

Good Tree, The: Distinguishing the Baha'i Faith From De

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...every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

Matthew 7:17 -18

The disastrous outcome of the events surrounding Waco, Texas, and the Branch Davidians in 1993 was both shocking and terrifying to the American nation. For many, the horror of this terrible event -- and others like it -- has fostered skepticism and fear of any new or unfamiliar religious group. Moreover, this fear is clearly not unwarranted. For, in contrast to the vast majority of nations, the United States is a highly fertile breeding ground for destructive cults. This is the case for four main reasons. First, since the 1960s, many Americans have abandoned traditional forms of religion. Second, there is a legal separation of church and state, and great religious freedom and diversity in the population. Third, there are vast amounts of open space in the United States where people can live in relative isolation. And fourth, the established institutions of the United States -- schools, governments, and families -- are "hard put to provide the emotional security and intimate social support and love sought by many people in our complex society." [1]

For these reasons, it is imperative that new religious groups be carefully examined to determine whether or not these organizations are cults. The Bahai Faith is one such religious organization which must be carefully investigated. This paper will explain the fundamental characteristics of a cult and then examine whether or not the Bahai Faith embodies these characteristics.

The Fundamental Characteristics of a Cult

The word "cult" has very different meanings in different contexts. Thus, before defining the basic characteristics of a cult, it is important to examine this word carefully. In a theological and historical context, the word "cult" concerns a style of worshipping and rituals, and has a positive connotation. In a sociological context, the word "cult" concerns a minority religious group that exists in conflict with the predominant religion of the culture, and has a neutral connotation. In a general religious

context, the word "cult" concerns a small, new group -- often headed by a charismatic leader -- that is not a sect, or variant, of the established religion. In this context the word also has a neutral connotation. In an evangelical or fundamentalist context, the word "cult" concerns any religious group that does not accept the fundamentalist interpretation of essential Christian doctrine. By this definition, "mainline and liberal Christian denominations, and all of the other religions of the world ... 70% of humanity" would be classified as cult groups. In this context, the word has a clear negative connotation. Finally, in the context of popular media usage, the word "cult" concerns a new, destructive, and small religious group that practices "brain washing" techniques and harmful rituals. This usage is obviously very negative[2]. For the purposes of this paper, the author will use the word "cult" or "destructive cult" with its popular media connotation -- as a psychologically and socially destructive religious group.

When

one examines the characteristics of a destructive cult, one finds many non-defining characteristics cited in the literature. These non-defining characteristics are elements that both destructive cults and neutral -- or even benign -- religious organizations often share in common. For example, the promotion of social change, the promise of increased spiritual development, the appeal to those who are searching for meaning in their lives, and the stress of love and acceptance of its members are all commonly cited characteristics which many destructive and non-destructive groups share. Thus, this paper will examine only a cults defining characteristics, or characteristics that destructive religious groups generally do embody and that non-destructive religious groups generally do not. From the literature, the author has identified five defining characteristics of destructive cults: 1.) a charismatic leader demanding total authority, 2.) the use of "controlling" techniques, 3.) social and physical isolation, 4.) extreme or fanatical behavior, and 5.) secrecy and deception. In this section of the paper, each of these characteristics will be fully explained.

1. The Leader

Destructive

religious groups almost invariably center around a living, self-appointed leader[3]. This leader is generally esteemed as Gods representative on Earth, as God Himself, or as one who has the sole right to interpret the scripture of an established religion. The cult doctrine is based on his revelations or ideology. Because of his position of divine enlightenment, the cult leader exercises tremendous, and often absolute, authority over his followers[4]. Individual cult members surrender their wills and their lives to the responsibility and authority of the leader[5]. Additionally,

since no large organization can be run by one individual, the cult leader generally has a "revered inner circle," or a group of loyal helpers appointed by the leader, who, to a lesser degree, share the prestige and power of the cult leader[6]. Also, there are often serious ethical violations committed by the cult leader: the leader claims to be chaste and then impregnates

a follower, the leader preaches against drugs or wealth yet buys expensive cars -- and often drugs -- with the cult members money[7]. It is important to note, however, that it is not the mere presence of a leader that differentiates

destructive cults from non-destructive religious groups; rather, it is the fact that this leader is plagued by ethical questions and demands total authority over his followers. This authority is derived through practicing "brain washing" techniques, isolating the cult followers, demanding fanatical practices, and using deception.

