American system of individual freedom. "If unethical cults are permitted to proliferate," Dr. Singer is quoted as saying, "more families could be threatened and we would have more people accepting totalistic and totalitarian methods of group living without being aware of exactly what they are involved in."

But we have yet to touch on what is perhaps the paradigmatic fact, Xhe symbolic event, that most troubles people as they ponder the often strange expressions of the cult phenomena. The memory of the events at Jonestown, is very much alive for many people today. Is that kind of chilling story, they wonder, -- are those mass suicides, predicated on blind allegiance to an irrational, tyrannical leader, who seem to have exercised a shockingly effective kind of mind control, to become the destiny of members of the younger generation? More concretely, is that kind of collective insanity, however benigh it may first appear, now invading our college campuses across the country?

I.

Given such questions, it is only natural that serious Church people should be interested in mounting a theological counteroffensive against the so-called "unethical cults." But we need to exercise caution here.

In the first place, if we were to put ourselves in the place of some leading citizens of first century Rome, we might well conclude — as many Romans did, among them Nero -- that Christianity was a dangerous, unethical

cult. After all, it tooks its first roots among the alienated of society.

It seemed to be subversive in many respects. Its founder taught dangerous-sounding ideas, such as forsaking father and mother to follow Him. He proposed unpious deeds, such as letting the dead bury the dead. He even suggested unpatriotic activities, such as obeying God, at times, rather than Caesar. Also, the early Christians were no respecters of class distinctions; slaves and masters gave each other the kiss of peace. In this way, Christianity was a threat to the very fabric of the social structure. Early Christians, moreover, met secretly, behind closed doors, and they used outrageously intimate terms such as "brother and sister." Accordingly, respectible citizens wondered in those days, how intimate those Christians really were being behind those closed doors. In the same vein, Christians seemed to have a rather scandalous notion of sharing their worldly goods in common, insofar as any had need. What would that idea lead to? Furthermore, they practiced strange and barbaric-sounding rites, such as drinking and eating the blood and the body of their God. And some of them, it appeared, madly and suicidally chose death in the coliseum, rather than going through the simple, painless, and widely accepted social duties of offering worship to Caesar.

In these respects, the early Church was very much akin to what many people today think of as dangerous cults. So it seems prudent for us not to join immediately in the public outcry against cults, lest in the end we find ourselves condemning our own religious roots, along with everything else.

Secondly, we need to exercise caution in joining in the public condemnation of cults, lest we find ourselves falling prey to a media event. We all know that popular journalism flourishes on the proverbial "man-bites-dog" kind of story, the sensational and the violent. We know also that soealled "experts" are always ready to be quoted by the media and willing to paint the bleakest picture of any event, whether it be the population explosion, Three Mile Island, the threat of communism in Africa, or the phenomenon of cults in America. Why was it, indeed, that the press did not pay much attention to the cult phenomenon in the period before Jonestown ? How much is the cult phenomenon in this country in fact a pervasive, dangerous reality, and how much it is a creation of the media, riding the waves of public shock after the events of Jonestown ? Furthermore, it seems that many stories about cults, such as some about the Unification Church, have been extensively exaggerated, notwithstanding the numerous objections most Christians rightly have when they analyze Rev. Moon’s religion.

This is not to suggest that we should overlook the excesses of the cult movement. Surely, for example, we have much to learn and much to criticize when we ponder the history of the Peoples’ Temple in Guyana. Surely, in the same spirit, we need to condemn any group which preys on human weaknesses or exploits spiritual needs for its own narrow ends. Surely, likewise, we need to condemn any manifestation of a totalitarian ethos, whether in the form of cults or otherwise. But there is good reason, nevertheless, to exercise caution in our criticism, as we have seen.

II.

All of this suggests a familiar diagnostic distinction. When we look at the cult phenomenon, we will be well instructed to look at the underlying pathology in the culture in which the cults are rooted, and not focus our attention solely on the superficial symptoms represented by some of the cults, however destructive those symptoms appear to be. To this diagnostic end, the well-known saying of Jesus to the tempter in the wilderness can serve as a guide: humans should not live by bread alone.

