

# FINDING HUMANITY

A PODCAST SHARING TRUE STORIES OF COURAGE AND PURPOSE

## FINDING HUMANITY PODCAST EDUCATION TOOLKITS Season 3: Stuck In Transit

### EPISODE 7

### Indoctrinated: Helping Cult Members Find a Way Out | Janja Lalich

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Our goal is to share our insights, research, policy analysis and key findings with hopes to inspire continued engagement and learning around the podcast episodes and the substantial content and topics unearthed in each episode.

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### About the Finding Humanity Podcast | Season 3:

For some, fighting for change means risking it all, one's own life. As history has taught us, fighting grave injustice requires courage, perseverance and grit. In season 2 of Finding Humanity Podcast, we unpack the stories of people on the frontlines of change. People who put their bodies on the line to create an equitable and just world. [Learn More.](#)

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## EPISODE INFORMATION

**Main topics in Episode:** Cults, Alternative Religions, Escaping Cults, Deprogramming.

**Short Description of Episode:** From picking a new name to burning her belongings and spying on new members, Dr. Janja Lalich did not foresee how her life would dramatically change as a budding feminist in the 70s. Like many others, the Democratic Workers Party, a cult she joined through a study group, first appealed to her political interests. Alternative religions and occult groups have been present throughout modern history. While the number of people in cults globally is unknown, experts estimate that there are up to 10,000 cults in the United States. Even though most cults are religious, cult is a term that doesn't refer to religion at all. In this episode, we break down what cults are and how prevalent they are in our societies? We'll look at the dangers of cults and how they swell into large, powerful groups. Without physical restraint of freedom, how do cults trap their members with mental shackles, fear and abuse and more importantly, what are effective ways to help members exit a group and not feel traumatized when they start to live again in the outside world. Featuring policy and advocacy insights from experts: Dr. Janja Lalich, Professor Emerita of Sociology, California State University Chico and Founder of Cult Research and Information Center, Dr. Steven Hassan, Founding Director of Freedom of Mind Resource Center, and Dr. Suzanne Newcombe, Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at the Open University and Honorary Director of Inform, King's College London.

## Topic Overview: Cults, sects and denominations

Many common religious terms lack a generally accepted, single, current definition. This leads to confusion over the meanings of certain religious terms, such as *Christian, cult hell, heaven, occult, Paganism, salvation, Witch, Witchcraft, Unitarian, Universalist, Voodoo*, etc. A reader must often look at the context in which the word is used in order to guess at the intent of the writer.

One of the most confusing and dangerous religious terms is "**Cult**". The word is derived from the French word "culte" which came from Latin noun "*cultus*." The latter is related to the Latin verb "*colere*" which means "*to worship or give reverence to a deity*." Thus, in its original meaning, the term "*cult*" can be applied to any group of religious believers: Southern Baptists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Hindus or Muslims.

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However, the term has since been assigned at least eight new and very different meanings. The original meaning of "cult" remains positive; more recent definitions are neutral, negative, or extremely negative.

A **Denomination** is an established religious group, which has usually been in existence for many years and has geographically widespread membership. It typically unites a group of individual congregations into a single administrative body. Denominations differ greatly in the sharing of power between individual congregations and the central authority. Baptist churches have historically allowed individual churches to hold diverse beliefs. (An exception is the Southern Baptists Convention who reversed centuries of tradition and expelled some congregations over their treatment of homosexuals.) Other denominations, like the Roman Catholic Church, centralize authority, and allow congregations little freedom to deviate in beliefs, practices, or policies.

A **sect** is a small religious group that is an offshoot of an established religion or denomination. It holds most beliefs in common with its religion of origin, but has a number of novel concepts which differentiate them from that religion. However, in many countries, the term "sect" takes on the negative meanings associated with the word "cult." The two terms are considered synonyms in some cases. Many religions started as sects. One well-known example was the Nazarenes. This was a reform movement within Judaism formed by Jesus' apostles after the execution of Jesus circa 30 CE. They were largely dispersed or killed some four decades later when the Romans attacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple.

Source/Extracted from:  
Cults, sects and denominations, Religious tolerance, [link](#)

## Glossary

### Eastern cults

Eastern cults are characterized by belief in spiritual enlightenment and reincarnation, attaining the Godhead, and nirvana.

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## **Religious cults**

Religious cults are marked by belief in a god or some higher being, salvation, and the afterlife, sometimes combined with an apocalyptic view.

## **Political, racist, or terrorist cults**

Political, racist, or terrorist cults are fueled by belief in changing society, revolution, overthrowing the perceived enemy or getting rid of evil forces.

## **Psychotherapy, human potential, mass transformational cults**

Psychotherapy, human potential, mass transformational cults are motivated by belief in striving for the goal of personal transformation and personal improvement.

## **Commercial, multi-marketing cults**

Commercial, multi-marketing cults are sustained by belief in attaining wealth and power, status, and quick earnings.

## **New Age cults**

New Age cults are founded on belief in the “You are God” philosophy, in power through internal knowledge, wanting to know the future, or find the quick fix.

## **Occult, satanic, or black-magic cults**

Occult, satanic, or black-magic cults are generated through belief in supernatural powers, and sometimes worship of Satan.