2. The Use of "Controlling" Techniques

A large part of what makes a cult "destructive" is its use of fear or guilt-based "mind control" techniques.[8] In order to indoctrinate and reinforce the follower, various forms of physical deprivation, social and physical isolation techniques, hell and salvation-based fear techniques[9] and, most commonly, guilt-based, ritualistic confession of sins is used. In the cult environment, this confession goes far beyond its normal religious function. A follower's thoughts are no longer his or her own -- every past and previous thought and action now becomes the property of the group. The group and its leaders use this information -- extracted in long confession sessions -- to manipulate and shame the individual.[10]

Also, critical thinking and views that differ from those of the group are highly discouraged or actively suppressed and, as a general rule, the cult community does not permit questioning of any sort.[11] The net result of these controlling techniques is a shift in the followers' locus of control and responsibility.[12] Followers lose the ability to think and act independently, and develop a tremendous and harmful dependency upon the cult group and its leader.[13]

3. Social and Physical Isolation

Cult members normally live in some form of isolation from the greater society.[14]

Almost invariably, cult members experience some form of social isolation -- i.e. they have very little meaningful interaction with non-cult members. This occurs in large part because virtually all of their time, effort, and finances are devoted to the cult and its leader, leaving little time

for family, old friends, and their jobs.[15] A sharp we/they distinction is drawn between members and those outside the cult, and a pervasive distrust for everyone except the "saved" cult members is fostered by the community.[16] Though not quite as common, destructive cults often require physical isolation as well. Cult members live in communes, and often cannot leave without permission.[17] This serves to further isolate the cult member from those who would support his or her original belief system.

4. Extremist or Fanatical Behavior

One of the true defining characteristics of a destructive cult is its pervasive fanaticism -- i.e. when a behavior or practice that is not necessarily harmful (such as confession) is taken to a tremendous and unhealthy extreme.[18]

Members often neglect or abandon their families, jobs, schools, possessions, and lives to protect the cult leader and community.[19] One area where unhealthy excess is clear is in the dangerous or ascetic rituals of a destructive

religious group. Excessive praying, chanting, fasting, and sleep deprivation can cause anxiety, exhaustion, illness, and eating disorders.[20] Other dangerous rituals such as snake handling can prove lethal. A second area where fanaticism appears is in the way believers "witness" their beliefs and attempt to convert new followers. The believers are, "compulsively and constantly witnessing beliefs to everyone, often in an extreme or confrontational

way . . ."[21] This aggressive, high-pressure proselytizing can involve door-to-door recruiting, daily calls to potential converts, or threats of eternal damnation.[22] A final area where cults manifest an unhealthy excess is in the endorsement of various forms of violence[23] when used for or by the cult. This can translate into a stock-piling of arms in Waco Texas, or a "spare the rod, spoil the child" abusive mentality[24] in Jonestown.

5.) Secrecy and Deception

Another part of what makes cults destructive forces in peoples lives is the fact that the followers are often unaware of certain cult activities, or are blatantly being deceived. Cult leaders often issue a "Sicilian Code of Silence"[25] about their unethical conduct. Also, there is often "secret doctrine" reserved only for cult members, and levels of "secret doctrine"[26] as one goes up the hierarchy of leaders within the cult structure. Destructive cults are often characterized by financial secrecy and deception[27] as well, including the selling of indulgences, unethical fund raising, and a refusal to produce financial records[28]. Additionally, "miracles" are often staged at "revivals," in the form of phony faith-healings.[29] Finally, cults such as the Boston

Church operate using "front groups"[30] -- subsidiary groups which use a different name, but in reality are a part of the same destructive group. Cults often use this method to penetrate college campuses.

With these defining characteristics in mind -- 1.) a charismatic leader demanding total authority, 2.) the use of "controlling" techniques, 3.) social and physical isolation, 4.) extremist or fanatical behavior, and 5.) secrecy and deception -- this paper will now examine whether or not the Bahai Faith embodies any of these characteristics.

An Examination of Bahai Faith

Not every cult embodies all five of the above mentioned characteristics. For the purposes of this investigation, if a religious organization embodies even one of these characteristics -- because they are defining qualities and, thus, not shared with non-destructive groups -- then it will be classified as a destructive cult. Therefore, if the Bahai Faith clearly embodies even one of these qualities, then it will be grouped as a cult. If, however, it clearly embodies none of these characteristics it will be classified as a non-destructive religious group. With this standard in mind, this paper will again turn to the five defining characteristics of a cult.

1. The Leader

The Bahai Faith has no single living leader, nor does it have any formal clergy members.[31] Rather, the leadership of the Bahai Faith is executed through what Bahais term their "Administrative Order". To understand the nature of this "Order", it is important to first give a brief summary of the historical events that led up to it.

