

These two books, one serious and the other humorous, treat of phenomena that are mutually linked, namely cults and New Age fads, and are as actual today as they were several years ago. These two phenomena emerged into notoriety about a decade ago almost so simultaneously as to suggest a causal link, but it is not clear which is the cause and which the effect. But cause or effect, they represent an existing situation in our midst.

The two books are here reviewed together because they constitute an important challenge to Catholic formators, especially in the area of liturgical rituals and their psychological infrastructure.

Fourteen writers collaborated in writing the book on cults. To critique such a pluralistic approach, it may be helpful to adopt a norm somewhat as follows: The history of religions reveals some features that are good and other features that are not so good. The desirability to “make all things new” concretely includes the danger of innovations that are not so good. The need to “hold fast that which is good” includes the danger of holding fast that which is not so good. These two dangers are at opposite poles of a continuum in which both the old good and the new good are bounded by obsolescence at one pole and by undesirable innovations at the other pole. The two boundaries are not always clear. Clarification is hoped for through state legislation making it a crime to go beyond boundaries in order to protect the central good, both old and new. The problem is how to pinpoint the boundaries.

To solve the problem, fourteen partially overlapping approaches are attempted. Each of these analyzes courtroom reflections arising, for example, from cases brought up by parents whose children have been proselytized from their former beliefs. The reflections are mainly legalistic but also include psychological and philosophical speculations about the meanings of various terms like “brainwashing,” “coercive persuasion,” “conversion,” “deprogramming,” “destructive cults,” “mind control,” “new religions,” “religious freedom,” and similar terms. For example, if “brainwashing” is pronounced illegal and punishable by the state, does the pronouncement also apply to parents who “brainwash”
their children of their beliefs in the cults into which they have been "converted"?

There is a feeling that present legislation cannot pinpoint boundaries. But can religious freedom ever be limited by state legislation without contradiction? No, according to Lee Coleman in his article "Who Is Brainwashing Whom?" Yes, according to Robert Shapiro, provided the legislation is aimed not at the religious beliefs but at the actions of an individual insofar as his actions violate the freedom of other individuals.

However this distinction ignores psychopathic cases that have led to the adoption of what Thomas Robbins, in his editorial introduction, calls the "medical model." Furthermore Robbins affirms that this model bypasses the main issue, namely, church-state relations. A further difficulty emerges if "church" means any institution that claims to be a church. As one dramatic example, Robert Wuthnow mentions Jim Jones: could Jones claim to be a church leader and therefore free to preach mass suicide in Guyana in November 1978?

Besides the four contributors mentioned above, the other ten contributors speak more or less in the same vein and within the same continuum. All fourteen discuss specific legal cases, and the index gives a list of 54 of these. Such a list facilitates further research that may be needed in aid of legislation.

State legislation is woefully inadequate in the task of differentiating authentic religion from pseudo-religions and destructive cults. As an alternative to legislation, Henry Gordon attempts satire, incisive and humorous, in debunking occultist claims of mysticism, astrology, telepathy, psychokinesis, clairvoyance, reincarnation, and a lot of old superstitions disguised as brand new and pompously labelled "paranormal." He focuses on the smorgasbord being published by Shirley MacLaine, for this is quite typical of the new dogmas being peddled by New Age syndicates in their multi-million dollar fleecing of the gullible.

Gordon, as an entertainer in prestidigitation, is quite familiar with the tricks of amusing people in search of mystification. He knows that part of the amusement is the tacit admission that trickery is presupposed. But destructive cults do not admit trickery. They solemnly swear that this is all part of the mysterium tremendum et fascinosum that characterizes the sacred.

He divides his book into two parts and each part into three chapters. Part One is quite fascinating in content and in its racy, chatty style, besides being informative about occultist trickery. Part Two is less fascinating. It singles out various claims of MacLaine and exposes their syllogistic fallacies in a way that tends to be monotonous with overkill.
Here, his few attempts at humor fail to measure up to the satirical tone in Part One.

Anyway, Gordon's humorous style is a fitting complement to serious jurisprudence in confronting the realities of destructive cults. Both books are highly recommended to Catholic parents and educators — even today.

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