

TOXIC FAITH SYSTEMS AND MENTAL PROBLEMS

TRAITS OF ABUSIVE CHURCHES AND ORGANIZATIONS

- Control-orientated, arrogantly assertive, power-posturing leadership.
- Authoritarian and legalistic with dictatorial, dogmatic unproven doctrines that are proclaimed to be ‘the Truth’.
- Claims of being the channel of communication between God and mankind; having unique knowledge that makes them special. If members do not submit to its dictatorial rule, the leaders emphasise that any waver of support to the organization or church is evidence of a wavering of one’s faith in God.
- Manipulation of members by guilt, shame, blame and fear.
- An “Us-vs-Them” view, a perception of being under persecution.
- Demanding, rigid lifestyles and overwhelming service requirements. Member’s lives are controlled by both spoken and unspoken rules which are unscriptural.
- Loss of focus on God, replaced by a complicated process of furthering the church or organization and its rules.
- Followers “in pain,” hiding real feelings that oppose or disagree with the religious system.
- Intolerance of individual thinking, and of criticism of the religious system by its members. Fosters an unhealthy dependency by focusing on themes of submission, loyalty, and obedience to those in authority.
- Severe discipline of members with threats to remove members from the group.
- The religious system puts down other religions beyond simple analysis of the doctrines and practices of the religion.
- Leaving the religious system is painful and difficult.
- Closed communication: information is only valid if it comes from the top of the religious organization down, and from inside the system to the outside of it.
- Labelling: a technique used to discount a person who opposes the beliefs of the religious system.
- What you do is more important than who you are.
- Love and acceptance are earned by doing certain things.
- Scripture-twisting.
- Scare tactics; focus on demons.
- Members are misled into thinking that the only safety is in the religious system.
- A view that education is bad or unnecessary.

CULTS

The word 'cult' is often used in reference to organizations which operate a set of extreme policies designed to control members so that their free-will is substantially denied. This is generally done by mind and behaviour controlling techniques. However, we must balance this with other definitions of the word 'cult'. The Readers Digest Dictionary also defines this word as:

1. A system or community of religious worship and ritual, especially one focussing upon a single deity or spirit.
2. An exclusive group of people sharing an esoteric interest.

So clearly not all cults are damaging and many are, in many ways, beneficial for reasons of social, psychological, and physical welfare.

In the second of the above definitions it is mainly secular organizations which are being referred to. Such members gather for some common purpose and such cults are therefore beneficial as long as there is no hidden agenda and with no intention of misleading. These have their leadership, their rules and their principles of operation.

In the first of the above definitions there are included the Mosaic system of life for the Israelites, and the system of life for Christians under the New Covenant. Various denominations interpret the Bible differently but this does not make anyone of them an extreme cult as long as the Bible is not being used to further some hidden agenda and with the intention of misleading.

Naturally all such systems have rules, guidelines and principles regarding one's thinking and behaviour. The primary of these must always come from the Bible. Additionally there will be lesser rules that work toward good order. However, there may come a point where the 'denomination' moves to an extremity and becomes an extreme cult and so becoming damaging psychologically, socially and perhaps even physically to its membership.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EXTREME CULTS

- Members of the group must believe that the doctrines of the group are the one and only "Truth."
- Members must follow the doctrines even if they don't understand them.
- The doctrines form the basis of all thoughts, feelings, and actions.
- There is an "Us-vs-Them" belief that no outside group is recognized as godly.
- No independent thinking by members is allowed.
- It teaches that there is a huge conspiracy (*actually non-existent*) working to thwart the group. (However, certain individuals may wish to thwart the group).
- Teaches that spirit beings are constantly critically observing the members.
- Members are made to feel elite, chosen by God to lead mankind out of darkness.
- The group looks down on other religious groups.
- Members are told if they don't fully perform their duties, they are failing in humility.
- Members are required to render absolute obedience to their superiors.
- When members leave the group, the love that was formerly shown to them turns into anger, hatred, and ridicule.
- The group uses guilt and shame to control its members.