The founder of the Bahai Faith, a Persian nobleman named Mirza Husayn-Ali, and surnamed Bahauallah (Arabic for Glory of God), first announced His claim to be a Messenger or "Manifestation" of God. From this time until His ascension in 1892 He wrote voluminously and these works today constitute the Bahai "sacred text". Before His death Bahauallah, appointed His eldest son Mirza Abbas, surnamed Abdul-Baha (literally the Servant of Glory), as the head of His religion and the sole interpreter of His writings.[32] Bahauallah promised that Abdul-Baha would have the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and that there would someday be a "House of Justice" to rule His Faith.[33]

Abdul-Baha, whom virtually all of the Bahais followed, served as head of the Bahai religion and interpreter of the writings of His Father until his ascension in 1921. Before His death, He appointed his eldest grandson,

Shoghi Effendi, as the head of the Faith and the sole interpreter of Bahauallahs writings.[34] He also elaborated the means for the election of the "House of Justice" spoken of by his Father, and gave this institution the right to enact, "all ordinances and regulations that are not to be found in the explicit Holy Text."[35]

Shoghi Effendi served as the head of the Bahai Faith and interpreted the writings of Bahauallah until his death in 1957. He did not name a successor -- possibly because he had no children -- however, in 1953 he did initiate a plan termed the "Ten Year Crusade". During this "crusade" the Bahai Faith experienced tremendous growth, and at its conclusion in 1963, the House of Justice -- a ruling body of nine members -- was elected. Shortly thereafter this institution announced, "(The House of Justice) cannot legislate to make possible the appointment of a successor to Shoghi Effendi . . ."[36] Thus, the Bahai Faith was left with no single leader, and still does not have one today.

The House of Justice now serves as the head of the international Bahai community, and legislates on issues not covered in the writings of Bahauallah or in the interpretations of Abdul-Baha and Shoghi Effendi. However, it does not further interpret these writings.[37] Thus, in contrast to most destructive cults, the Bahai Faith since 1957 has had no single leader, nor anyone to "authoritatively" interpret the writings of Bahauallah.

Moreover, in contrast to the appointed "inner circle" of most cult leaders, the Bahais themselves elect the leaders of their "administrative order". The local Bahai community annually elects the members of its local administrative bodies, the Local Spiritual Assemblies. Delegates from these local communities, in turn, annually elect the members of the National Spiritual Assemblies. Likewise, the members of the National Spiritual Assemblies elect the members of the Universal House of Justice once every five years. Each administrative body has nine members and makes decisions using a process Bahais term "consultation". Consultation is a non-adversarial decision-making process where consensus on a decision is the goal, but -- if consensus cannot be reached -- a majority vote will suffice. The interesting feature of this system is that no individual member of these institutions has the authority to make any decisions -- it is only in group consultation "in the attitude and atmosphere of love" that these institutions have any decision making authority.[38] The decisions of a Local Assembly can be appealed first to the National Assembly and then to the House of Justice.[39] Moreover, every nineteen days the Bahai community also "consults" on community issues, and submits its recommendations to the Local Assembly.

The only appointed positions in the Bahai administrative order are: 1.) the Continental Counselors, who are appointed by the House of Justice and who serve as advisers to (but have no authority over) the National Assemblies, and 2.) the Auxiliary Board Members, who are appointed by the Counselors and who serve as advisers to (but also have no authority over) the Local Assemblies and communities.[40]

Concerning the integrity of the leaders of the Bahai Faith, there are several methods by which a leader can be removed for various ethical violations. First, for flagrant ethical violations (such as sexual misconduct) administrative privileges can be taken away from any believer. When this occurs the Bahai can no longer vote, serve on assemblies, or give money to the Bahai religion. When the issue is one of character, assembly members can also be removed by a majority vote of the assembly. However, if the issue is one of administrative incompetence, the Bahai community can vote out the assembly member during the annual election.[41]

Finally, the Bahai writings state that no one can claim for themselves the head position that Shoghi Effendi left unfilled.[42] The writings of Bahaullah also state that a new Manifestation of God will not come for at least a full 1,000 years.[43] Thus, if any Bahai claims either a.) to be able to authoritatively interpret the sacred writings, b.) to be the new head of the religion, or c.) to possess a new revelation from God, then the House of Justice will expel him or her as a "covenant breaker". A covenant breaker can, however, be re-admitted to the religion by the House of Justice if he or she sincerely retracts his or her claims.[44] Interestingly, all Bahais must shun this "covenant breaker" and have no contact with him or her. Viewed critically, this practice of "shunning" covenant breakers prevents and protects Bahais from entering into the presence of a "charismatic cult leader". It is also a mechanism that prevents charismatic leaders from gaining authority within the Bahai religion.

