

David Gray

Cults

Cult Culture

Does the word 'cult' evoke images of childlike rituals and superstitious ceremonies? We need to be aware of these and other growth-inhibiting aspects of cults, because we are participants in cult life as well as observers. In the evolutionary outworking of revealed religion, a cult provides symbolic reinforcement for our inspiring ideals. It offers mutual support, something to belong to, for believers in moral standards and spiritual ideals.

To promote growth, a cult needs to be elastic and growing itself. A snake must shed its old, dead skin in order to grow; a man's skin renews itself cell by cell, so that he is spared the periodic ordeal of shedding the entire outer skin in one piece.

A religious cult must grow; it cannot be made to order. We need symbolic reinforcement, emotional gratification, something to belong to, yet we cannot create that which we need. A cult is social--it is something we do together. But what we do follows from what we individually and collectively choose to be. Here as in other aspects of our human condition, the Master's admonition to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness applies.

Our new cults--and there may be as many of these as there are families or groups of believers--must grow out of our love of our spirit Father applied to daily living. That is, they must reflect our persistent faith-choice, our spiritual experience of being sons and daughters of God. Love is the secret of growth, both personal and social.

Growth must be unconscious, but religion, the love of God and of our fellow beings, is an increasingly conscious way of living. Just as personal growth may be consciously fostered, so can we take intelligent action to further desirable group progress. Our group religious development requires the down-to-earth discipline of constructive criticism, the refreshing air of philosophy, the cleansing fires of science, and the thirst-quenching water of loyal fellowship.

Intelligent leadership will determine much of what happens in our group life. We need to be reminded of our group concern with religion and only with religion. We need to remain free from the distortion and perversion of our efforts onto some sidetrack, some sociologic or theologic pursuit. To know God as our Father and man as our brother is true religion. Our leadership must keep the goal of true religion ever before us.

Constructive criticism, refreshing philosophy, purifying science, loyal fellowship--these will help to sustain our new groups.

On a day-to-day basis, a constructive criticism requires us to recognize and face our life problems. We are asked to admit and to deal squarely with the discoveries of sincere and logical thinking. We are brought down to earth to apply our ideals. Suppose that you experience early warning signs of serious disease and ignore them. Constructive criticism sends you to the doctor. But you must also have the courage to accept the criticism. Otherwise, you may be paralyzed by fear. Indeed, you may be so blinded by morbid fear and self-seeking anxiety that you fail even to hear the warning.

An Alexandrian philosopher characterized prejudice as a barrier preventing the light of truth from reaching the soul. He linked prejudice to selfishness, and taught that the only escape from such prejudice lies in abandoning the

stuffy search for self in favor of the open air of the quest for God. That is truly a refreshing philosophy!

A close companion of prejudice is fanaticism, that mental upheaval or imbalance which so distorts perception and perverts purpose that it often leads to disaster. A scientific mental attitude restores balance and purifies perception; the paper dragons of psychic illusions and emotional delusion are burned away in its cleansing fire. The attitude of science admonishes us to use the understanding we have as a foothold from which to reach forth for new and higher understanding. For true science, there can never be a final understanding, an end of discovery. Loveless zeal, on the other hand, may be caricatured as a wild-eyed lonely eccentric proclaiming, "The end is near."

It is not good for us to be alone, to exist without the support of our fellows. We need to cultivate our "creative, comforting, and love-expanding fellowships." Love is the secret of growth.

Let our new group religious experience, our evolving cults, be the fruit of our living faith and of our intelligent efforts, as we courageously face the problems of living, wisely and unselfishly pursue the quest for God, sanely and with balance reach for higher understanding, and as our Father loves us--love one another.

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