## **Quick Facts & Data**

### **GLOBAL RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE:**

- Christians remained the largest religious group in the world in 2015, making up nearly a third (31%) of Earth’s 7.3 billion people. [1]
- The number of Christians in what many consider the religion’s heartland, the continent of Europe, is in decline. [1]
- Globally, Muslims make up the second largest religious group, with 1.8 billion people, or 24% of the world’s population, followed by religious “nones” (16%),

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Hindus (15%) and Buddhists (7%). Adherents of folk religions, Jews and members of other religions make up smaller shares of the world's people. [1]

- Muslims experienced the greatest natural increase among all religious groups, including Christians. [1]
- Standard lists of history's most influential religious leaders – among them Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) – tend to be predominantly, if not exclusively, male. [2]
- Many religious groups, including Roman Catholics and Orthodox Jews, allow only men to be clergy, while others, including some denominations in the evangelical Protestant tradition, have lifted that restriction only in recent decades. [2]
- Yet it often appears that the ranks of the faithful are dominated by women.
- In the United States, for example, women are more likely than men to say religion is “very important” in their lives (60% vs. 47%). [2]
- Some social scientists have argued that women are universally more religious than men across all societies, cultures and faiths.<sup>2</sup> More controversially, a few sociologists have theorized that the gender gap in religion is biological in nature, possibly stemming from higher levels of testosterone in men or other physical and genetic differences between the sexes. [2]
- Among Christians, women attend religious services more often, but among Muslims and Orthodox Jews, men attend more often. [2]
- American men generally display less religious commitment than American women, *both* genders are more religious than men and women in other economically advanced countries. [2]

Sources/Extracted from:

[1] Factank, Pew Research, [link](#)

[2] Religion Around the World, [link](#)

## Topical Background Information & Context

### WHAT IS A CULT

What differentiates a cult from a religion? Followers see themselves as believers, even disciples—not cult members. Families, law enforcement, media, and other religious leaders,

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however, rely on the word “cult” to discredit, call out, or accuse these groups. Who has the final word, and what is behind the word itself?

The world is fascinated by cults. Television series are full of references—cults are present in every genre, from comedy and crime to horror and documentary. Cults are in the headlines too, with the recent NXIVM trials capturing the world’s attention. With varying degrees of opposition, cults have been present in the society since the beginning.

## GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

Authoritarian states such as China and Russia have defined groups that have been deemed dangerous in some way to the government. These countries have either banned groups or kept them under close supervision, joining an increasing number of countries around the world imposing growing restrictions on religious freedom and government favoritism of certain religious groups. These policies are also often used to control minority groups, including the Uyghurs in China. Other democratic countries, such as France, ban religious cults like Jehovah’s Witnesses and Scientologists on the grounds that banning these groups increases religious freedom for everyone else. The U.S. made its respect for religious freedom clear while still emphasizing the necessity of adherence to certain laws.

## CULTS OR SECTS?

Sect and cult are two words which, in today’s world are considered derogatory, are omitted by many scholars. But, their usage was originally considered scholarly. Even in French, German, Italian and Spanish, this word is not really used anymore. Let’s now understand what exactly these two words are.

The word ‘Sect’ is derived from ‘secta’, a Latin word which refers to the School of thought. Sects are a part of all religions. Sects can be understood as branches of the religions. For example, Hinduism is divided into Vaishnava and Shaiva sects; Christianity is divided into Baptism and Lutherans; Islam is divided into Sunni and Shia sects.

Sects are smaller parts of larger groups and follow a particular doctrine. They have their own ideas and beliefs. Sects could also be non-religious. There are the capitalists and communists in Economics and there are the Freudians and Jungians in Psychiatry. So, sect could either refer to religious denominations or to groups that don’t have anything to do with religion at all.

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Ernst Troeltsch believed that sects were those groups that parted away with the church since they were not happy with its teachings as well as its actions. Troeltsch said they sects are small groups and are mostly composed of people belonging to the marginalized communities. Sects are headed by a leader upon whose demise the sect might decline and this is the reason why sects are short-lived.

A cult has unconventional ideologies and the members practice very different rituals. The members live isolated from society and do as their leader commands them to. The members of a cult isolate those family members that don't believe in all this in order to make them even more dependent on the cult. They also try to break them psychologically.

## **CULTS V NEW RELIGIONS**

Cult is a term that doesn't refer to religion at all, but is applied to a social movement. People have intuitive feelings about how the word cult should be used, even when an organization or movement meets the criteria of a new religion.

Both Scientology and Mormonism were new religious movements that have evolved into a general understanding or definition of a religion. However, according to Pew Research, non-Mormons in the U.S. are more likely to label Mormonism as a cult.

Scientology and Mormonism have outlived their charismatic leaders. They have openly published their beliefs as scripture. Both religions seek truth by offering its followers a roadmap for their place in the universe, along with a moral code. Those who accept the beliefs and rituals are members of the religion. But many outside consider the movement, and its followers, to be a cult. How have the two been conflated?

"The word 'cult' originally designates a practice of religious veneration and the religious system based around such veneration—for example, the cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe," says Robin Clark, a linguistics professor in the School of Arts and Sciences. "However, the word was co-opted in the first half of the 20th century by sociology, and has come to denote a social group with 'socially deviant' beliefs and practices, like a UFO cult."

Cults versus new religions is a matter of perspective, says Ori Tavor, a senior lecturer in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, who teaches a class on new religious movements. "New religious movement" is a new term from academic discourse, and is applied to religious movements from the 19th century onwards. "Remember," says Tavor,

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“that the religious landscape of the U.S. was about freedom of religion. Anyone can create a new religion, and can appeal to the government for new religion status and get protections and recognition from the government.”