- Fear is a major motivator.
- Members feel an extreme sense of urgency about given tasks.
- Many groups teach that the apocalypse is just around the corner, and have timetables for it's occurrence with dates near enough to carry an emotional punch.
- Members are kept extremely busy.
- There is never a legitimate reason for leaving the group.
- Members are indoctrinated with the belief that if they ever leave the group, terrible consequences will befall them.
- Members are forbidden to think negative thoughts about the group.
- Members are forbidden to have contact with former members of the group.
- 'The 'truth' is changed to fit the needs of the situation.
- Friendships in the group are shallow; the only real allegiance is to the leader/leadership.
- There is no allowance for interpretation of or deviation from the group's' doctrines.
- The leadership systematically creates a sense of powerlessness in its members.
- The group causes members to become extremely dependent on its compliance-oriented expressions of love and support; dread of losing the groups support.
- 'Love Bombing': members shower much attention on prospective members.
- Members must project a façade of happiness.
- Members must believe the group is always right, even if it contradicts itself.
- Members spend more and more time with and under the direction of the group.
- Those who do not conform to the group's requirements will be expelled.
- Disagreement with or doubts about the groups teachings are always the fault of the member, due to lack of faith or lack of understanding.
- The group is superior to and different from all other groups.
- Members must trust the group leaders instead of themselves.
- Members have similar odd mannerisms and modes of speech.

MENTAL PROBLEMS OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE EFFECTS OF AN EXTREME CULT

According to various scientific studies in the USA, Jehovah's Witnesses experience mental health problems at a level considerably higher than that found in virtually every other American religious group. Sadly many Jehovah's Witnesses will view these studies as an attack upon the WBTS and so, in defence of the WBTS, they will deny the validity of the studies. This is a grave mistake because it puts the welfare of the Jehovah's Witness at further risk.

ACADEMIC STUDIES

1. THE RYLANDER STUDY (Sweden mid-20th century)

Dr. Rylander studied 126 Jehovah's Witnesses who had been imprisoned as conscientious objectors: 51 were neurotic; 42 psychotic; 32 mentally retarded; 5 were brain-damaged. Of the eligible armed service Swedish population 4% were assessed as psychologically unfit whereas 21% of Jehovah's Witnesses were. These were strongly active Jehovah's Witnesses. Rylander concluded that the WBTS' influence was detrimental to mental health.

2. PESCOR STUDY (America)

From a sample of 177 young male Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned as conscientious objectors 7% were diagnosed as psychotic and 25% as maladjusted. This was 17 times higher than for other prisoners.

3. JANNER STUDY (Switzerland 1963)

This study of 85 Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned as conscientious objectors revealed that, compared with the general prison population, they had an abnormally high level of fear anxiety, neuroticism, and introversion and/or social isolation tendencies. Mentally they "were somewhat removed from reality." Janner concluded that the WT influence was often not positive and that those with emotional problems when they became Jehovah's Witnesses were not helped by the WBTS, but rather it had an adverse effect on them.

4. SPENCER STUDY (Australia 1973)

This study of active Jehovah's Witnesses who had been admitted to psychiatric hospitals revealed that the rate of serious mental illness among this group was three times higher than that of non-witnesses. Paranoid schizophrenia was four times higher. The British Journal of Psychiatry 1975 stated:

During the period of 36 months from January 1971 to December 1973 there were 7,546 inpatient admissions to the West Australian Mental Health Service Psychiatric Hospitals. Of these 50 were reported to be active members of the Jehovah's Witnesses movement ... Of the 50 admitted 22 were diagnosed as schizophrenic, 17 as paranoid schizophrenic, 10 as neurotic and one as alcoholic (p. 557-58).

5. MONTAGUE STUDY (Ohio 1972-1986)

"The mental illness rate of Jehovah's Witnesses is approximately 10-16 times higher than the rate for the general, non-witness population [and that]...about 10% of the full members in the average congregation are in serious need of professional help...[although they are often] able to hide this fact quite well, especially from outsiders." Montague concluded that persons who had emotional problems were attracted to the WBTS but WT involvement also caused many of the emotional problems that they suffered.

6. POTTER STUDY (thesis for Ph.D.)

Potter concluded that there exists "a strong correlation between Witness membership and clinical schizophrenia." Similar studies by Elmer Koppl in Germany and Kjell Totland in Norway reveal the same pattern.

