

CHRIS JOINS A CULT

Be forewarned. When your son or daughter get to college, a religious cult may be waiting to take control of his or her life.

By Rev. Hubert F. Beck

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Chris hailed from a small town, went to a conservative LCMS church, and was the valedictorian of his high-school class. For him, going to college was both an exciting opportunity and a slightly frightening prospect.

Owing, perhaps, to his trepidation about going away, Chris chose a medium-size university. That way, he thought, he wouldn't get "swallowed up" by a large state school, yet there still would be plenty of extracurricular activities to broaden his education.

Chris had every intention of joining the Lutheran campus group as soon as he got there, for he had always found his times with the high-school youth group rewarding. So, he dutifully marked down the dates and times for the early-semester activities outlined for him in the literature he had received from the Lutheran campus pastor.

The campus was abuzz with activity when he and his parents arrived, it was a hot, sweltering day, and, as he soon found out, his room was on the third floor of an old dormitory. There was no elevator, and the prospect of lugging all his stuff upstairs was far from appealing.

It was as though angels had arrived, therefore, when two fellows came up to him as he picked up his first armload and asked if he needed help. "Do I ever!" he replied. And his dad wasn't about to refuse the offer, either!

With everyone pitching in, hauling Chris' stuff upstairs took relatively little time. Needless to say, Chris was grateful for his helpers.

It seemed like a real bonus, then, to hear these helpers very openly talking about their Lord and the group where they had "met Him," to use their words. Noting how friendly they were, Chris didn't find it too forward or odd when they invited him to join them and their group that evening at a "watermelon splash." In fact, in light of all their kindness, how could he refuse? Going, of course, would mean missing the first get-together of his Lutheran group, but there would be plenty of other times to get involved with them.

Chris' parents left shortly after he got settled into his room. It wasn't too long after that that he started feeling a bit lonely. He wished he had someone to talk with, but everybody was just too busy with their own affairs.

So, naturally, Chris was delighted when the two fellows picked him up to go to the watermelon splash. And he was absolutely amazed at the warm welcome he got when

he arrived. Everybody was so considerate! They seemed to understand perfectly well the strange emptiness he had felt after his parents left. By the end of the evening, he had met three other students from his dormitory with whom he seemed to hit it off, and the two older students had promised to stay in touch with him regularly during his orientation and “settling in” period.

When he called his parents that night to tell them how things had gone after they’d left, they sounded disappointed that he hadn’t gone to the Lutheran student group. But he assured them he would look them up soon. For now, he wanted them to know what a great bunch of students he had found in the “Friends of God” group, as they called themselves.

The next morning Chris and his three newfound friends from his dormitory had breakfast and attended the morning orientation sessions together. To his amazement, the two older students he had met were there, too! He saw them three or four times more by the end of the day, in fact, and they insisted that he come to the Bible study they were conducting that evening in their dormitory room.

How could he say “No” to such caring people? And, as things turned out, the study itself was very good and relevant. The group, about a dozen in number, half of them incoming freshmen, looked at passages that talked about being faithful to Christ and living according to the “law of the Lord.” Leaders of the group placed serious emphasis on the danger of “backsliding.” They warned the younger students that it was very easy to backslide, which was why they needed to stay in close touch with people who knew the Lord. Chris could hardly argue with that.

On his way back to his dorm after the study, Chris ran into a bunch of fellows he recognized from his floor in the dorm. They urged him to join them. They were going to “have some fun” since they would soon be studying hard. Now was the time to relax and live it up! So Chris went along. To his dismay, however, almost before he knew what was happening, they had broken out some beer and were telling crude jokes and generally acting in ways he had always tried to avoid in the past.

But, peer pressure is a powerful thing, and Chris ended up partying with these fellows well into the night. In a way, he felt “sucked in,” but in another way he felt good that he could be so easily and readily accepted by the guys.

Almost as soon as Chris was out of his room the next morning, the two older students from “Friends of God” were at his side again! They wanted to know what he had thought of the Bible study the day before, and they urged him to come to a picnic sponsored by the group after the last orientation session that afternoon. Chris felt a kind of relief to see such well-meaning people caring for him so much, for he was feeling a little ashamed over what had gone on the night before. He decided not to mention the partying episode to his two friends, but he accepted their invitation to the picnic.

