


Why Cults Flourish

INTERVIEW WITH GORDON MELTON

Though Gordon Melton is hardly a household name, there is probably no one more knowledgeable about the proliferation of sects, cults, and new religions in the U.S. today. Since the early '60s, Melton and his Institute for the Study of American Religion have studied and archived material about the thousands of groups that Americans have formed in their quest for spiritual fulfillment. Melton himself is a Methodist minister — a self-described evangelical with his own well-defined theological perspective. However, in his scholarly work, which includes several encyclopedic guides to American religions (see review, p. 55) Melton maintains an admirable objectivity.

When Melton came through the Bay Area this fall, Kevin Kelly and I spent a couple of enjoyable hours interviewing him for his observations about new religions, past, present, and future. Here's a distillation of our conversations.

(Another portion of this interview, covering gnosticism, heresy, and mysticism, will appear in *Gnosis* #4, a magazine I edit about Western spiritual traditions, available after April 1987 for \$5.00 postpaid from P.O. Box 14217, San Francisco, CA 94114.)

—Jay Kinney

Gordon Melton: I started working in the 1960s, before the modern cult controversy came along, when the only people talking about cults were a handful of Christian scholars and writers. What I set out to do was to survey all the religious groups in America and try to understand where they came from and what was happening. I arrived at the conclusion that a number of different new religious traditions were growing up in America, and we didn't know why. There were all kinds of outlandish theories about cultural changes trying to explain them.

But what really happened in the 1960s that fostered these new religions was a legal change; namely, the Asian immigration laws were rescinded. All of a sudden Asians could enter this country in the same proportion as Europeans. And the same became true of Middle Easterners. But it was the Indian swamis who made the biggest, earliest impact. The first person able to take advantage of the rescission of the Asian Immigration Act in 1965 was Prabhupada, the Hare Krishna founder. He came in on a tourist visa, prior to the Act's rescission. About a month after he got here the Act was rescinded, and he was able to stay. Not only Prabhupada but a number of different religious traditions — Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Jain,

Sufi — were transferring here, growing, and attracting young adults.

It's mainly young adults who possess the characteristics that allow conversion. They have no vested interest in the society; they're trying to become adults; and they are trying to find a worldview. So they are the people who will tend to convert the easiest in any religion. These were the people being attracted to these groups, and parents didn't like it.

Parents have never liked their kids' converting to an intense religious experience. But because their kids were converting to groups that not only emphasized intense religious experiences, but also served them with a foreign flavor, they really got alarmed. Parents were becoming concerned about their children joining these new groups and short-circuiting their professional careers.

In my professional work I try to avoid the word "cult" because segregating supposedly evil groups doesn't help to see what is going to happen to them, how they will grow or develop. This is not to say that genuinely bad things haven't happened in some groups. For example, one of them, the Children of God, were prostituting their female members. Venereal disease ran rampant through



Bhaktivendanta Swami Prabhupada, founder of the Hare Krishna, is venerated by his followers.

Stan Creighton/San Francisco Chronicle

their community. But bad things have happened everywhere in every religion. We know of ministers of staid denominations molesting children and seducing secretaries. All of the evil things that the cults were known for were happening in mainline churches. Jim Jones's People's Temple was a member of the National Council of Churches. That's about as establishment as you can get in America.

Jay Kinney: Nevertheless, your publishers have saddled you with book titles such as *The Cult Experience* and *Why Cults Succeed Where the Church Fails*.

GM: The word "cult" sells books, that's it, pure and simple. We chose the name for *The Cult Experience* because Bob Moore and I, who co-authored the book, wanted to deal with cult issues, with the issues of the anti-cult movement and cults. We wrote a book on the alternative religious experience in America — it didn't sell half as well as *The Cult Experience*. I didn't pick the title for the other book, *Why Cults Succeed Where the Church Fails*. I didn't like that title. We're dealing with alternative

religious traditions, and the text makes that point clear, but the title is on there to sell books.

Kevin Kelly: Nonetheless, would you say there is no such phenomenon as cults?

GM: There's certainly a phenomenon. If you're a Christian, for example, there are groups all around you which no longer profess Christian faith, in various forms. Then there are groups that deviate from that norm. They are still Christian but they've dropped the essentials of Christian orthodoxy. And then there are groups that are not Christian at all. Those with Christian backgrounds call those groups cults. And finally there are groups which are very intense in their experience and authoritarian in their organization, which have been labeled cults by the secular anti-cult movement. As I said, these attract young adults, primarily late teens to early twenties, into an intense conversion experience. So, yes, there is that phenomenon.