In the last 30 years in America, perhaps from the very beginning of our national history, American culture has been shaped by a love affair with material well-being and economic power. The old preachers who used to rant and rave against American materialism weee not that far off the mark. The cult of financial success, the cult of economic wealth, the cult of material comfort, the cult of security and social well-being — all these are as American as cherry pie. They are celebrated on Television everyday, as we all know., especially in the ads: as people gather around their sets for their daily devotions in the cult of Mammon. Living by bread alone is among the most venerable of American religious orientations.

Since, moreover, the mechanism of materialism in our society has been and is competition, and since competition by definition sets people against each other, the American life by bread alone has as a matter of course both presupposed and fostered isolated individuals. This has led to what Philip Slater has called The Pursuit of Loneliriass, in the book that bears that title. This pursuit is evident throughout our society: it is symbolized best perhaps by all those isolated individuals sitting everyday behind their wheels in their resource-consuming, polluting, and extravagantly comfortable motor cars at the comuting hour, stalled in the traffic jam. Individual isolation, surrounded by by an expensive, power-hungry technology, is the legacy of the American way of living by bread alone.

Now there are cracks appearing, some very wide ones, in the shiny exterior of this life by bread alone. This can be seen most vividly perhaps in the frustration, and sometimes the anger, that comes to the fore in the long lines at the gas stations. It can be seen more poignantly in the deep shock many ordinary citizens felt in the wake of Three Mile Island.

In the same vein, most citizens are at least subliminally aware that both Russia and the United States are insanely cranking out scores of unimaginably destructive nuclear warheads every month, and positioning them against each other every day. Likewise, many people are aware, however dimly, that while we Americans scramble to feed our petrolium habit — wasting, by the way, some fifty per cent of what we use, compared to other developed countries -- the poor majority in the world is much more concerned with where their next meal is coming from. They need petrolium for fertilizer so theycan eat. We need it so we can sustain the enormously consumptive style of life to which we have grown accustomed. We know this, however diffusely. People are aware, howevermuch they may try to forget it, that millions of children are suffering from malnutrition around this globe. All these items from the daily news, and many more like them, precipitate adeep feeling of distress in the American consciousness. We know, at some level, what the lifestyle of bread alone means, compared to the rest of the world. And that is distressful since we are human beings created for community with each other. These, then, are some of the external cracks in the shiny shell of American materialism.

Inside, in our souls, things seem even worse at times. Created for community by God, we Americans find ourselves often isolated from our brothers and sisters around the world, from our own neighbors, even from the members of our own family. That is probably why so much emphasis is placed in our society on saving the family. The family seems to be the last expression of community for many people, — and that is fading, too. The divorce rate, we may note, was enormous long before the emergence of the cult phenomenon. So we had better not be too quick to blmvis our family troubles on the cults.

With such a world of external distress and internal loneliness, no wonder people turn to all manner of narcotics, to anything that will ease the distress and the pain of their isolation: to drugs, sex, romantic retreats to the wilderness, race cars, pro-football, even jogging. The list is endless.

We are a nation of isolated individuals, hung up on material comfort, with incredibly powerful technologies at our disposal, yet we are unable to buy the happiness and the fulfilment that we dream about.

In this cultural context, the phenomenon of cults can be seen as just one among many phenomena, as part of an overall pattern of our social reality. It may be the case, indeed, that, notwithstanding all the concern with the dangers of certain cults, other expressions of the underlying social pathology may be more destructive than the much publicized cults themselves. Consider the fact, for example, that some 3.3 million American teenagers have a drinking problem today, about twenty per cent of that age group. Consider the related fact also that sixty per cent of automobile Accident fatalities involve drunken teenage drivers.

Whether it be alcohol or certain cults or the beautiful condominium life in Florida, people in our society are grasping for all manner of quick-fix solutions to drown out the pain of their isolation and the distress of living in a world that shows signs of going to pieces.

Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow ye die! That is the implicit motto of much of our culture today; and the phenomenon of cults, in some cases, if not most, seems to be but one more chapter of the same story, the attempt to find a quick-fix, some kind of narcotic, spiritual or physical, to drown out the pain.