In sum, the Bahai Faith does not have a living, self-appointed leader or leaders who demand absolute authority. On the contrary, in the Bahai religion authority is exercised only by elected councils, or "assemblies", using group "consultation".

2.) The Use of "Controlling" Techniques

Concerning confession -- the controlling technique most often used in destructive cults -- the Bahai writings (those of Bahaullah, Abdul-Baha, Shoghi Effendi, and the House of Justice) expressly forbid the use of any type of confession:

Bahauallah prohibits confession to, and seeking absolution of one's sins from, a human being. Instead one should beg forgiveness from God. In the Tablet of Bisharat, He states that such confession before people results in one's humiliation and abasement, and He affirms that God wisheth not the humiliation of His servants. (Bahais) are forbidden to confess to any person, as do the Catholics to their priests, our sins and shortcomings, or to do so in public, as some religious sects do . .

[45]

Thus, the most common controlling technique used by cults -- public confession of sins -- is forbidden in the Bahai teachings. Moreover, there is no evidence to indicate that the Bahais do not obey this ordinance of their religion.

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Bahais also have a less "fire and brimstone" theology of heaven, hell, and salvation than do most cult communities. Bahais teach that there is a "future life" after this life, and that "heaven and hell are conditions within our own beings." [46] The Bahai writings state that heaven and hell are spiritual conditions rather than physical locations: heaven is nearness to God and that hell is isolation from God. For Bahais both of these "conditions" are attainable in this life and the next, and there is no exclusive salvation or eternal damnation for any group (even souls in hell, or remoteness from God, can eventually attain "heaven" or reunion with God -- both in this life and the "future life"). Also, Bahais believe that Satan is really an embodiment of the "lower nature" of man, rather than a personal being. Thus, the fear-based images of "eternal hell" so often used to manipulate cult members are also absent from the Bahai Faith.

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Bahai writings, moreover, are not critical of reason or questioning. This religion teaches that the "primary duty" [47] of all humanity is the independent investigation of the truth. Abdul-Baha states:

Another new principle revealed by Bahauallah is the injunction to investigate truth - that is to say, no man should blindly follow his ancestors and forefathers. Nay, each must see with his own eyes, hear with his own ears and investigate the truth himself in order that he may follow the truth instead of blind acquiescence and imitation of ancestral beliefs. [48]

In Bahai theology, faith and reason go hand in hand:

Consider what it is that singles man out from among created beings, and makes of him a creature apart. Is it not his reasoning power, his intelligence? Shall he not make use of these in his study of

religion? I say unto you: weigh carefully in the balance of reason and science everything that is presented to you as religion. If it passes this test, then accept it, for it is truth! If, however, it does not so conform, then reject it, for it is ignorance!... If religion were contrary to logical reason then it would cease to be a religion and be merely a tradition. Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone![49]

Possibly because of a lack of clergy -- the Bahai teachings tell its followers that their first duty is to study their sacred writings: "To strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahauallah's stupendous Revelation must ... remain the first obligation and the object of the constant endeavor of each one of its loyal adherents."[50]

Moreover, in the Bahai religion there is no visible negative attitude towards questioning as is characteristic of most cults. The Bahai teachings state: "It is always through questioning and mature thought that we can arrive at the root of everything ... in the teachings of Bahauallah ..."[51] Interestingly, one of the Bahai months -- each of which is each named after a virtue such as light, wisdom, or love -- is named "questions".

Finally, while the locus of control of individual believers is difficult to assess, the author has found no evidence that individual Bahais have been robbed of the responsibility for their actions as members of destructive cults tend to be. On the contrary, probably because of the lack of clergy, the Bahai teachings repeatedly stress the responsibility of the individual believer:

Man is not intended to see through the eyes of another, hear through another's ears nor comprehend with another's brain. Each human creature has individual endowment, power and responsibility in the creative plan of God. Therefore, depend upon your own reason and judgment and adhere to the outcome of your own investigation...[52]

Thus, unlike destructive cults, Bahai Faith does not use controlling techniques, such as ritual confession or threats of damnation, nor does it condemn reason, forbid questioning, or foster an unhealthy dependency in its followers.

