Cynthia Kisser's essay provides an excellent introduction to this special section since, like "genius" in the last issue of Skeptic, a "cult" is so difficult to define, even though we all think we know one when we see one. As an active observer through the Cult Awareness Network, Kisser is well suited to provide objective criteria by which we can distinguish a cult from related organizations.

—Editor
Waco, Jonestown and All That Madness

An Analysis of Cults From the Director of the Cult Awareness Network

By Cynthia S. Kisser

Ask most people about cults in America, and they think immediately (if they are old enough) of Jonestown, in Guyana, where over 900 people died on orders of leader Jim Jones. Of course, if they own a television, read the newspaper, or listen to radio, then they will also mention David Koresh and Waco, Texas, where the tragic and spectacular end for Koresh and approximately 80 followers was witnessed live by satellite around the world as the compound burned to the ground.

What kind of a problem exists in regard to cults, and what, if anything, should be done to contain the problem, or to try and avert tragedies such as Waco and Jonestown? Or are they an inevitable result of exercising freedom of religion in this country?

An essential step in understanding this problem is defining what exactly these groups are—the Jonestowns, the Mt. Carmels in Waco, and the other groups which seem capable of leading followers to fanatical actions which rob them, or the innocent children whose destinies they control, of any sense of self-preservation.

These groups are destructive cults. They have two important hallmarks in common.

First, destructive cults are unethical (by outside standards) and deceptive in how they recruit and indoctrinate their members. They have a hidden agenda in store for recruits. They withhold or lie about facts, actions, and conduct concerning the group to which the recruit has not yet been exposed, and which might deter the recruit from further involvement at the early stage of contact with the group. They do not tell the recruit all that will be demanded of that individual once the decision is made to embrace the organization as a true member.

Second, destructive cults use powerful techniques of influence and persuasion in a concerted manner, without the consent or knowledge of the recruit, during the recruitment and indoctrination process to influence the way the recruit's value system and the way he or she thinks. Often these techniques are disguised as exercises meant to be beneficial to the recruit, and, in fact, if used ethically and with disclosure, could actually be beneficial.

Lots of groups in society show one of these two hallmarks of a destructive cult. For example, some marketing operations promise recruits big money or exciting premium gifts without explaining all the work that the recruit must really perform to make that money or gain those awards. However, in these scenarios, the recruit initially holds up his or her end of the bargain, i.e. attending a high-pressure weekend seminar to get a fabulous free gift, or investing money for the sampler kit and the hours to sell the revolutionary new product not available in stores. At a certain point, sooner or later, the individual, sometimes with pressure from friends or family to re-evaluate the commitment, realizes the deception involved in the initial recruiting pitch, and breaks off involvement with the organization, a wiser, if poorer individual.

My first experience in such a scenario was at the age of six when, without my mother’s permission, I sent off for "quality greeting cards" to sell to friends and neighbors as a way to make easy money. No one would buy the ugly, overpriced cards; my mother got quite angry with me for falling for the scam and mailed the cards back, and I, while embarrassed and chagrined by the experience, survived it with my original personality and values intact.

On the other side of the coin, some organizations, with no deception, make it clear they are offering their customer the opportunity to reshape aspects of their value system by being subjected to influence techniques. Those, for example, who sign up at a clinic to quit smoking know, and expect, that their value system will, hopefully, be altered. The ethical clinic, however, makes no attempt to alter views on religion, politics or sexuality while using influence techniques to curb the smoking habit.

Clearly, religious beliefs are not the issue when it comes to defining a destructive cult. A group can be solely religious, political, or commercial, or a combination of the three, and function as a destructive cult. Even a therapy group can be a destructive cult if it is deceptive to recruits and uses persuasive techniques systematically and without disclosure.

Conversely, two groups can embrace the same doctrine or belief system, but if one is not using this deception and lack of disclosure concerning influence techniques, then, though the groups are similar in other ways, only one is truly a
destructive cult.

Enough is now known about Jonestown and Waco to determine that there were both deception perpetrated by the leaders on recruits, and, especially after the members had moved to isolated communal environments, and a constant barrage of influence techniques used regularly. Harsh physical conditions, lack of, or irregular sleep, criticism of individuals in group settings, control of diet, and the use of language in a redefined manner, were typical in both groups.

Not all groups are as extreme as Jonestown and Waco. And, as with everything in life, one cannot neatly label some groups as "safe" and others as "dangerous." Groups evolve over time, change as leadership changes, may inconsistently and irregularly apply influence techniques, or may reform with enough pressure. But this imprecision in identifying groups should not prevent us from finding a way to educate the public on how to recognize such groups. Indeed, as the Skeptics Society endorses, the ideal avenue is to promote critical thinking and awareness in general, and leave to the individual a determination of what groups, once an awareness is cultivated, are indeed destructive cults to him or her.