What they have in common may be reason to conflate the two: a charismatic leader. Buddhism and Christianity are both named after a charismatic leader. Islam, originally called Mohammedanism, is also named after its leader. Religions and cults often follow a leader who claims divine, or at least special, access to different models of knowledge and revelations. Many are martyred. Jesus of Nazareth was famously crucified. Joseph Smith, Mormonism’s founder, was lynched, leaving Brigham Young to lead followers west.

If one factor can determine the difference between a cult and a religion, according to Tavor, it would be time. Scientology is now recognized by the state as a religion, with tax-exempt status. Mormonism was considered such a deviant form of heterodoxy its founder was lynched. Now the Mormon Church has more than 14 million members worldwide.

“It takes time for a movement to establish itself as a legitimate part of the religious landscape,” says Tavor. “A cult doesn’t have anything to do with the content of its religious ideology. It is a term to demonize a movement that is controversial. It is considered a threat to mainstream society.” NXIVM, for example, is labeled a cult of personality because, like Jonestown, it is a group that has followed a charismatic leader to its detriment.

But sometimes the state determines whether a group is a cult, and not popular culture. Falun Gong, for example, was an extremely popular Chinese religion that was labeled a cult abruptly by the Chinese government when it became so popular that its followers exceeded the number of Communist Party members. Nearly overnight, Falun Gong was designated as a cult, and something to be feared. In the U.S., religious leaders and mainstream culture act as arbiters in designating a cult, and violent acts like suicide, murder, and bodily harm drastically influence whether a group is labeled a cult.

## WHO JOINS CULTS

No particular psychopathology profile is associated with cult involvement, in part because cults, like many effective sales organizations, adjust their pitch to the personality and needs of their prospects. Although cult members appear to have a somewhat higher rate of psychological distress than nonmembers, the majority seems to lie within the normal range.

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Nevertheless, clinical experience strongly suggests that certain situational or developmental features appear to make people more receptive to cult sales pitches, including:

- a high level of stress or dissatisfaction
- lack of self-confidence
- gullibility
- desire to belong to a group
- naive idealism
- Fulfillment (the cult provides something that they are missing)
- cultural disillusionment
- frustrated spiritual searching

Individual vulnerability factors matter much more than personality type when it comes to joining or staying in a cult or abusive relationship. No one type of person is prone to become involved with cults. About two-thirds of those studied have been normal young persons induced to join groups in periods of personal crisis, [such as] broken romance or failures to get the job or college of their choice. Vulnerable, the young person affiliates with a cult offering promises of unconditional love, new mental powers, and social utopia. Today, however, increasing numbers of people in their late twenties and older are joining cult groups or getting involved in abusive relationships.

In fact, the majority of inquiries to cult information resources involve new recruits or adherents who are in their thirties to fifties, or even sixties. Still no single personality profile characterizes cult members.

## PREDISPOSING FACTORS

Most experts agree, though, that whether the joiner is young or old, certain predisposing factors may facilitate attraction to a cultic system, the success of recruitment and indoctrination efforts, and the length and depth of involvement. These factors include:

- A desire to belong
- Unassertiveness (the inability to say no or express criticism or doubt)

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- Gullibility (impaired capacity to question critically what one is told, observes, thinks, and so forth)
- Low tolerance for ambiguity (need for absolute answers, impatience to obtain answers)
- Cultural disillusionment (alienation, dissatisfaction with the status quo)
- Idealism
- Susceptibility to trance-like states (in some cases, perhaps, due to prior hallucinogenic drug experiences)
- A lack of self-confidence
- A desire for spiritual meaning
- Ignorance of how groups can manipulate individuals

A wide range of human susceptibility emerges when we combine the list of predisposing factors with the potential vulnerabilities mentioned above. The stereotype of a recruit is a young person worried about leaving college or uncertain about “facing life.

The reality, however, is that anyone, at any age — in a moment of confusion, personal crisis, or simply a life transition — may become attracted to or drawn in by a cult’s appeal. “New in town, lost a job, recently divorced, a friend or family member just died, need a career change, feel a little blue?” The unstable and anxious feelings experienced at such times make a person vulnerable, whether that person is twenty or seventy years old.

If a vulnerable person happens to cross paths with a cult advertisement or personal recruiter putting forth even a mildly interesting offer, then that ad will likely pay for itself and that recruiter will stand a good chance of making her mark. According to Michael Langone, “Conversion to cults is not truly a matter of choice. Vulnerabilities do not merely “lead’ individuals to a particular group. The group manipulates these vulnerabilities and deceives prospects in order to persuade them to join and, ultimately, renounce their old lives.”

Anyone is capable of being recruited (or seduced) into a cult if his personal and situational circumstances are right. Currently there are so many cults formed around so many different types of beliefs that it is impossible for a person to truthfully claim that he would never be

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vulnerable to a cult's appeal. Cult recruitment is not mysterious. It is as simple and commonplace as the seduction and persuasion processes used by lovers and advertisers. However, depending on the degree of deception and manipulation involved, the resultant attachments can be even more powerful.

## PRIMARY CHARACTERISTICS SHARED BY DESTRUCTIVE CULTS

the most salient concern to the general public, law enforcement and government officials today regarding groups called "cults" is what potential they might represent to do harm.

Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, who once taught at Harvard Medical School, wrote a paper titled Cult Formation in the early 1980s. He delineated three primary characteristics, which are the most common features shared by destructive cults.

**1.** A charismatic leader, who increasingly becomes an object of worship as the general principles that may have originally sustained the group lose power. That is a living leader, who has no meaningful accountability and becomes the single most defining element of the group and its source of power and authority.

**2.** A process [of indoctrination or education is in use that can be seen as] coercive persuasion or thought reform [commonly called "brainwashing"].

The culmination of this process can be seen by members of the group often doing things that are not in their own best interest, but consistently in the best interest of the group and its leader. Lifton's seminal book Thought Reform and Psychology of Totalism explains this process in considerable detail.

**3.** Economic, sexual, and other exploitation of group members by the leader and the ruling coterie.

The destructiveness of groups called cults varies by degree, from labour violations, child abuse, medical neglect to, in some extreme and isolated situations, calls for violence or mass suicide.

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## WARNING SIGNS

Some groups may not fit the definition of a cult, but may pose potential risks for participants. Here are 10 warning signs of a potentially unsafe group or leader.

- Absolute authoritarianism without meaningful accountability.
- No tolerance for questions or critical inquiry.
- No meaningful financial disclosure regarding budget or expenses, such as an independently audited financial statement.
- Unreasonable fear about the outside world, such as impending catastrophe, evil conspiracies and persecutions.
- There is no legitimate reason to leave, former followers are always wrong in leaving, negative or even evil.
- Former members often relate the same stories of abuse and reflect a similar pattern of grievances.
- There are records, books, news articles, or broadcast reports that document the abuses of the group/leader.
- Followers feel they can never be "good enough".
- The group/leader is always right.
- The group/leader is the exclusive means of knowing "truth" or receiving validation, no other process of discovery is really acceptable or credible

## FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR A SPIRITUAL ABUSE?

The international endeavour to afford the right to freedom of religion to all world citizens is essential. This right ensures that people can choose their own religion and freely participate in the practice thereof. Although the conventions on religious freedom prohibit the use of unethical coercion in order to proselytise and retain members, the enforcement of this prohibition is problematic. Underlying psychological processes that induce members in cults to engage in radical behaviour changes cannot be proved without reasonable doubt in any legal action. The conclusion reached in this article is that although - on paper - the right to religious freedom ensures freedom in the sense that people can choose their religion, it cannot ensure that worship in any religion is a voluntary act on the part of the participants.

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On the one hand, religious freedom has opened the world of religion to people; but at the same time, it has also created a vague, or "grey" area where abuse can flourish under the banner of so-called "freedom". Abuse in religious cults can be addressed by cultivating public awareness through the gathering and distribution of information on the abusive practices of these groups.

In order to establish awareness regarding the possible abuses perpetrated by religious cults, their practices must be observed and made known to the general public through information centres. Religious leaders must also be willing to participate in ensuring that their practices do not cause harm to members and their families. (Read the full article [here](#))

## **WHERE IS THE LINE BETWEEN DESTRUCTIVE AND HEALTHY?**

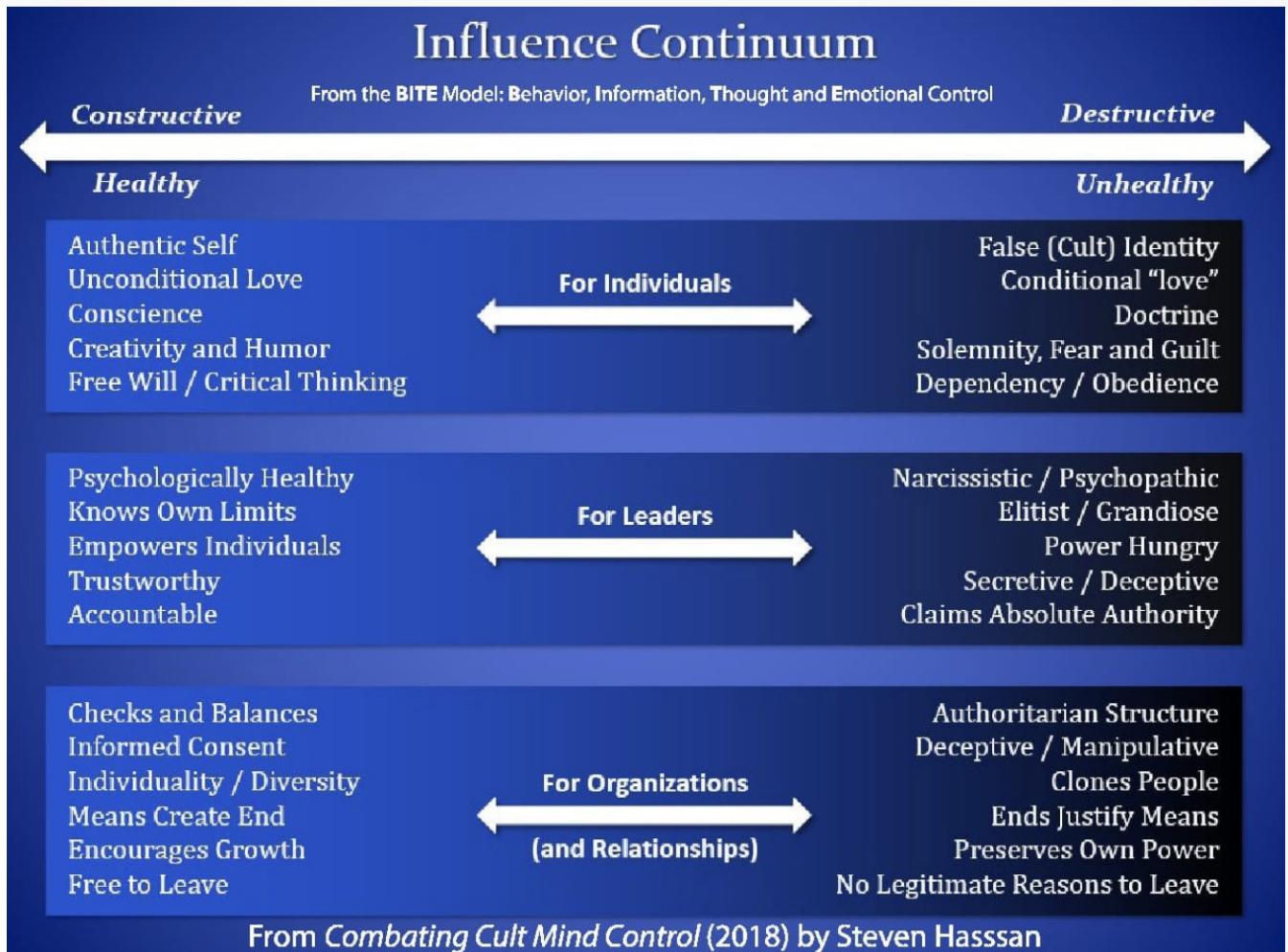
That line may be different for every person. You are the one responsible for you. It's important to emphasize that not all groups are harmful. Sometimes it's hard to distinguish whether a religion or organization is destructive or not. There is what Steven Hassan, leading cult expert and founder of Freedom of Mind Resource Center, calls an Influence Continuum, a spectrum of healthy and unhealthy influence:

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Not all churches, religions, and organizations are cults. Expressions of these groups, however, can be cultish. Instead of focusing on the faith, ideology, or belief system of a group, focus on the behavior of the people involved. Don't disregard your feelings. Determine for yourself whether the group is healthy FOR YOU.

Sources/Extracted from:  
 Differences between sect and cult, Sociology group, [link](#)  
 Cults in America, Arcgis, [link](#)  
 Who joins cults, Apologetics index, [link](#)

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Tell-tale signs, The Guardian, [link](#)  
Spiritual Abuse, Scielo, [link](#)  
Dare to doubt, [link](#)

## CULTS: TYPES AND EXAMPLES

### **CULTS: Categories**

Cults come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Not every person's experience will fit neatly into these following categories, but this list should provide some idea of the range of cults and their reach into every walk of life.

#### **Eastern cults**

Eastern cults are characterized by belief in spiritual enlightenment and reincarnation, attaining the Godhead, and nirvana. Usually the leader draws from and distorts an Eastern-based philosophy or religion, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, or Sufism. Sometimes members learn to disregard worldly possessions and may take on an ascetic and/or celibate lifestyle. Practices and influence techniques include extensive meditation, repeated mantras, altered states of consciousness, celibacy or sexual restrictions, fasting and dietary restrictions, special dress or accoutrements, altars, and induced trance through chanting, spinning, or other techniques.

#### **Religious cults**

Religious cults are marked by belief in a god or some higher being, salvation, and the afterlife, sometimes combined with an apocalyptic view. The leader reinterprets Scripture (from the Bible, Koran, Talmud, or Cabala) and often claims to be a prophet, if not the messiah. Typically the group is strict, sometimes using such physical punishments as paddling and birching, particularly of children. Often members are encouraged to spend a great deal of time proselytizing. Included here are Bible-based, neo-Christian, Islamic, Jewish or Hebrew, and other religious cults, many of which combine beliefs and practices from different faiths. Practices and influence techniques include speaking in tongues, chanting, praying, isolation, lengthy study sessions, faith healing, self-flagellation, or many hours spent evangelizing, witnessing, or making public confessions.

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## **Political, racist, or terrorist cults**

Political, racist, or terrorist cults are fueled by belief in changing society, revolution, overthrowing the perceived enemy or getting rid of evil forces. The leader professes to be all knowing and all powerful. In some cases, adherents may be more drawn to an extreme ideology rather than a leader per se. Groups tend to operate as secret cells. Often the group and/or individuals are armed and engage in violent activities, including arson, kidnapping, bombing, and suicide bombs. Such groups typically meet in secret with coded language, handshakes, and other ritualized practices. Members consider themselves an elite cadre ready to go to battle. Practices and influence techniques include paramilitary training, reporting on one another, fear, struggle or criticism sessions, instilled paranoia, violent acts to prove loyalty, long hours of indoctrination, or enforced guilt based on race, class, or religion.

## **Psychotherapy, human potential, mass transformational cults**

Psychotherapy, human potential, mass transformational cults are motivated by belief in striving for the goal of personal transformation and personal improvement. The leader is self-proclaimed and omniscient, with unique insights, sometimes a “super-therapist” or “super-life coach.” Practices and techniques include group encounter sessions, intense probing into personal life and thoughts, altered states brought about by hypnosis and other trance-induction mechanisms, use of drugs, dream work, past-life or future-life therapy, rebirthing or regression, submersion tanks, shame and intimidation, verbal abuse, or humiliation in private or group settings.