7. BERGMAN'S STUDIES

The current leading investigator of mental health issues among Jehovah's Witnesses is Jerry Bergman Ph.D. who was a Jehovah's Witness for 20 years. From this perspective he was able to assess the reasons for the poor mental health of Jehovah's Witnesses better than others in the psychiatric profession:

GENERAL EFFECT OF MENTAL CONFLICT

Eventually for most Jehovah's Witnesses there will be a degree of mental conflict. If there is no resolution and they continue to be part of the Jehovah's Witnesses organization they will tend to be putting on an appearance so that they will be continually hearing things at the meetings or other Jehovah's Witnesses association with which they do not agree and, in fact, they themselves will be saying things with which they do not agree e.g. statements to follow the party line or answers given from WT literature. Most Jehovah's Witnesses can cope with up to four conflicts and still maintain their confidence in the WBTS. However, whilst doing this the toll on their mental health is considerable. Disillusionment usually sets in when the Jehovah's Witness realizes that there are numerous things wrong with the WBTS and that these things are never going to be rectified because of the rigidity that occurs (as with all religions over time, i.e. the traditional understanding becomes fixed so that no further progress is made in understanding actual Bible teachings).

CHOICE OF HELP

If an active Jehovah's Witnesses goes to a therapist who is also a JW it can be totally counterproductive because such a therapist will feel duty bound to the WBTS to inform them of the revealed sins, problems and doubts. The psychiatric profession views such informing as utterly unethical. In fact, some JW therapists have requested that the Jehovah's Witnesses patient sign a waiver concerning normal confidentiality. This is again highly unethical and the opinion of professional psychiatrists/psychologists concerning the counselling and advice given by JW elders is that it does far more harm than good and it can bring the most disastrous results for the patient. This is because JW elders are mostly uneducated and untrained, especially as regards dealing with the personal problems of individuals. Just knowing Scriptures is not enough and it is even worse if the Scriptures are misused on the person with the problem. One doctor provides a diagnosis:

This type of head pain can be caused by a chemical imbalance in your brain, which can be due to stress that is caused by living in a way that is not in agreement with the way you feel internally.

REALITY CONTRADICTS WT STATEMENTS

Within congregations Jehovah's Witnesses usually, at some point in time, experience personality conflicts. This tells them that all is not well in God's organization. They are then required to let the general public know that Jehovah's Witnesses provide a 'spiritual paradise.' This is very damaging mentally for the JW. Furthermore, Jehovah's Witnesses find that the conduct and attitude that is espoused in the literature does not at all match with the way other JWs often deal with them. This is especially true if there is an issue over money.

CONFLICT OVER DOCTRINAL FLIP-FLOPS

If past WBTS policy has resulted in harm to or death of a loved one and then the policy changes, the result is extreme mental anguish and heartbreak over the damage to or loss of the loved one. It is almost impossible for the Jehovah's Witness to come to terms with the conflicting thoughts and so produces resentment toward the WBTS and other Witnesses. The false-encouragement from those who say things like "well she was loyal to Jehovah" is a hollow consolation.

CONFLICT OVER PROPHECY FAILURE

After such a failure the process for the individual Jehovah's Witness goes from disappointment to confusion to explaining it away. This creates some fragmentation of the personality and integrity.

UNHEALTHY SUBORDINATION

This produces in the Jehovah's Witness a state of fear, a loss of self-esteem, a failure to find self-fulfilment or resentment. All of these mental negatives can lead to a variety of health problems.

UNJUSTIFIABLE GUILT

This results from a fear of failing to meet up to the WBTS' demanding requirements.

CONCLUSION

- The WBTS has provided **few effective major guidelines** to help Jehovah's Witnesses live their lives well because the main goal is to serve the WBTS.
- The **enforced field service**, with little or no success for most Jehovah's Witnesses in finding anyone really interested. This very unrewarding situation creates a sub-conscious lack of self-fulfilment. It is estimated that most Jehovah's Witnesses would be thrilled if the WBTS announced that the preaching work was to end forthwith.
- The original joy that a new Jehovah's Witness finds steadily fades in to a demoralization, loss of real spirituality, and sometimes even leading to suicide
- The main general mental health problem of Jehovah's Witnesses is ***depression*** generally caused by many or all of the above factors including negativity concerning the present.
- According to the psychiatric profession the prime serious mental health problem of Jehovah's Witnesses is ***paranoid schizophrenia*** which is **four times higher** than for non- Jehovah's Witnesses.

By Raymond C. Faircloth
www.biblicaltruthseekers.co.uk