There are certain problems that destructive cults have in common, and which separate them, when viewed in toto, from open, ethically problems are apparent when the true destructive cults, where all these of these problems, and they are not controversial the causes or doctrines labeled some groups as Jonestown and Waco. And, as with those other groups embrace. Cer­
vated, are indeed destructive cults to
true destructive cults. However, a
motivated groups, no matter how
true toleration for diversity. Such a
certainty to values may include
dress, lifestyle, career choices, or
even personal relationships. There is
a key point to consider with this con-
fornity to values. Bizarre, distinct, or
markedly separatist groups that are
not actually destructive cults are
quite open about their values, and
their members embrace these values
with their own free will. The values
destructive cults demand conformity
to often are, at least in part, inculcat-
ed to begin with in the recruit
through the deceptive use of the
techniques of persuasion. Journalist
Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, writing in
the August, 1993, issue of Mirabella
magazine, notes:
Mainstream religions quarrel
over whether women should be
ordained priests or rabbis, and
offer conflicting views about
everything from homosexuality to
the death penalty, abortion rights,
pacifism, and "just" wars. As a
result they frequently (if inadver-
tently) leave the burden of choice
and discrimination to the individu­
al believer. But the fanatic, the
fundamentalist, and the cultist are
able to say, "This is how it is; it can
be no other way; I am certain."
The primary focus of destructive
cults is on its own expansion or
activities, even at the price of break-
ing the law, exploiting followers, and
violating their basic human rights. In
conjunction with this they are illogi-
cal or inappropriate in their use of
funds, allocate the funds without any
true type of group consensus or con-
cern for the welfare of the member-
ship, and may be secretive with
members about the use of such
funds.

In the Koresh commune there were
roughly three guns to a person
according to Tim Madigan, author of
"See No Evil," one of the many books
now coming out about Waco. Ammunition boxes were stacked two
deep in one room, reaching to the
ceiling of a ten-foot wall. At least
$199,715 was spent on weapons and
related equipment in one 17-month period. Yet, children released from
Waco were unaccustomed to hot
meals, seldom received baths, lived
in buildings without adequate heat
and sanitation, and were home
schooled with little in the way of
school supplies.

While some destructive cults
engage in token programs, such as
donating food to a local charity, or
contributing time to community
clean-up projects, their programs
certainly consume little of the actual
resources the group has at its dispos-
al, and are done strategically to
recruit new members, gain political
support, and good public relations in
their community, or to attract main-
stream ministers, academicians and
community leaders who, helped in
some way by the group, are expected
to publicly criticize the groups' crit-
ics in return.

Destructive cults have a complete
disregard for authority. The more
extreme they become, the more reck-
less this disregard grows. Eleven Sci-
entologists, for example, were
convicted in 1979 for their part in a
break-in of government offices and
wire-tapping, clearly outlined in docu-
ments of theirs seized by the FBI as
part of a criminal plan with a code-
name "Operation Snowwhite."
Destructive cults that engage in
commercial enterprises, and many do, compete unfairly with legitimate businesses by drawing on cheap or free labor from followers. Koresh, for example, ran a bakery in California, according to Madigan, which operated without a license, issued no W-4 forms to workers, and registered no profits with government agencies. The Alamo Christian Foundation was assessed $7.9 million in taxes for operating businesses as religious enterprises, with followers working in sweatshop conditions for as little as $20.00 a week.

Ultimately it is, over and above all else, victimization of the most innocent on a systematic and methodical basis that characterizes destructive cults. Bruce Perry, chief of psychiatry at Texas Children's Hospital, headed the team that interviewed the children of Koresh's followers who were released form the Waco compound in the early days of the siege. The children, he told press, were disciplined regularly with a paddle called "the helper," or by being denied food. According to Perry they were "living in an environment which had an unhealthy, malignant, and predatory quality of sexuality." Most of them, he said, felt "a great deal of fear of David Koresh."

Sadly, the life for children in Koresh's group was no worse than in many of the smaller, isolationist destructive cults.

In March of 1985, Michael Ryan, leader of a Christian Identity survivalist group, ordained that five-year-old Luke Stice was the seed of Satan. He tortured the small child for weeks, and ultimately dangled him when local police, attempting to dislodge members of a radical political cult called MOVE, accidentally set the surrounding neighborhood on fire, burning to death 11 MOVE members, including children, and destroying approximately 60 homes.

The most telling example of this is offered by the case of Jim Jones. Jones ran charity programs for minorities and senior citizens and got the endorsement of California politicians, and even Rosalyn Carter. What was discovered, however, was that the seniors on social security were turning their checks over to the People's Temple in return for a meager existence. Worse still, some of the children that died in Jonestown were wards of the state of California that had been placed in foster homes with People's Temple families. The children had been allowed to be taken out of the country to Guyana, the checks continued to be paid on the children's behalf while they were abused and ultimately killed on Jones' orders. The ultimate irony is that it is possible that some of California taxpayers' money intended for the care of the children was used to buy the cyanide with which they were injected. Likewise, costs to American taxpayers for the Waco situation have already reached the millions.

If these and so many other cult-related incidents were totalled up in terms of the money taxpayers have had to spend on this issue, the cost would surprise most, and make a good argument, economically, for a pro-active response to this problem.

There is no such thing as a "risk-free" society, writes William Ebenbarger an article, "The Home of the Not So Brave," (Chicago Tribune Magazine, July 26, 1992). Yet increasingly we avoid risking the debate over religious, Constitutional and human rights issues which a full examination of the cult problem in this country would engender. Instead, we need to come to grips with how our democratic system makes us vulnerable to exploitation by destructive cults. We need to face what our obligations as defenders of Constitutional rights really means, We need to confront what we have already permitted to happen in the name of religious and political freedom.

The one thing more dangerous, says Ebenbarger, than taking a risk is not taking it. The longer we delay examining the cult issue, stripped bare of the propaganda with which destructive cults and their apologists try to surround it, the longer the danger continues for the cults' most innocent victims. The message we send worldwide, each time a cult-related incident makes the news in this country, is that we are allowing children to be abused, lives to be wasted, sometimes even murder to occur, rather than risk coming to terms with what religious liberty and human rights really stand for if they are to mean anything at all.