At the picnic, however, someone from his dorm who had seen him with the rowdy bunch the night before asked him how he had gotten mixed up with them. One of the two older students happened to overhear the conversation and broke in with a stern warning that Chris must be careful about the company he kept. He reminded Chris of the temptation to “backslide.” He was obviously quite unhappy to learn that Chris had gone straight from the Bible study to a night of carousing with guys like that.

“You don’t want to hurt God, do you?” he asked. And, of course, Chris didn’t want to do that, so he took the admonition as a caring warning. He resolved to himself to shape up his life like the people in the “Friends of God” group had done with theirs.

Chris became more and more attached to the group, spending an increasing amount of time attending their Bible studies and devoting much of his energies to the activities they sponsored. Something was going on virtually every day, including the way the older students almost “shadowed” him everywhere he went and seemed to watch over or inquire about almost everything he did.

In a way, this was bothersome, but in another way it was flattering, for the older students, and the “Friends of God” group as a whole, obviously wanted him to live a godly life. And that was in keeping with everything he had ever been taught at home, even if it seemed more intense here with the “Friends of God.”

He kept up with his classes that first semester, for he had graduated from a fine high school. Much of the material was basically an extension of what he had learned before—just a bit more advanced. So his grades held up well.

His parents were admittedly concerned, though, that he had gone only once to the Lutheran student group. He had felt out of place when he visited there four or five weeks into the school year, when the Lutheran pastor called to see how he was doing. The Lutheran group, called “Circles,” had already formed, which made Chris feel like an outsider of sorts. He felt much more at home with the “Friends of God” by now, so he simply assured his parents that he was associating with fine Christian people, even if they weren’t Lutheran. Much as his parents wanted him to affiliate with the Lutheran group, they had to admit they felt good that at least he was associating with a Christian group. So no alarms went off. Yet.

In the middle of the second semester, however, Chris’ parents grew more concerned. It was apparent that his grades were falling off considerably. He shrugged it off, attributing it to increasingly difficult material. But his parents suspected there was more to it than that. They questioned him about how much time he was spending with the “Friends of God,” but it was hard to call him to task for studying Scripture intensively or for being active in outreach programs.

By the end of that second semester, Chris’ grades had dropped off sharply. Worse than that, he seemed indifferent to the decline. When pressed by his folks, he even suggested that education was not nearly so important as the fostering of his faith and

Christian life. He mentioned the possibility, in fact, of dropping out of school and going overseas to a mission post maintained by the “Friends of God” in Lebanon.

There was now no question that his parents had to confront him openly and honestly about their great concern.

When they did, he told them bluntly what had been happening in his life. He had come to the realization that the “Christianity” he held when he left home was shallow and perhaps even nonexistent. It did not make nearly as many demands on his life as he now knew it should have. It did not challenge him to live up to what God wanted him to do. It did not engender in him the same intensity, the same commitment to God’s will, he now felt.

Chris’ parents sat speechless, for he was addressing them with a hardness, a coldness, they had never seen in him before. And then he dropped a bombshell. “I know you mean well,” he said, “and I appreciate what you have done for me through the years. But frankly, I’m not at all sure that you are Christian yourselves. I don’t see you taking your faith very seriously. I’d like you to come with me to learn about what God really wants of you. There’s a church over in Middleton where you could learn about all this like I have.”

His parents were crushed. What had seemed like such a promising start with a “Christian group” had turned into a nightmare of legalism, accusation and judgment.

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While this is not an “everyday” story, it is not a “make-believe” or even an unusual story, either. It happens more often than most people think.

“Friends of God” (a made-up name for the purpose of this article) is a way of talking about the forms of cultic and extreme sectarian activity on college campuses everywhere.

Many people mistakenly think that cults are easily recognizable. While this may be true in some cases, it is more likely that cults will appear to be “in keeping” with a student’s familiar understanding of “church” and the Christian religion. For it is in seizing on the “familiar” that cults and legalistic sects of supposedly “Christian” groups can attract and draw into their midst the unsuspecting young person.

These groups play off of the familiar themes heard so often in Christian circles: the need for strong commitment, for the denial of self in order to take up the cross of Christ, for the sacrificial offering of self to God. They integrate all this into a web of caring concern. At least that’s how it appears to the unsuspecting student—the student who is lonely and a bit fearful, who is concerned about the ungodliness surrounding him in his new setting, who earnestly desires to please God.

