

# Instruction Concerning Cults and Non-Christian Religions in the Christian School Classroom

by Agatha Lubbers

*This article was originally the text for a speech given at the fall Convention of the Protestant Reformed Teachers' Institute meeting in South Holland, Illinois at the Protestant Reformed Christian School, October, 1982. At that time the Cults and Non-Christian Religions course was an elective for seniors and was a two-semester course. Since that time it has become a one-semester course and is required of all seniors during either the first or second semester of their senior year.*

I teach a course to seniors called Cults and the Non-Christian Religions. This is one of three religion courses taught at Covenant Christian High School — this is not to say that the rest of our courses are irreligious. Religion is an all-pervasive leaven that must determine the direction of every course taught in the school.

But there are certain courses in the Course of Study of a school that are more specifically and more systematically religious. These courses in the school to which I refer — Covenant Christian High School, Walker, Michigan — are courses such as Biblical History taught to all tenth grade students, Church History (Ancient, Medieval, and Modern) taught to all eleventh grade students, and Cults and the Non-Christian Religions taught to all twelfth grade students.

The burden of this paper is to show why and how a course such as Cults and the Non-Christian Religions can be taught.

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In an article appearing in the October 22, 1982 *Christianity Today*, the "Changing Face of American Religion" is described. The results of a county-by-county analysis of church membership covering 111 Christian and Jewish groups with a total of 112.5 million adherents or nearly half of the U.S. population was made public. This study is the

third of its kind in the last three decades and it reveals that the number of religious groups has increased but the rate of growth has been slower in the 1970s.

During the 50s and 60s church growth surged ahead of population growth but the 70s the population grew at a rate of 11.5% while church attendance increased by just 4.1%.

One notable exception to the rule was the Mormons with a 25.9% growth rate. The Mormons, a group we consider to be a cult, became the dominant religious group in 74 counties in Utah, Idaho, and adjacent states. Another exception was the Seventh Day Adventists, a group some will not include with the cults. The Seventh Day Adventists grew in the Grand Rapids area about 28%.

It's this kind of research that catches the eye of one who has been involved for the last several years in teaching a course such as I have taught at Covenant Christian High School about the Cults and the Non-Christian Religions.

At the outset I should admit to you that a course like the Cults and the Non-Christian Religions is not without its critics. While attending the Bible and Religion conferences sponsored annually by the Calvin College religion department, it became obvious that there was not total unanimity in the Religion department of Calvin College about the value and purpose of courses that were developed around an understanding and critique of the cults.

There are several reasons for this.

1. In the first place there are always differences of opinion about what group is a cult and what group is not a cult. One of the most notable examples of this difference of opinion concerns the Seventh Day Adventists. There are those writers who are very certain that the Seventh Day Adventists are not a manifestation of the church evangelical. They point to its stand on investigative judgment as this destroys the Scriptural doctrine of justification by faith alone. They point to the supremacy of the ideology of Mrs. White. Some of those who have left or been cast out of the Seventh Day Adventist church are its chief critics.

2. There are also those critics who contend that young people do not know the doctrines of the church and therefore they should not be expected to study the false doctrines of the cults when they need more time to understand Reformed Doctrine.

3. The third kind of criticism says that the primary concern of the Reformed Christian should be to combat the errant theologies like Arminianism and that it is a misplacement of emphasis and one's

energies to concern himself with the more obvious errors and false doctrines held by the cults.

In spite of these criticisms we contend that the purpose of all education is to give our students an understanding of their life in the world as they live antithetically against all religious groups who do not see and confess that "there is salvation in no other name given among men" than the name of Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 4:12). One can effectively teach the basic doctrines and truths of the Scripture as he contends for the faith once delivered for the saints against those who contend against the faith. It is our belief that important units of positive instruction can be developed as one seriously and systematically studies the errors of those responsible for the development of sectarian ideas.

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The decade of the 70s has been the age of the development of movements called the cults. Ronald Enroth, author of the book *Youth, Brainwashing and the Extremist Cults* was interviewed by a writer for *Christianity Today*, October, 1981. Enroth answered the question, "Why have cults found such fertile ground for growth in the U.S. in the last 25 years?" Enroth said there are at least four factors that have contributed to this development. (It should be noted that Enroth views the development of the cults from a sociological point of view.)