3. Social and Physical Isolation

As mentioned above, the Bahai teachings do not promote the notion of exclusive salvation as do most cults. Moreover, the Bahai religion, encourages, rather than discouraging interaction with those who are not Bahais. The

Bahai writings state: "There can be no doubt that the progress of the Cause from this time onward will be characterized by an ever increasing relationship to the agencies, activities, institutions and leading individuals of the Non-Bahai World." [53] Bahais are not forbidden to date or marry non-Bahais [54] as is often the case with most cults, and Bahauallah stressed the "importance of fellowship with the followers of all religions." [55] Also, the Bahai religion upholds that Abraham, Moses, Christ, and Muhammed were all Manifestations of one God. The Bahais teach that each holy book is a chapter in the book of the "Cause of God" and that Bahauallahs revelation is the latest chapter in that book. Bahais, therefore, are urged not only to study their own sacred writings, but the Bible [56] and the Quran [57] as well.

The Bahai religion also promotes the notion that all people are of one human family, and that all races and ethnicities are one:

Bahauallah taught the Oneness of humanity; that is to say, all the children of men are under the mercy of the Great God. They are the sons of one God; they are trained by God. He has placed the crown of humanity on the head of every one of the servants of God. Therefore all nations and peoples must consider themselves brethren. They are all descendants from Adam. They are the branches, leaves, flowers and fruits of One Tree. [58]

Also, Bahais -- unlike the majority of cult members -- are enjoined to serve their families, even before they serve their religion:

Show honour to your parents and pay homage to them.
. . Beware lest ye commit that which would sadden the hearts of your fathers and mothers. Follow ye the path of Truth which indeed is a straight path. Should anyone give you a choice between the opportunity to render a service to Me and a service to them, choose ye to serve them, and let such service be a path leading you to Me. [59]

This injunction applies whether or not the parents are Bahais. Thus, the Bahai religion clearly does not foster antipathy towards non-believers, nor is there any evidence to support the notion that Bahais live in social isolation.

Moreover, the physical isolation and secluded living common to many destructive groups is forbidden in the Bahai Faith. The Bahai teachings stress the importance of working (even equating work performed in a spirit of service with worship to God) and balancing this work with service to their religion. Additionally, the Bahai teachings explicitly forbid monasticism and seclusion:

Living in seclusion or practicing asceticism is not

acceptable in the presence of God, and (Bahauallah) calls upon those involved to observe that which will cause joy and radiance. He instructs those who have taken up their abodes in the caves of the mountains or who have repaired to graveyards at night to abandon these practices, and He enjoins them not to deprive themselves of the bounties of this world which have been created by God for humankind . . . While acknowledging the pious deeds of monks and priests, Bahauallah calls upon them to give up the life of seclusion and direct their steps towards the open world and busy themselves with that which will profit themselves and others. He also grants them leave to enter into wedlock that they may bring forth one who will make mention of God[60]

The only thing which remotely resembles communal living are private Bahai boarding schools. However, these schools are virtually identical to those of other religions, and have many students who are not Bahais. Thus, it is clear that the Bahai religion fosters neither the social or physical isolation so characteristic of destructive religious groups.

4.) Extreme or Fanatical Behavior

The Bahai teachings stress the importance of moderation in all things. Bahauallah wrote: "In all matters moderation is desirable. If a thing is carried to excess, it will prove a source of evil." This is a theme repeated over and over in the Bahai teachings and manifested in Bahai practices.

In contrast to the excessive rituals of many cults, the rituals of the Bahai Faith are few in number and in keeping with the principle of moderation. Bahais must say one of three "obligatory prayers" daily. There is a short, a medium, and a long prayer, and the Bahai is free to choose between the three. Two of the prayers have ritual motions, while the short prayer (seven lines long) has no ritual motions. Shoghi Effendi states:

Bahauallah has reduced all ritual and form to an absolute minimum in His Faith. The few forms that there are - like those associated with the two longer obligatory daily prayers - are only symbols of the inner attitude. There is a wisdom in them, and a great blessing, but we cannot force ourselves to understand or feel these things, that is why He gave us also the very short and simple prayer, for those who did not feel the desire to perform the acts associated with the other two.[62]

Interestingly, unlike the Muslim and traditional Christian religions, the Bahai teachings (except in the prayer said at Bahai funerals) forbid congregational obligatory prayer:

The reason why privacy hath been enjoined in moments

of devotion is this, that thou mayest give thy best attention to the remembrance of God, that they heart may at all times be animated with His Spirit, and not be shut out as by a veil from thy Best Beloved. Let not thy tongue pay lip service in praise of God while they heart be not attuned to the exalted summit of Glory and the Focal Point of communion[63].