But that “caring concern” soon takes the form of intrusions into privacy and demands on time in the name of “discipline” and “community life.” It becomes a suffocating web of claims and prescriptions that holds the student’s life captive, a judgmental legalism that destroys former relationships—and even, quite possibly, in the long run, the very life of the student.

These groups, often bound together across campuses or even in national networks, have a variety of names. Often, a group will change its name to avoid the regulations and restraints campuses frequently impose on them because of their uncivil way of carrying out their activities. But they are always reappearing in new and different forms, preying on unsuspecting underclassmen and presenting themselves as people vitally interested in students and uniquely equipped to instruct them in the “ways of true godliness.”

Parents and students alike do well to examine carefully the kinds of independent religious groups present on a campus. To whom is the group accountable for its teaching and practice? How does it present itself to, and how is it generally perceived on, the campus at large? Does it relate to other recognized Christian groups as a co-worker, or does it work in isolation? Is it affiliated with a responsible local parish or church body rooted in the larger Christian community?

These and other such questions are important ways to “check out” the religious communities on the campus where your child resides.

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Why Do Cults Do What They Do?

It’s a good question: What motivates cults? Why do they prey on susceptible people? What drives them to such an intensely “evangelistic” and fanatical zeal?

Money, power or even a socio-psychological malfunction can certainly be factors in some instances.

But I believe that their primary motivating factor is a very real and deep-seated conviction that they possess a dimension of truth to which nobody else has access. Cult leaders (and their followers, too) sound—and often appear—strange, incredible and “far out” to the casual observer. Their certainty that they have discovered heretofore unknown truth, however, is a driving force within them and inspires them to seek to convert others to their understanding of truth.

In this sense, they consider themselves “messiahs” of sorts, “saviors” of all those who live in the darkness and who need the light of the absolute truth at their unique disposal. Those with a “Christian” bent act and speak as though they have found that truth, which has escaped the church for 20 centuries, having only recently been discovered by a particular person or group.

This way of cultic thinking has found fertile ground in modern America. This is probably due combination of factors: Our highly individualistic understandings lead us to believe that anybody’s opinion is as good as the next person’s—about religion as well as any other subject. This, in turn is coupled with a growing anti-authoritarianism and an almost total lack of interest in history. Such a combination of factors leads to an ignoring, a neglect of, or an out-right rejection of “old” ideas (including religious ones) on the part of many people.

This leaves space for anyone who pleases to concoct a “new” version of “truth” (even though these “new” truths have been tried and rejected, in one form or another many times over throughout history!). It is only a small step from such an individualized version of truth to a conviction on the part of its inventor that he or she has discovered “ultimate truth.”

Many people, of course, have “homemade” versions of truth, but when such a version is joined to a charismatic person devoted to convincing people that he or she possesses “absolute truth,” you have the making of a cultic leader. Give such a person only a few followers, and you have the beginning of a cult.

I feel quite sure that this sense of possessing truth coupled with the sense of a divine call to impart that truth, is why cults do what they do and why they feel free to use almost any means at their disposal to attain their ends.

—H.F.B.

Points to Share with Your Child

If you are the parent of a college-bound student, you would be wise to share the following points with your son or daughter.

Remind him or her that cultlike and other para-religious groups abound on American college campuses, both large and small. Even those groups that appear solidly Christian (the various “International Churches of Christ,” formerly known as the Boston Church of Christ, come to mind) may be totally flawed in their theology, drastically overemphasizing Law at the expense of the Gospel of God’s grace and mercy.

“Disciples” in such groups, driven by their leaders to accumulate more and more members, are constantly on the prowl for lonely, naive and other wise vulnerable

recruits. These disciples are expert at insinuating themselves into a young person's life, so tell your child not to be overly forthcoming about his name, schedule, room location and phone number.

Make sure the Lutheran campus church (or the local LCMS congregation, in "town-gown" settings) gets the name of your child so the pastor can contact him or her. Also, make a point of reviewing with your child the true meaning of Baptism and the Scriptures.

Finally, warn your child that, chances are, he or she will be approached by one group or another. In that event, he should state up front that he has no interest in attending their studies or whatever event they happen to be sponsoring. (If he simply says he doesn't have time, they'll be back.)

If they continue to harass him, have him go to the university authorities. They will help.

—*Rev. Robert Hackler*