## **Commercial, multi-marketing cults**

Commercial, multi-marketing cults are sustained by belief in attaining wealth and power, status, and quick earnings. The leader, who is often overtly lavish, asserts that he has found the “way.” Some commercial cults are crossovers to political and religious cults because they are based on ultra-conservative family values, strict morals, good health, or patriotism. Members are encouraged to participate in costly and sometimes lengthy seminars and to sell the group’s “product” to others. Practices and influence techniques include deceptive sales techniques, guilt and shame, peer pressure, financial control, magical thinking, or guided imagery.

## **New Age cults**

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New Age cults are founded on belief in the “You are God” philosophy, in power through internal knowledge, wanting to know the future, or find the quick fix. Often the leader presents herself or himself as mystical, an ultra-spiritual being, a channeler, a medium, or a superhero. New Age groups, more so than some of the other types, tend to have female leaders. Members rely on New Age paraphernalia, such as crystals, astrology, runes, shamanic devices, holistic medicine, herbs, spirit beings, or Tarot or other magic cards. Practices and influence techniques: magic tricks, altered states, peer pressure, channeling, UFO sightings, “chakra” adjustments, faith healing, or claiming to speak with or through ascended masters, spiritual entities, and the like.

## **Occult, satanic, or black-magic cults**

Occult, satanic, or black-magic cults are generated through belief in supernatural powers, and sometimes worship of Satan. The leader professes to be evil incarnate. Animal sacrifice and physical and sexual abuse are common; some groups claim they perform human sacrifice. Practices and influence techniques include exotic and bizarre rituals, secrecy, fear and intimidation, acts of violence, tattooing or scarring, cutting and blood rituals, sacrificial rituals, or altars.

## **One-on-one or family cults**

One-on-one or family cults are based in belief in one’s partner, parent, or teacher above all else. Generally an intimate relationship is used to manipulate and control the partner, children, or students, who believe the dominant one to have special knowledge or special powers. Often there is severe and prolonged psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. Practices and influence techniques include pleasure/pain syndrome, promoting self-blame, induced dependency, induced fear and insecurity, enforced isolation, battering and other violent acts, incest, or deprivation.

## **Cults of personality**

Cults of personality are rooted in a belief that reflects the charismatic personality and interests and proclivities of the revered leader. Such groups tend to revolve around a particular theme or interest, such as martial arts, opera, dance, theater, a certain form of art, or a type of medicine or healing. Practices and influence techniques include intense training sessions, rituals, blatant egocentrism, or elitist attitudes and behaviors

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## **(IN)FAMOUS CULTS**

Many cults have flourished in recent decades, and changes in recruitment styles and targets have occurred. In the 1970s and early '80s, primarily young adults, either in college or some other life transition, joined these groups. At that time, cults were extremely active (and some still are) on college campuses and in places where young people congregate.

### **JONESTOWN**

Reverend Jim Jones was embraced by African-Americans after his fiery speeches on racial equality in America. From the 1950's until the end of "The People's Temple" in 1978, Jones was seen as a beacon of peace across the racial divide and a leading advocate for socialism. But when Jones moved hundreds of cult members to "Jonestown" in Guyana, where he and followers believed they could create a "socialist paradise," concerned family members garnered the attention of California Congressman Leo Ryan.

The congressman sought to investigate whether some cult members were being held against their will, as relatives suggested. When Ryan traveled to Guyana to meet with Jones, he was ambushed on a plane by the reverend's followers, and died after being shot repeatedly in the body and face.

Fearing retribution for the congressman's death, Jones led 918 followers into a mass murder-suicide known now as the "Jonestown Massacre" on November 18, 1978. Most died by drinking cyanide mixed with Kool-Aid. The reverend, however, died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

### **THE MANSON FAMILY**

Ex-convict and singer-songwriter Charles Manson was able to woo followers, especially women, into a non-religious cult that believed a race war known as "Helter Skelter" was imminent.

Manson, who described Scientology and Satanism as influential to his beliefs, told those who joined The Manson Family cult that when the African-American rebels won the war, they would be elevated by the survivors to lead the survivors in the United States. As leader of The Manson Family, Charles influenced the murders of nine people in California, including the murder of actress Sharon Tate and four others in her home. The family also was involved

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in a number of crimes, including the plotting of an attempted assassination of President Gerald R. Ford.

## **BRANCH DAVIDIANS**

Branch Davidians - Formed by charismatic leader David Koresh after his expulsion from the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Branch Davidians shared a belief that the end of the world was drawing near. Koresh, recognized often for his musical talents on the guitar, believed he was a messiah who spoke the true word of God. He also believed all women were his spiritual wives, resulting in multiple relationships with women in the cult, married and single alike.

In the end, 76 people were killed in the building. Investigators determined those who did not perish in the fire died of gunshot wounds or from being crushed when a concrete wall collapsed.

## **HEAVEN'S GATE**

Finding meaning through the cosmos and extraterrestrial life, former University of St. Thomas (Houston) professor Marshall Applewhite led dozens of people in a cult known as "Heaven's Gate." Launching the society in 1974 after a near-death experience, Applewhite and his followers believed the end of Earth was near, and that the planet was going to be "recycled." As a result, believers were prepared to leave Earth by boarding a spaceship that was trailing the Hale-Bopp Comet. But in order to leave, followers had to make the ultimate sacrifice by shedding their earthly bodies.