Thus, the Bahai writings teach that ritual is to be avoided.[64] This view of rituals is in sharp contrast to the practices of most cults.

Although there is a period of fasting from sun-rise to sun-set in the Bahai Faith for 19 days each year, the Bahai teachings forbid asceticism:

Living in seclusion or practicing asceticism is not acceptable in the presence of God. It behoveth them that are endued with insight and understanding to observe that which will cause joy and radiance. . . Deprive not yourselves of the bounties which have been created for your sake.[65]

The fasting that occurs in the Bahai religion is similar to the structured fasting of the Islamic faith (though shorter in length) and very dissimilar to the unstructured and excessive fasting of destructive cults. Exemptions for fasting and obligatory prayer are made for those under 15 or over 70, those engaged in heavy physical labor, those who are ill, those who are traveling, menstruating women, pregnant women, and nursing mothers.[66]

The Bahai Faith also condemns the aggressive proselytizing which tends to characterize destructive religious groups. Bahauallah wrote:

Consort with all men, O people of Baha, in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. If ye be aware of a certain truth, if ye possess a jewel, of which others are deprived, share it with them in a language of utmost kindness and good-will. If it be accepted, if it fulfill its purpose, your object is attained. If any one should refuse it, leave him unto himself, and beseech God to guide him. Beware lest ye deal unkindly with him.[67]

This directive is repeated many times in the Bahai writings. In another place Shoghi Effendi writes, "(Bahais) must be careful not to teach in a fanatical way." [68] He also cautioned Bahais against going door to door, stating it was "undignified and might create a bad impression of the Faith." [69]

Finally, concerning the use of force commonly abused by destructive cults, the Bahai Faith teaches its followers to abstain from violence. Bahais, while not

conscientious objectors, are advised to serve in non-combatant military positions if drafted, and are forbidden to kill[71] unless their own life is directly threatened. Holy Wars are also forbidden in the Bahai teachings, and only under extreme circumstances are Bahais allowed to own or carry weapons.[72] Moreover, Bahais are forbidden to act violently toward children:

Whensoever a mother seeth that her child hath done well, let her praise and applaud him and cheer his heart; and if the slightest undesirable trait should manifest itself, let her counsel the child and punish him, and use means based on reason, even a slight verbal chastisement should this be necessary. It is not, however, permissible to strike a child, or vilify him, for the child's character will be totally perverted if he be subjected to blows or verbal abuse.[73]

In sum, the Bahai religion clearly does not embody the excessive rituals, ascetic practices, fanatical "witnessing", or violent behavior common to most cults.

5.) Secrecy and Deception

This paper has already discussed in detail the means for the removal of unethical leaders from their positions, as opposed to the "code of silence" common for the unethical behavior of a cult leader. Concerning the "secret doctrine" which is revealed only to the seasoned members of destructive cults, one cannot be certain that there are no "secret" teachings which exist only at the summit of Bahai administration -- for if they exist they are secret. However, there is no evidence to support this notion, while there is much evidence to the contrary. All of the Bahai writings (including the writings of Bahauallah himself) were either written by the author Himself or transcribed by a secretary, and then signed by the author to authenticate the work. These original writings are stored at the Bahai World Center in Haifa, Israel, and many are on display for the public to see. Most of these Bahai writings are available in print on the internet, where they can be downloaded by anyone free of charge.[74] Also, the House of Justice, within hours of completion of a new message, sends its message (both conventionally and electronically) to virtually every local Bahai community in the world. The Bahai writings, moreover, stress the vital importance of communication between the House of Justice and the individual believer.[75]

Concerning the financial management of the Bahai community, again the authors search for any unethical dealings has proved fruitless. While the treasurer gives a monthly report of the financial status of the local community and the National and International funds are published in The American Bahai (a free monthly newspaper received by all American Bahais), no Bahais

are allowed to directly solicit money from individual believers. Contributions are entirely confidential; only the assembly knows who gave what amount to the Bahai funds, and they are not allowed to disclose this information to anyone. Shoghi Effendi wrote that giving to the Bahai funds:

... is an entirely personal matter, and each believer must act according to his own judgment and the needs of the Faith. In times of crisis, whether in the affairs of the Cause or in one's own family, people naturally behave differently from under normal circumstances. But decisions in these matters must rest with each individual Bahai[76].

Additionally, a yearly audit of each local assembly is submitted to the national assembly to ensure proper and ethical bookkeeping.[77]

A final interesting element of the Bahai finances is that only Bahais can give to the Bahai funds.[78] Bahais consider it an honor as well as a duty to give to their religion.

