

The Next David Koresh

T. M. Luhrmann

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What makes a cult group leader successful? Mishell asked me to answer this question but it is not the first time I have been asked. The first time was shortly after some forty members of an odd little group called Heaven's Gate had decided that a spaceship full of aliens was coming towards earth in the tail of a comet, and that they should take a lethal combination of barbituates and vodka in order to jump on board and escape the doomed planet they were already on.

They had been living in San Diego, which is where I was, and so I found myself (an anthropologist of odd religious behavior) being trotted out on various talk shows. On one of them, I found myself being interviewed by someone I knew to be involved in what I would call a dangerous cult. The public events of this group took place in a large industrial warehouse. When they arrived, participants spread out on the floor. The leaders then lowered the lights, turned on technothrob music, said, 'find your heartache and find God,' and then everyone in the place began to sob. For three hours. Then they danced and hugged each other and oozed around. The insider events went on for nine days. At the end of the nine day events, people came out like little amoebas, emotionally formless and vulnerable. When I asked about the group in the local occult bookstore, the salesclerk shuddered. "You look into their eyes, and no one is home."

And here was a member of this group, asking me on national television how one would recognize the signs of an effective, dangerous cult.

So part of the answer is that one woman's David Koresh is another's Christ. There are no fixed rules in this domain. That said, here are some characteristics that help to bind people to a leader and reduce their capacity to leave.

1. isolation. If you can't get outside the group, it's harder to find an external vantage point from which to disagree. Heaven's Gate refused to allow any member to walk outside the house unless escorted by another member.
2. financial investment. If you have turned over your mortgage payment to a group leader, it will take more work to persuade he does not have your best interests in mind. This is a standard principle of cognitive dissonance. The more you sink your worldly goods into a group, the more you feel committed to its rightness.
3. paradox. This is the intellectual version of financial investment. If you have to work hard to figure out what someone is saying, you are more likely to feel committed to them when you succeed. This probably explains why French intellectuals are cult leaders in the academic world.
4. voice. I think that a good voice is a cult leader's most powerful weapon, and the reason why many come to stay. There is a great autobiography of one of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's early followers who said that she heard him speak, loved him speak, gave him her down payment (\$30,000 in the 1960s; a good downpayment) and stayed with him for years. Over the course of time, things got so bad that some members were deliberately poisoned. But this woman could

not bring herself to notice that anything was wrong until the FBI helicopters landed in the compound.

And yet one woman's Bhaghwan ...

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