KK: There are, in fact, a number of Christian fundamentalist groups that operate the same way. ▶

That is, they're guru-oriented, slightly paranoid, and may have a sense of persecution.

GM: Right. To a large extent the feeling of paranoia is there because the groups *are* persecuted. I can remember testifying before one of the government legislative committees, where I said, "Look, folks, I'm a Methodist. And if the Justice Department and the Immigration Bureau, and the local law enforcement officials, were all coming after my church, and if the state decided to do an investigation of the evils of the Methodist church, I wouldn't *feel* persecuted, I'd *be* persecuted."

In fact, some of these groups have been hit pretty hard. Some of them might deserve it, but as a whole they haven't. As they have been persecuted, some of the groups have been pushed into radicalness. It's certainly true of Scientology. Scientology's done things which are illegal, and others which are plainly immoral, but to a great extent they were pushed that way by the kind of action the government was taking against them. It's similar to the action taken against the Peace Movement groups and the feminist groups in the '70s. The same kind of things were being done to the Church of Scientology. They felt helpless dealing with big government. They filed for Freedom of Information material, and people would say such documents don't exist, and then later the documents would turn up. Problems like that tend to radicalize a group. While we can't condone some of the things they did, hearing of those problems helps us to understand the frustration that led them down that path. A more mature leadership would not have followed that path, but that's another problem you get in these groups. They grow fast and suddenly they've got people running large national organizations who are still in their twenties, and they're just not mature enough to know how to make decisions in the real world.

KK: Why were so many of the new alternative religions so intense and radical?

GM: I'm not sure that so many were. There may be three or four hundred different groups that sprung up as a result of Easterners moving here, and they seemed to run the gamut. Some groups were very intense, not just in terms of religion but in terms of organization — that is, they tended to take people's whole lives. I trace the tendency in that direction to two things. Number one is the guru syndrome — or more precisely, the structure of the guru/chela relationship. It's a relationship of submission, where the chela submits to the guru. In some relationships it's a segregated submission, that is, you only submit a little bit. You submit to your guru in matters spiritual, but in no other way. You would not submit to the guru in the matter of whom you marry or what job you take or those kinds of decisions in life. You expect the guru to conform to the social structure; in other words, that he's not going to be making demands on you that put you outside the social structure. And in India that's the case; the gurus

are Indians and they understand that social structure. But here problems arise because there is not a common social structure, so sometimes they make commands which don't fit with the chela's social structure.

Number two, at the other end of the gamut, is a nearly monastic tradition coming out of India and Southeast Asia. This life demands everything. The sanyasins in Indian society have a very high status, particularly if they live up to their vows. It's a very accepted part of the culture to have mendicants wandering through the land who live that kind of vow and live off the land. It's not acceptable here. Here they're called bums.

The demands the guru makes which go beyond religious and spiritual matters, demands regarding lifestyle, diet, and relationships, are really the daily practice of religion as opposed to weekly practice, which is what most of us are used to. If you throw that on top of a monastic ideal, you get, for example, the Krishnas where total adherence to a total lifestyle is being asked of people. A total immersion in this monastic, ascetic life. That immersion seems to be where most of the trouble comes in.

You will always have the odd charismatic leader, like Reverend Moon, who wants to develop a very intense following which'll change the world and make real impact in a short lifetime. They have always been around. But when things start to go wrong, people who were never thought of as cult leaders all of a sudden are called Cult Leaders. You know, when Rajneesh came here, he was asking for disaster. He had been kicked out of India, essentially, and he came here and didn't play cool. He could've had everything here, but he chose the wrong leadership to help him, and it went sour. Rajneesh was *not* an intense guru — he only asked a few things of his followers. But because things went sour with his second echelon of leadership, he got labelled a cult leader.

JK: It seems to me that Rajneesh represents the end of a wave. I haven't noticed another Eastern group or guru rising to much fame or public notice since Rajneesh.

GM: You're quite right. For one thing many of these groups are beginning to align themselves with the very respectable Hindu or Islamic communities developing now in America.