In some cases, surely, the attractiveness of cults, especially those that are anti-materialistic and communal in character, stands as a judgment on the dominant trends of our society. These religious movements are attractive, especially to the young, precisely because they are un-American, that is, spiritual rather than materialistic and communal rather than individualistic. Some among the young, at least, intuit the fact that authentic humanity does not mean living by bread aLone, for oneself alone.

III.

Given this situation, what dould we tell our young people? What should we say to them in order to prepare them to deal with the cult phenomenon, as they may meet it in college or elsewhere, and with the deeper patterns of our society, in which the cult phenomenon is rooted?

The answer to this question seems clear. We should tell them the truth, so help us God. We whould tell them the whole truth, indeed, however painful that may be for them or for us, since we know that the truth, and the truth alone, will set us free.

To this end, as some first steps in telling the whole truth, we might consider saying the following things to our young people.

First, materialism is dead. That whole American way of living by bread alone has reached its limits. It is taking us down the road to one disaster after another. Did not Jesus say that we cannot serve two masters, both God and Mammon? Is anything short of an act of national repentance, turning away from the fixation on material comfort and security — living more simply, accepting more insecurity -- is anything short of that going to prevent us from drifting, as a nation, into a cataclysmic futre of death and destruction?

As Christians, we know that we cannot live by bread alone, and that we have a higher calling, to live by the Word of God. Maybe we need to emphasize that theme much more, by deeds as well as words, with our young people. The older generation has prettymuch had it both ways, living happily with both God

and Mammon. We need to let our youth know that that was never a Godly solution in the first place.

Second, the Church is a minority. Jesus said that his Kingdom is not of this world. Since the time of Constantine, however, the Church has been very much of this world, and still is, nowhere more passionately than in contemporary America. With a Christian president and a renewed interest everywhere in fundamental Christianity, it would seem that the American nation and the American Church are walking today, as ever, hand-in-hand. But in fact, the true Church, the faithful Church, is a minority. Notwithstanding many religious trappings, our culture has become increasingly secular, increasingly hedonistic, increasingly unChristian.

So to prepare our youth to live in a Christian society, where Christianity is the established religion, legally or by common consent, is to prepare them for a reality that no longer exists. It is also to encourage them to link their lives, to invest their identities, in a world which seems to be going to pieces, in several fundamental ways.

Better we should tell them the truth, that Christians are a peculiar people, that the Church is a minority, and that they should be prepared to accept the consequences of that fact.

Third, the demonic is a reality. However we may choose to articulate this fact, the reign of what the New Testament calls the principaLities and powers, what Kant called radical evil, is for real in human history. American society in general and the American Church in particular have often lived happily with optimistic illusions, that things will naturally get better if you wait or work, that steence and technology will always discover a way out, that education will make people more rational, that wealth will filter down to the poor, that we can spend ourselves blind on the machines of war without stumbling blindly into was, and so on.

But Murphy's law, however silly it sounds, has its own veracity, although probably more profoundly than the original Murphy first thought to be the case; if something can go wrong, **tt** will. More truthfully, we can say with the Bible, that there are active powers of evil in this world, which no one can afford to take lightly. If anyone has any doubt about this matter, let him or her ponder some of the events of our history in this century: Auschwitz and Buchenwald, Hiroshima and Dresden, South Africa and Cambodia, Mai Lai and Jonestown.

As the letter th the E^esians reminds us: "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, aganastthe powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, agZhtfist the spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places."

Fourth, discipleship is costly. Jesus did not call us to a life of ease, but to a life of self-sacrifice. Jesus did not call us to a life of material comfor t and security, but to share our goods with the poor and to take up our crosses and follow Him.

Too often, we have taught our youth, directly or indirectly, that Christianity is a bed of roses. So these young people are ill-equipped for the struggle of faith which will be theirs, if they are to grow up into their own Christian maturity. They often seem so ill-equipped to follow the way of genuine self-sacrifice, the way of the ross.

Fifth, love is the last word within the Church. This statement is really another way of saying that discipleship is costly. But it needs to