Concerning staged miracles -- a common form of deception within destructive cults -- the Bahai teachings strongly counsel followers not to use stories of miracles to teach their religion. The Bahai teachings state: "We do not need to mention miracles . . . for such miracles and statements may be denied and refused by those who hear them." [79] Abdul-Baha wrote:

I do not wish to mention the miracles of Bahauallah, for it may perhaps be said that these are traditions, liable both to truth and to error . . . Though if I wish to mention the supernatural acts of Bahauallah, they are numerous; they are acknowledged in the Orient, and even by some non-Bahais. But these narratives are not decisive proofs and evidences to all; the hearer might perhaps say that this account may not be in accordance with what occurred, for it is known that other sects recount miracles performed by their founders ... Therefore, miracles are not a proof. For if they are proofs for those who are present, they fail as proofs to those who are absent.[80]

Thus, the use of miracles in teaching the Bahai Faith is condemned, and there is no evidence to show that Bahais do not follow this aspect of their teachings.

Finally, concerning the "front groups" often used by destructive cults, there are no sects or denominations of the Bahai Faith. The Bahai Faith is a unified global religion, with over 5,000,000 followers world wide. The Bahai religion has established a "significant following" in over 205 countries and independent territories and is second only to Christianity in its geographic diversity.[81] Moreover, all Bahai communities

and administrative bodies are identified as Bahai (for example the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of Nashville, the Nashville Bahai Center, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of Canada, the Vanderbilt Bahai Student Association, etc.). Thus, it is fair to conclude that the Bahai Faith does not embody the qualities of secrecy and deception that are definitive of most destructive cults.

A Final Note on Cults

Generally, a cult develops around a charismatic leader and reaches its height during that leader's life time. After his death, unless another charismatic leader arises, the cult disappears. While this pattern is not exclusive to destructive religious groups, virtually no cults survive without an authoritarian leader. Thus, it is interesting to note that when Bahauallah ascended in 1892 there were approximately 50,000 Bahais; when Abdul-Baha ascended in 1921 there were approximately 100,000 Bahais; and, when Shoghi Effendi passed away in 1957 there were less than 400,000 Bahais in the world. Since 1957 -- with no living leader -- the Bahai religion has increased thirteen-fold to well over 5,000,000 Bahais world-wide.[82]

Conclusion

This paper identified five defining characteristics of a destructive cult: 1.) a leader demanding total authority, 2.) the use of "controlling" techniques, 3.) social and physical isolation, 4.) extreme or fanatical behavior, and 5.) secrecy and deception. A critical examination of the Bahai Faith showed that it did not embody any of these characteristics. The Bahai Faith also did not exhibit the same growth pattern as that of destructive cults -- i.e. while cults almost invariably reached their height during the cult leader's life time and sharply declined or disappeared after his death, the Bahai Faith experienced tremendous growth in the absence of any single leader. Therefore, the Bahai Faith should be classified not as a destructive cult but rather as a non-destructive religious organization.

Notes

[1] *The Cult Experience* (London: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 22.

[2] OCRT Home Page

[3] Refocus Home Page.
The Cult Experience, p. 4.

- [4] The Cult Experience, pp. 4-5.
- [5] OCRT Home Page
- [6] M. Scott Peck, Further Along the Road Less Traveled (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1993), p. 212.
- [7] Steven Hassans Home Page < <http://virtumall.com/mindcontrol/main.html> >
- [8] Refocus Home Page. Steven Hassans Home Page.
- [9] Isolation and salvation are discussed in point three -- "Social and Physical Isolation"; deprivation is discussed in point four -- "Extremist or Fanatical Behavior". [10] The Cult Experience, pp. 50-51
- [11] The Cult Experience, p. 4. Steven Hassans Home Page.
- [12] OCRT Home Page
- [13] Further Along the Road Less Traveled, p. 213.
- [14] The Cult Experience, p. 4.
- [15] The Cult Experience, pp. 4, 6.
- [16] The Cult Experience, p. 44. OCRT Home Page.
- [17] The Cult Experience, p. 4.
- [18] The Cult Experience, pp. 19-20.
- [19] The Cult Experience, p. 74.
- [20] Steven Hassans Home Page.
- [21] OCRT Home Page
- [22] The Cult Experience, p. 51.
- [23] OCRT Home Page.
- [24] Stephen Hassans Home Page.
- [25] Steven Hassans Home Page.
- [26] Stephen Hassans Home Page.
- [27] Further Along the Road Less Traveled, p. 213.
- [28] Stephen Hassans Home Page.
- [29] The Cult Experience, pp. 50-51.
- [30] OCRT Home Page.
- [31] Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahauallah:

Selected Letters (Wilmette: Bahai Publishing Trust, 1982), pp. 153-154.