Secondly, I think the secular media is bored with gurus. There are so many of them floating around. (And the most successful ones are not well known at all.) When you stop and look at him, Muktananda was as successful a guru as we've had in this country. Muktananda developed a very intense relationship with his disciples and yet escaped most of the notice of the anti-cult media. He established 150 centers, and huge headquarters in upstate New York — a very successful guru. If it hadn't been for the scandals at the end of his life, we would rarely hear of the guy. [Muktananda's story was first published in CQ #40, p. 104.]

JK: I went to a meeting of the Siddha yoga group recently (with Swami Chidvillasananda), and the majority of people there were my age, in their 30s. I didn't get the sense they were attracting many twenty-two-year-olds.

GM: It varies around the country. The newer gurus — there are new gurus popping up every year — are still recruiting on college campuses and within those transient communities of young adults who went straight from high school into the workforce.

One of the things that has interested me while visiting the Sai Baba groups has been the amount of white hair I saw. I have never seen a group that has the generational span that the Sai Baba people have. They're effectively recruiting older adults as well as young adults, although the older adults tend to be women. Demographically it's almost that same group that Vedanta recruited in the early part of this century — women in their post-childbearing years. So it really does vary.

But you're right that some of the groups that were very popular ten years ago, like the Divine Light Mission in California, are growing older together. One problem they're going to face is how to deal with the children born to members, and that are now growing up. Child rearing tends to sap your evangelical fervor. When you start putting energy into children, it takes away from recruitment.

KK: As I see it, Reverend Moon's Unification Church disappeared from public sight right after their spectacular mass marriages.

GM: Yes, they married off over half their membership, and they almost went under as result of that. Two months after the marriage their cash flow dropped to nothing. They had a real crisis in September following that July marriage, and that crisis is just now waning seven years later. The other thing, of course, is that the Unification Church lost a lot of members who couldn't cope with that arranged marriage. They had to bring in a lot of Japanese members to replace them. In fact, they brought in a whole planeload of their best Japanese fundraisers.

JK: You mean Korean?

GM: No, Japanese. The main strength of the church is in Japan. They're stronger in Japan than they are in Korea. They work off the Japanese guilt toward the Koreans. That's a major underlying theme for them, and the indemnity theme plays well to Japan.

JK: Something I've noticed regarding the Unification Church is that in some regards they seem to be redefining themselves as respectable.

GM: Been tryin' to.

JK: With some success if one identifies the *Washington Times* and their *Insight* magazine as, on some level, Moon publications. They have a conservative, Republican point of view. And they've had some success achieving contacts in the Reagan

Administration. Are groups identified as cults being increasingly integrated into American society?

GM: Sure. What we call the cult experience is a one-generation phenomenon. It is the experience of a first generation of intense converts. You know it's not so much opposition to cults that makes them change. It's time.

Over time you can't sustain that intense a lifestyle, unless you go off by yourself somewhere. And the groups we popularly call cults didn't want to do that. They wanted to be involved. Moon wanted to be involved in politics. The Krishnas wanted to be out on the street, even the Church of Armageddon, that little group in Washington state, wanted to be involved at least in social service. So did the Divine Light Mission. Over a period of time, that intensity wore off, the newness of the faith wore off, they fell into routines, and bureaucracies took over.

And then there is the pressure of dealing with children. Their children aren't converts. When they grow up, they're like all other children — some are in, some are out. Moon's Unification Church came here in '59, though most of their converts are early '70s types. They've been around



Chris Stewart/San Francisco Chronicle

The followers of Bhagwan Rajneesh showered him with Rolls Royces, flowers and an aide to hold an umbrella for shade and spiritual purity.

long enough to start families and have babies. The presence and responsibility of those children has been doing more to change the Unification Church than all the legal pressure that's been put on them. Children have an amazing way of doing that.

KK: What happens in the third generation?

GM: One of two things. Either the groups join the consensus, or they become like Christian Science — an accepted eccentricity. Nobody gets upset about Christian Science anymore. There's a Christian Science church on every corner. By the third generation we understand they're not going to do any harm. They're not going to take over, or bloc vote the city out of existence. They're just going to be there and there'll always be a few people filtering through.

KK: They're culturally dead in most ways.

GM: Yes, in a very real sense, they are. They've lost their power to influence things. They still have a role to play — the *Christian Science Monitor* is a fairly important newspaper and with an influential editorial page — but they're just one more of the little blocks that build this huge society that we have. They are no longer as interesting and controversial in the sense that they were in their first and second generation.

Some of the other new religions will just move into complete and total irrelevance. They won't have even the impact that Christian Science has, much less that of Mormonism.

