CULTS & MIND CONTROL – washingtonpost.com

Americans call them "cults." Europeans call them "sects." Both are loaded words in cultures that have been shocked repeatedly by the mass suicides and terrorist acts of fringe groups.

This special report brings together 50 years of Post photographs and news clips about some of the religious and other movements whose techniques have drawn criticism. It includes an annotated chronology tracing trends among these groups, along with analysis and opinion about methods used by many of these groups.

The intense media focus on the extreme acts of a few groups overshadows a deeper controversy over tactics employed by many, including methods used to win and hold converts. Critics charge that a growing number of religious, political and commercial groups are using deceptive psychological techniques to control and exploit members.

Looming in the debate are broader questions about the nature of free will and mind control. Critics charge that high-control groups "brainwash" members. Others counter that no "mind control" can occur without physical coercion. Both sides acknowledge there is a continuum of control that starts with the relatively mild influence of education and advertising. The spectrum extends to the stronger techniques of indoctrination and propaganda in the middle and, at the far end, the more extreme measures of totalistic environments, in which individual thinking and freedom are said to be squashed.

Clearly, though, one person's cult

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| Dance Followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh dance in a ritual. |

can be another person's religion, and history has proven that yesterday's small sect can mushroom into today's mainstream religion. Christianity, like the Mormon religion, started as a fringe messianic group. [Paroxyms of spiritual fervor](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/misc/revival.htm) have punctuated American history, with the First Amendment spawning a stunning array of new religious movements that often seem more peculiar than dangerous. In the United States, even religious beliefs perceived

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| revival A revival in Florida. By Cathy Woods. |

as heretical or dangerous are protected. That's not the case everywhere.

Nowhere is the debate over religious freedom more fierce than in Europe, where governments have been less reluctant than in the United States to impose restrictions on religious movements they consider dangerous. While France appointed a parliamentary commission to investigate new religious sects, Germany has been roiled over the Church of Scientology, which claims to have 30,000 members in Germany and 8 million worldwide.

Scholars who study zealotry say people tend to be more susceptible to manipulation in times of major change and crisis.

"Totalism is likely to emerge during periods of historical --or psychohistorical --dislocation, in which there is a breakdown of the symbols and structures that guide the human life cycle," Robert Jay Lifton, the well- known American psychiatrist, wrote recently.

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| Waco, Tex. The headquarters of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Tex. |

The human craving for stability and meaning is cited as a contributing factor in the rise of thousands of new religious, political and psycho-social sects in the second half of this century.

The turbulent 1960s were a time of such change in the United States, providing fertile ground for neo-Christian and Eastern-style groups such as Hare Krishna and Transcendental Meditation.

A decade later, the human potential movement emerged, teaching self-awareness and consciousness expansion. Groups such as Lifespring and est had no strong ties to religion. And as the millennium approaches, self-styled messiahs like David Koresh and Marshall Applewhite have flourished, teaching impending doom with doctrines cobbled from Christianity, millennialism and even science fiction.

--By WashingtonPost.com staff  
April 26, 1997

**OVERVIEW: The 1950s**Go to Chronology

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| [**Church of Scientology**](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/scientology/main.htm) Science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard founded Scientology as a church in 1954 based on a form of self-help psychotherapy he called "Dianetics." Scientology's spiritual counseling, for which people pay money, involves an "audit" in which people confess painful or embarrassing moments while using a lie detector-type device. FBI raids on Scientology offices in the 1970s uncovered evidence that adherents had infiltrated government agencies and harassed people, but Scientology officials said they purged offenders from their ranks following the convictions. Since Hubbard's death in 1986, Scientology has stirred intense controversy in Germany. The church, known for suing its critics, won a hard-fought battle for tax-exempt status as a religion in the United States in 1993. |

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| **[Unification Church](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/unification/main.htm)** The Rev. Sun Myung Moon founded the Unification Church in South Korea in 1954 and sent the first missionaries to the United States in 1959. Followers, known for street-corner vending, believe Moon is the Messiah. A U.S. congressional probe in 1976 demonstrated ties between the Unification Church and the South Korean government. The church has promoted an ideological war against communism and used its substantial financial resources to build political alliances with conservative leaders. In 1982, at a time when many American newspapers were folding, Moon started The Washington Times. That year he also was convicted of income tax fraud and conducted a "mass wedding" of 2,075 couples in Madison Square Garden.  **Post archive articles**  http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/images/common/clearspc.gif |

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**OVERVIEW: The 1960s**

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| [**Transcendental Meditation**](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/trans_med/main.htm)  Introduced into the United States in 1958 by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, "TM" was an offshoot of Hinduism that caught the interest of many in the new hippie counterculture. It received a publicity boost when the Beatles traveled to India to study with the maharishi, who said adherents could usher in the "age of enlightenment" through mass meditations. Followers chant one-word mantras twice a day to relieve stress. They are taught to believe they can wipe out crime, hunger and violence if 1 percent of the population of major cities worldwide meditate at once. Some also believe they can fly, though people who watched demonstrations said the "yogic flying" exercise looked more like hopping. |

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| [**Hare Krishna**](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/hare_krishna/main.htm) The International Society for Krishna Consciousness is another spiritual sect developed from Hinduism. Founder Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada arrived in New York in 1965 and opened centers for the "Hare Krishna" movement there and in California. In the 1970s, he opened many centers in other countries. The group's ranks eventually swelled to more than 1 million. New Vrindaban in West Virginia, with its palatial headquarters, became one of the largest Krishna centers. Members are a familiar sight in public, often with shaved heads and chanting, "*Hare Krishna . . .Hare Rama*."  [**Post archive articles and photos**](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/hare_krishna/main.htm)  http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/images/common/clearspc.gif | |
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| [**Charles Manson**](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/manson/main.htm) One of the most chilling crimes of the century took place in Los Angeles at the end of the decade when Charles Manson, 35, and a band of middle-class followers broke into the home of filmmaker Roman Polanski and savagely murdered his pregnant wife, Sharon Tate, and four guests. The 1969 murders stunned Americans, who couldn't understand how Manson's band of young followers—the "Family"—could have swallowed his incoherent preachings about race wars and an Armageddon he called "Helter Skelter." People puzzled over such blind devotion to a scraggly, wild-eyed leader.  [**Post archive articles and photos**](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/manson/main.htm) |