After drinking a mix of cyanide, pineapple juice and vodka on March 26, 1997, 39 people died, including Applewhite, in Rancho Santa Fe, California. When police found their bodies, the members all wore black clothing, matching armbands and tennis shoes. Before the group committed suicide, their website was updated to read: "Hale-Bopp brings closure to Heaven's Gate ... Our 22 years of classroom here on planet Earth is finally coming to a conclusion -- "graduation" from the Human Evolutionary Level. We are happily prepared to leave "this world" and go with Ti's crew."

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## WARREN JEFFS FUNDAMENTALIST CHURCH

Formed by leader Warren Jeffs as a breakoff sect, The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints had one fairly obvious difference from believers of the Mormon faith: its practice of polygamy.

Jeffs, who was excommunicated by the church for polygamy, watched as his church membership swelled to more than 10,000 members in Arizona, Utah and Texas. Amid allegations of ongoing and far-reaching incest and sexual misconduct with minors inside the church, federal officials raided Jeffs' Eldorado, Texas ranch in 2008. Evidence led investigators to charge Jeffs on multiple counts for sex crimes against children. He was sentenced to life in prison plus 20 years, to be served consecutively.

### IF YOU, OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW, NEED HELP TO GET OUT OF A CULT PLEASE READ:

- **How to get someone out of cult, [link](#)**
- **5 Tips for leaving a cult, [link](#)**

Leaving is the first step. Recovering is another. If you know or suspect you were/are in a destructive group and you need help, or if you're seeking help for a loved one, see our list of resources below. There are professionals and peers who want to help you make sense of what happened and recover and rebuild your life. Freedom is possible, visit e.g. [this website](#) or [this one](#) to seek useful tips.

Sources/Extracted from:

Cults, Policy perspectives, [link](#)

Cults in America, TSU, [link](#)

## Proposed Discussion Questions

- In your opinion, what makes a cult?
- Do you think the word 'cult' has a negative connotation?
- How can we avoid the potential danger of cult-like groups?
- How has the "cult" stereotype permeated today's culture?
- How has the image of religious groups changed throughout centuries?
- Why do so many cults and sects still succeed today?

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- Should there be limits to someone's right to freedom of religion?
- What is the best way to support someone trying to escape a cult?

## Additional Reading & Follow up

### Learn more about:

### Our expert guests:

#### Janja Lalic:

- Profile, Cult Research, [link](#)
- An article on how people end up in cults, [link](#)

#### Steve Hassan:

- Profile, Cambridge College, [link](#)
- Profile, Freedom of mind, [link](#)

#### Leaving cults:

- Dare to doubt, [link](#)
- Get help, Cult escape, [link](#)

## Episode Speaker Biographies

**[Main Guest Biography] DR. JANJA LALICH** // Professor Emerita of Sociology, California State University Chico // Founder, Cult Research and Information Center

Janja Lalic, Ph.D. is a researcher, author, and educator specializing in the study of closed groups, focusing on recruitment, indoctrination, and coercive influence and control. Professor Emerita of Sociology at California State University, Chico, she has been studying controversial groups and abusive relationships for 30+ years. Dr. Lalic has written and lectured extensively, has advised national and international intelligence communities on recruitment, indoctrination, and deradicalization, and has been an expert witness in civil and criminal cases. Her work has been translated into 10 languages.

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Her critically acclaimed book, *Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults* (University of California Press, 2004), is based on her comparative study of the Heaven's Gate cult, which committed collective suicide in 1997, and the Democratic Workers Party, a radical U.S.-based political cult, of which Lalich was a leading member, thus giving her first-hand experience with cultic behavior. The book elucidates her bounded choice framework and theory, a major theoretical development that offers a new and sophisticated approach for understanding the internal dynamics of cultic groups. Her book, *Take Back Your Life: Recovering from Cults and Abusive Relationships* (Bay Tree Press), is the number-one resource used by clinicians, helping professionals, and former cult members, their friends and families. Her most recent book, coauthored with Karla McLaren, M.Ed., is *Escaping Utopia: Growing Up in a Cult, Getting Out, and Starting Over* (Routledge, 2017). She also co-authored two books with renowned clinical psychologist, Dr. Margaret Singer: *Cults in Our Midst* and "Crazy" Therapies: What Are They? Do They Work? (both Jossey-Bass/Wiley). Dr. Lalich has appeared on Meet the Press, AC360, CBS Evening News, NPR's The Morning Edition, CBS This Morning, and BBC's Thinking Allowed. She has been featured in or an adviser to numerous documentaries on HBO, HBOMax, A&E, National Geographic, Learning Channel, Investigation Discovery, History Channel, STARZ, Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, and British and Japanese public television. She has been quoted in major print media across the nation and worldwide, from People to the Harvard Business Review to Harper's and The Atlantic, from the New York Times to the San Diego Union-Tribune, and Internet-based outlets such as Vice.com, Al Jazeera America.com, vice.com, and refinery29.com. Dr. Lalich may be reached at [www.cultresearch.org](http://www.cultresearch.org). **Twitter:** @Janja\_Lalich

**[Expert Biography] DR. SUZANNE NEWCOMBE** // Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at the Open University (UK) and Honorary Director of Inform, King's College London