KK: Since the spawning of alternative religions in America coincides with a boom of eligible teenagers, do you see fertile ground now for more new religions?

GM: Yes. Very much so.

KK: More than other countries in the world?

GM: Not really. Africa south of the Sahara has religions numbering in the thousands. We're still in the hundreds here. There are thousands of religious groups in India that haven't made it here yet. There are four or five hundred in Japan. Everywhere there's freedom of religion, even nominally, cults or new religions are springing up all the time. Plus variations on all the old religions will come along.

The other factor producing more religious variety is urbanism. In urban complexes you have a dense enough population to where you can sell a handful of people on almost any idea no matter how farfetched it may seem. Almost every month, a new teacher pops up. Hardly, a week goes by that I don't find a new one. I went to Washington over the Fourth of July, and I found a new guru who had just come in for a visit. He had three or four groups, one in Washington, D.C., one in Bethesda, and one in New York. He was from the same lineage as Yogananda but he was beginning an entirely new organization. And he wasn't here two years ago.

KK: Are we witnessing the fragmentation of the world into many, many minor religions?

GM: Not really, there will still be a Christian America and a Christian Europe. There will still be an Islamic Middle East, and a Jewish Israel, and an Islamic North Africa. There will still be a Buddhist Southeast Asia and a Hindu India. But in the major cities and urban complexes you will get much greater differentiation. Within these urban complexes, anywhere you want to go in the Free World, you will find a multitude of forms of the major religions in strength. This process of differentiation will be more visible in America for the next few decades, because of the changes in those immigration laws, and the resultant massive movement of people and religions into America.

KK: What about the influence of American Christian missionaries going in the opposite direction?

GM: It's very, very strong. The newer fundamentalist and evangelical groups which have emerged in the twentieth century are still very mission-oriented. The older churches are having to live with the success of the last generation. Methodism, for example, of which I am a part, was one of the most successful missionary groups of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. There's now a Methodist church in almost every country of the world. It was so successful that those churches in their third generation developed their own native leadership, and by the middle of the twentieth century they had their own bishops. All of a sudden we Americans discovered that we were an intrusion to them. They said, we don't want missionaries, we need people to help with agriculture and engineering, those kinds of practical things. The Methodist church has had to cope with the fact that there are no more traditional foreign mission fields left.

JK: One activity that seems to be occurring is the phenomenon of evangelical Protestants going into, say, Catholic countries and converting Catholics to their version of Christianity — defining the Catholics as non-Christians according to their viewpoint.

GM: It's a tremendous problem. Anti-Catholicism was a major theme of nineteenth century Protestantism. And today areas of Protestant-Catholic tension remain. Some Protestants define Catholics as non-Christians, while others define them as heretical Christians. Most mainline Protestants would say, "Certainly Catholics are Christian, they're even orthodox Christians, but they're not the standard of the faith. People should have a chance to opt for Protestantism if they really want it, because it's a better form of faith." Others simply opt out: "We're not gonna worry about Catholics." Protestants (i.e. non-Catholic Christians) run the whole gamut. Some liberal Protestants will support work in predominantly Catholic countries, for "let's give the people a choice" reasons.

KK: Is there any precedent for a country that

works without a dominant cultural religious matrix?

GM: Well, the Roman Empire worked for a little while without one. Of course it fell apart, and you could say it fell apart because it didn't have that kind of a matrix. No, I think that's a new phenomenon. At the time of the American Revolution, it was literally an unheard-of idea that you could have a country without a state religion. Different countries could have different state religions, but it was assumed that every country had to have one dominant religion. You could tolerate a few sectarians, but this country became the great experiment. The leaders said, "Well, let's try it without one, and make Christianity's lowest common denominator as the community religion, but we'll allow all the different sects to run things." There was an assumption that there would be some state establishments, but eventually even those went by the board, and so we've grown up with a Christian nation, but with no dominant church organization.

The question now before us is essentially the same one this country faced at the time of the Revolution. Must we have a Christian overlay? Or can we give even that up? Because that's where we're heading in the next century. We're going to be a country in which the majority of people are in some sense Christians, but that Christianity will not be visible in the legal structures and in many of the power centers of the country.

Right now the justices are articulating the fact that the government doesn't know heresy, therefore you can't persecute people for their religious ideas. That's been relatively easy up to now, because on the whole you were dealing with variations in the Christian community — making a place for Jews and a place for atheists. Now we've got to make a place for everybody. That's a much tougher job.