[32] Bahauallah, Tablets of Bahauallah (Wilmette: Bahai Publishing Trust, 1988), pp. 219-223.

[33] Bahauallah, The Kitab-i-Aqdas (Wilmette: Bahai Publishing Trust, 1993), p. 37.

[34] Abdul-Baha, Will and Testament of Abdul-Baha (Wilmette: Bahai Publishing Trust, 1991), p. 11.

[35] Will and Testament, pp. 14-15.

[36] A letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, May 27, 1966, cited in Helen Hornsby, Lights of Guidance: A Bahai Reference File, Third revised edition (New Delhi, Bahai Publishing Trust, 1994), p. 320.

[37] Will and Testament, p. 11-15. A letter to of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, May 27, 1966, cited in Lights of Guidance, pp. 317-318. [38] Abdul-Baha, Promulgation of Universal Peace (Wilmette: Bahai Publishing Trust, 1982), pp. 72-73.

[39] From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, October 2, 1935, cited in Lights of Guidance, p. 62-63.

[40] See Lights of Guidance, p. 325-339.

[41] From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, November 22, 1940, cited in Lights of Guidance, p. 32.

[42] Will and Testament, p. 12.

[43] Kitab-i-Aqdas, p. 32.

[44] From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahais of the World, June 8, 1973, cited in Lights of Guidance, p. 189.

[45] Kitab-i-Aqdas, p. 193-194.

[46] Shoghi Effendi, High Endeavors, pp. 49-50.

[47] Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day is Come, p. 6.

[48] Abdul-Baha, Promulgation of Universal Peace (Wilmette: Bahai Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 454.

[49] Abdul-Baha., Paris Talks (London: The Cromwell Press, 1955), p. 143-144.

- [50] World Order of Bahauallah, p. 100.
- [51] Shoghi Effendi, Light of Divine Guidance Vol. II, p. 9.
- [52] Abdul-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 293
- [53] From the Message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahais of the World, Ridvan 1984, cited in Lights of Guidance, p. 570.
- [54] Kitab-i-Aqdas, p. 148.
- [55] Kitab-i-Aqdas, p. 240.
- [56] See Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 42.
- [57] See a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, August 22, 1939, cited in Lights of Guidance, pp. 497-498.
- [58] Abdul-Baha, Abdul-Baha in London, p. 28.
- [59] Bahauallah, Family Life, p. 386-387.
- [60] Kitab-i-Aqdas, p. 196.
- [61] Tablets of Bahauallah, p. 69.
- [62] Shoghi Effendi, Prayer, Meditation, p. 243.
- [63] The Bab, Selections from the Writings of the Bab, pp. 93-94, cited in Lights of Guidance, p. 456.
- [64] See Paris Talks, pp. 120-121.
- [65] Tablets of Bahauallah, p. 71.
- [66] Kitab-i-Aqdas, p. 147.
- [67] Bahauallah, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahauallah(Wilmette: Bahai Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 289.
- [68] Shoghi Effendi, Guidelines for Teaching, p. 323.
- [69] Guidelines for Teaching, pp. 323-324.
- [70] From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, July 15, 1952, cited in Lights of Guidance, p. 407.
- [71] Bahauallah, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf (Wilmette: Bahai Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 25.

[72] Kitab-i-Aqdas, p. 240-241.

[73] Abdul-Baha, Selections from the Writings of Abdul-Baha (Haifa: Bahai World Center, 1978), p. 125.

[74] These files can be downloaded via the internet at world-wide web addresses <ftp://ftp.bwc.org/bahai> or <ftp://oneworld.wa.com/bahai/bwc>

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[75] A letter from the Universal House of Justice to National Spiritual Assemblies in Latin America, Africa and the South Pacific, August 28, 1965, cited in Lights of Guidance, p. 39.

[76] Shoghi Effendi, Unfolding Destiny, pp. 447-448.

[77] See a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, July 13, 1981, cited in Lights of Guidance, p258.

[78] See a letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahais of the World, Naw-Ruz, 1974, cited in Lights of Guidance, pp. 251-252.

[79] Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 364.

[80] Abdul-Baha, Some Answered Questions (Wilmette: Bahai Publishing Trust, 1981), pp. 37, 101.

[81] The Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year, 1992, cited in The Bahais (Oakam: Bahai Publishing Trust of the United Kingdom, 1992), p. 5-6.

[82] The Bahais, p. 49-57.

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