Suzanne is the honorary director of Inform, where she has worked in various capacities since 2002. Inform is an independent educational charity which exists to prevent harm based on misinformation by bringing the insights and methods of academic research into the public domain. Inform conducts research and provides as accurate and up-to-date information as possible about new and minority religions, sects, spiritualities and associated groups. Inform was founded in 1988 by Professor Eileen Barker at the London School of Economics and has largely been supported by direct grants from the British government as well as research council and charity grants. Since 2018, it has been based in Theology and Religious Studies at King's College London. For more information about Inform's work see: [www.inform.ac/](http://www.inform.ac/). She is also a Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at the Open University (UK); for more information about her personal research and background see: [www.open.ac.uk/shn44](http://www.open.ac.uk/shn44). **Twitter:** @InformReligion

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**[Expert Biography] STEVEN HASSAN, PHD //** Founding Director, Freedom of Mind Resource Center

Mental health professional, cult and undue influence expert Steven Hassan, PhD (pronounced /hɑːsɪn/) has been working in the field of religious and political cults for more than 40 years. His expertise includes undue influence in cases of destructive one-on-one relationships, families, parental alienation, mini-cults, religious cults, therapy and self-improvement groups, professional abuse, institutional abuse, human trafficking, and hate and violent extremism. He writes and speaks out about the importance of viewing terrorist groups as destructive cults. The author of several books and peer reviewed published papers, his most recent book is "The Cult of Trump." In 1974, at the age of 19, Dr. Hassan was recruited into the Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon. After more than two years, his family successfully deprogrammed him from the cult. This experience led him to his work helping save others caught by the predatory influence of cult leaders, and gives him a unique personal perspective on the process of freeing the human mind from the effects of undue influence on individuals, families, and society. Dr. Hassan holds a Master's Degree in Counseling Psychology from Cambridge College and a Doctorate in Organizational Development and Change from Fielding Graduate University School of Leadership Studies. He is a member of the Program in Psychiatry and the Law at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Hassan is an experienced educator having served as an instructor for the Harvard Law School Trial Advocacy Workshop, as a presenter in the course Spirituality, Religion and Psychiatry in the Harvard Longwood Psychiatry Residency Training Program, and in other educational and training capacities for higher education, professional, law enforcement, governmental, non-governmental and advocacy group audiences. He is Founding Director of the Freedom of Mind Resource Center, which provides training, consulting and support to individuals who are struggling to leave a cult, and to families and organizations that are concerned about cult behaviors. He developed the Strategic Interactive Approach (SIA), as an effective and legal intervention alternative for families to help cult members, and the BITE (Behavior, Information, Thought, Emotional) Model of Authoritarian Control. [Twitter: @CultExpert](#)

**[Host Biography] Hazami Barmada |** Founder & CEO, Humanity Lab Foundation; co-Executive Producer & Host, Finding Humanity Podcast. Hazami is a social entrepreneur, thought leader, and public affairs and social impact expert recognized by Forbes as an "inspirational agent of change." She has consulted for many leading global brands including the United Nations, United Nations Foundation, Aspen Institute, and the Royal Court of the Sultanate of Oman. Among her posts at the United Nations, she served as the Coordinator for the United Nations Secretary General's World Humanitarian Summit, an Advisor to the

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first-ever United Nations Secretary-General's Youth Envoy, as a member of the United Nations SDG Strategy Hub for the launch of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Hazami has a Masters from Harvard University where she was an Edward S. Mason Fellow in Public Policy and Management. She studied social and public policy at Georgetown University and has a BA in Anthropology and Sociology. Twitter: @hazamibarmada

## PODCAST PRODUCTION ORGANIZATIONS & TEAM

**Humanity Lab Foundation** is a disruptive empathy-driven movement at the intersection of public policy and people power. As a collective of enablers, the Humanity Lab facilitates public engagement and social innovation to drive progress on human development and create an equitable and just world. Through a diverse portfolio of programs and initiatives, the Humanity Lab enhances global development systems by convening, connecting and collaborating with everyday people to solve complex challenges and drive social change. The Humanity Lab aims to: unlock human potential, break down barriers, provoke thought-leadership and knowledge sharing, facilitate partnerships, catalyze action, and democratize access to the power that shapes the world. The Humanity Lab has collaborated with a large array of partners including the Office of the President of the United Nations General Assembly, United Nations Office of Partnerships, United Nations, Qualcomm, The Elders, Warner Music, MTV and the Washington Diplomat.

**Hueman Group Media** ("HGM") is an award-winning podcast company for social change. HGM produces impactful and high-caliber podcasts for leading nonprofit organizations, purpose-driven companies and thought leaders, amplifying conversations around today's most important causes and issues — including gender inequality, climate change, racial injustice, and mental health. HGM podcasts cater to diverse, socially conscious, and deeply curious audiences. With the power of storytelling and expert-driven conversations, HGM activates listeners to take action and make a positive impact in their communities. HGM has worked with notable organizations including UN Women, The Elders, SAP, GoDaddy, CORE Response, and MIT Solve.

### Podcast Production Team:

**Ayesha Amin**, Fact-Checking, Policy, Research  
**Maverick Aquino**, Mixing, Editing, Music  
**Hazami Barmada**, Co-Executive Producer & Host  
**Diana Galbraith**, Assistant Producer & Research

**Camille Laurente**, Co-Executive Producer  
**Karolina Mendecka**, Fact-Checking, Policy, Research  
**Fernanda Uriegas**, Associate Producer

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