KK: Will the word "cult" disappear? Or the notion of a cult?

GM: I have a feeling that to a certain extent it's going to. It is a term that has little meaning in a pluralistic culture.

JK: There has been quite a bit of publicity recently about radical right-wing groups, a number of whom coalesced around Christian Identity, a sect that seems on the fringe of the fringe.

GM: Identity grew up in the nineteenth century during the development of the British Empire. This idea states that the ten lost tribes of Israel were in fact the Anglo-Saxon people. The word "identity" comes from the professors of this belief who "identify" modern Anglo-Saxons as ancient Israelites, hence the Old Testament prophecies to Israel apply to them. The United States and Great Britain, in particular, play a key role in those prophecies. It's an idea that's been around since the middle of the last century, and it had its heyday in Britain, at the height of the Commonwealth. As the Empire began to disintegrate, it lost much of its popularity. It gained great popularity in the



Da Free John, leader of the Johannine Daist Community, holds an audience with a second-generation member.

United States after World War I. Around World War II it got tied up with the Klan, Gerald L. K. Smith and Wesley Swift — that bunch — and took in a very radical hate element. In the late '70s it enjoyed a new life, when the nation went through a national religious revival. At that time its adherents aligned themselves with both the American Nazi Party, and its several factions, and the Klan and its several factions. One of the major groups in Louisiana has the same box number as the local Klan group. Write that box number, and you get Identity material, write the same box number, you get Klan material.

The group's been very violent, primarily with its rhetoric, but some individuals and one or two of the groups have been violent with their actions. In the Midwest it got tied up with the Posse Comitatus and the radical farm movement and the anti-tax movement, so that a lot of violence emerged.

JK: Will groups establish a religious basis, or a supposedly religious basis, by being specifically against some other religion?

GM: Certainly we'll have groups come along whose major basis is fighting another group, but they will not survive. I think it's one of the reasons organized atheism has never made it in this coun-

Laughing Man Institute



Bettmann Newsphotos

Over 1,800 couples, matched personally by Rev. Sun Myung Moon, gather for a mass wedding ceremony at Changchung Gym in Seoul, Korea, in 1975.

try as a viable community. When atheists get together, they spend more of their time preaching against religion than they do promoting their own positive ideas and causes. There will always be groups who use various forms of chauvinism to oppose other groups, who denigrate other groups, but if they survive that will not be their major theme.

KK: What other new forms of religion have been popping up with signs of staying power? We recently did an issue of this magazine (*WER #52*) on eccentric science — looking at the edges as a way of seeing where the middle's going — in which there was some material on the Church of the Subgenius, the Super Rationale church in Brazil, UFO contactees awaiting the saucers, and that sort of thing. Is there a new kind of religion coming from somewhere in that mix?

GM: Contactees have been with us since the '50s, and in spite of the ups and downs of the UFO movement, the contactee movement has continued. Now there's a new wave of contactees, many emerging as leaders in the New Age channeling movement. One of the most popular is the trance medium Ramtha. I've recently watched the first of the Ramtha videotapes and what impressed me most was the audience — young smiling faces who've never seen trance mediumship. They were really turned on by the phenomenon of seeing a good trance medium.

Well, I've seen trance mediums for twenty years; she's just another trance medium — a pretty good

one, but just another somewhat boring example. There's a generation coming along who haven't experienced mediumship, and they're seeing it for the first time. I think it will grow for a while and some of them — Ramtha is probably one, Lazarus another — will establish organizations that will be with us for a generation or more.

KK: So we might see churches grow up around channeling.

GM: They've already formed a church around Ramtha (the Church I Am). Channeling is basically a religious phenomenon, and if channels are successful, that's the way they'll go.

KK: If you were going to make up a leaflet detailing the steps to follow in making your own successful religion, what would it say?

GM: First, contrary to popular opinion, have a genuine religious base yourself. If you've got that, you will draw people to you. The next crucial decision then becomes, who do you pick as your lieutenants as you grow? Stupid, psychotic, unprincipled lieutenants have killed many otherwise good religious organizations. Then to survive as a religion generation after generation, you have to develop a positive program and a positive world view. You've got to feed people spiritually, and teach them piety. There has to be a genuine religious fervor and feeling, or your religion dies. When serious life crises occur (and we all go through serious crises every decade on a personal level), if the resources aren't there to help you, you go find them where they are. ■