

Why Do Some Americans Join Cults?

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A breakaway Mormon sect in the southwest state of Texas is under investigation for polygamy and alleged abuse of hundreds of children. Church leaders complain that local authorities are unfamiliar with their ways, while most experts say sect members have little knowledge of the outside world.

The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints split from Utah's main Mormon Church in 1935 after two of its members were excommunicated for espousing polygamy. The breakaway group claims that secret ordinances from its religious leaders permit plural marriages, which are illegal in the United States.

Anthropologist Phillips Stevens of the State University of New York at Buffalo says that apart from the founders of the group, most members have grown up within the sect, knowing little about the outside world.

"In the case of the Fundamentalist Church of [Jesus Christ of] Latter Day Saints, many, if not all of the children were born into this group that their parents had belonged to. They had no choice of membership. That was their community. That was their neighborhood from birth. They had no knowledge of anything else. Some groups do display these restrictive characteristics [i.e., forcing people to join them], but they are very few," says Stevens. "The label 'cult' is usually applied by outsiders to an organization that they don't understand and they are a little bit scared of it."

What Are Cults and Sects?

Stevens warns against using the word "cult" loosely. He says the word acquired negative connotations in the 1960s and 1970s after Charles Manson, a California criminal, founded a commune and directed his followers to commit a series of murders.

"And then in the 1980s, this imaginary danger of satanic cults spread across North America. And the word 'cult' was permanently changed. It had become defined as a group of people who had been brainwashed by a megalomaniacal deluded person who imposed severe restrictions on his followers," says Stevens. "And most of these negative connotations are false."

Psychologist Newton Malony of the California-based Fuller Theological Seminary defines a



Police escort members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints from their compound this month

cult as a religion that is not indigenous to the current culture. A sect, he says, is a deviation from a known religion. "For example, in the 1960 and 1970s, Hare Krishnas were a cult within the United States, but not a cult in India. There was no tradition of Hinduism in the United States. So they were a 'cult'. They are no longer a cult because they are seen all over the nation and there are Hindu temples [in the United States]," says Malony. "Christianity was definitely a cult in the Greek world at its beginning. But in Palestine, Christianity was what we call a 'sect' within Judaism."

Why Join?

Although some sects might force members to join or prevent them from leaving, most analysts say people who are not born into a sect or cult often join of their own free will.



In Jonestown, Guyana, members of the Peoples Temple cult committed mass suicide in 1978

That vision sometimes turns violent. Members of the 1970s doomsday cult, the Peoples Temple, which started in the U.S. before relocating to Guyana, committed mass suicide after authorities began investigating claims of human rights abuses and animal sacrifices. And members of the 1990s Heaven's Gate cult in California committed mass suicide, believing that they would find salvation on another planet.

Nancy Ammerman, who chairs Boston University's sociology department, warns against generalizations when determining what sort of people join cults, although she suggests that conflicted individuals often are attracted to these groups.

"People who leave already established ways of life to join that kind of a way of life [i.e., obscure cults or reclusive religious movements] are typically people who are otherwise at a kind of crossroads time in their lives. It's often something that people do as they are making their transition into adulthood, or perhaps as they encounter a disappointment or some other bump along the road of life where the path that they've laid out for themselves isn't going the way they had thought it might, or simply that they encounter this new vision and it is so compelling that they are willing to give up everything and follow it," says Ammerman.

Brigham Young University's Daniel Peterson says people from all walks of life join cults. Peterson, a professor of Islamic studies and a member of The University of Utah's Council for Religious Scholarship, says potential cult members include people from all age groups, and educational and economic backgrounds.

"These movements often meet a real psychological need for people who want purpose and meaning and structure. And many people have said that cults represent the unpaid bills of the mainstream religions, that these people did not find the religion in which they were raised or the religion that is predominant in society satisfying to them. It didn't give them the sense of purpose or structure that they needed. We are in a society now that's awash in what many people see as relativism. They don't know if they have a purpose and what that purpose would be," says Peterson. "And a cult offers very decisive answers so that they know their place in the universe and their place in society."

The American Experience

All people search for meaning in their lives, says Peterson, although Americans, in particular, have more new religious movements to choose from than people in other parts of the world.

Boston University's Nancy Ammerman says it is all part of religious tolerance in the United States. "We have such a wide open sense of freedom about religion. If you don't like the religion that you are a part of, you can just go down the street and start your own. There aren't the kinds of legal constraints that there might be in other parts of the world and there's such a history of religious liberty and religious innovation in this country that there's reason to believe that we probably do have more than other countries do," says Ammerman. "And there have been lots of and lots of instances where people have engaged in behavior that might otherwise be seen as illegal, but does get protected by the First Amendment [to the U.S. Constitution that safeguards freedom of worship]."

Many analysts say sects that isolate themselves from the outside world might consider their practices the norm, while society at large, which might be ignorant of their ways, is likely to disagree.

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