1. Enroth first of all pointed to the general factor of cultural upheaval and social change during the 1970s. Enroth noted that especially during the 1970s there has been no nationwide focus of thought for young adults as we had in the 1960s. The 1970s was not a time influenced so much by civil-rights advocates or anti-war movements as had been true in the 1960s. Instead young people have channeled their energies and idealism into the religious sphere.

2. In the second place Enroth pointed to what he called a spiritual vacuum and an erosion of religious knowledgeability that could be exploited by the new religious movements — particularly those with an eastern ideology or those with an extremely charismatic leader. Enroth points correctly to the fact that many young adults are spiritually illiterate and therefore they could easily be swept along into erroneous groups. The time is such that the Judeo-Christian religious and cultural base has eroded beyond repair.

3. In the third place Enroth points to the fact that the new groups appear to satisfy the basic human needs of the adherents of the new religions. There is the need for a source of authority, whether in the

form of a charismatic leader or in the form of some written source of authority. In addition there is need for community, for fellowship, for commitment, for family wisdom, and for a sense of mission and purpose. The fact that the cults and new religious groups emphasize recruitment and utilize a form of brainwashing and mind-control does not negate their emphasis and provision of the other human needs.

We would be correct in affirming that the spiritual needs are the most basic cause for the growth of religious groups, but the psychological factor is very important and is determinative. Those who ally themselves with a cult need no longer make important decisions about careers, and the concern for their daily needs such as food no longer really exists. Even the abuses in the cults can be tolerated because of the security provided by the hierarchy of the organization.

In January, 1979, I wrote an article in the *Beacon Lights*, "The Threat of the Occult." In that article I quoted the dean of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, who said, "Our generation has produced more new religious cults than any generation in the total history of the human race." At the time of the writing of that article a recent report indicated that 1,300 new and sometimes "fly-by-night" cults had come into existence between 1966 and 1979.

The November 24, 1980, *U.S. News and World Report* contained an article entitled "A Comeback for Religious Cults?" This article written on the second anniversary of the Peoples' Temple mass suicide stated, that according to sociologists who have studied group allegiance, that "full-time memberships of many new religions have leveled off or declined." However, the sociologists also found that the "sturdiest cults continue to weather the public outrage directed at new religions."

Biggest memberships are claimed by The Way, a "Christian" sect run by Victor Paul Wierwille with 100,000 or more followers. The Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, which has experienced much difficulty with the IRS, can claim the allegiance of about 30,000 and has vast monetary assets. The Hare Krishna with 10,000 in the U.S. have temples in Los Angeles and a very controversial one in West Virginia. Almost any weekend one can hear a Krishna advocate discuss his philosophic ideas on the media.

The *U.S. News*' article also quotes Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman who estimate that about three million Americans have been involved with religious cults. A more recent article in the *U.S. News and World Report*, July 5, 1982, reports that "a few of the more publicized cults may be losing members but others appear to be growing. Exact membership is hard to determine, but experts estimate the size of such

groups is now between 2 and 3 million in America.” It must be noted that when cults are referred to by the national news media they do not include groups such as the Mormons with more than 5 million members, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Christian Science movement, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses to name only a few of the more tolerated religious groups.

In my article in *Beacon Lights*, January, 1979, I wrote that we are thankful to our covenant God that our Protestant Reformed young people have not been swept along with the occult craze of our age. But we and our children are not naturally immune. We too must be alert so that we are not swept along with this craze. The armament we need is doctrinal preparedness. Our children and young people acquire this in a course of this kind.

In one of the books that I have used in my course at Covenant Christian High School, i.e., *The Mind Benders* by Jack Sparks, the author writes as follows:

The Christian Church has spoken out boldly against those who twist and pervert the truth of God. Many of the creedal and confessional statements included here still smell of the smoke of battle. They come from God’s people when they had their backs against the wall. These statements were put together with great care, some of them when the very existence of the Church was threatened. Their words are battle-trying. They’ve weathered well. Now they are brought to duty again in these current wars.

Jack Sparks in this brief statement refers to the reliability and usefulness of the Ecumenical Christian Creeds and the Confessions written by the Reformed Churches during the 16th and 17th century. The point to be noted is that strategy may change but that the basic issue of the battle never changes.

It ought to be obvious that the religious situation is of such a kind in the world and our own country that a course called the Cults and the Non-Christian Religions is justified in the Christian school curriculum. We are in this world but not of it. For our young people this means that they must be “thoroughly furnished unto every good work.” In addition they must be prepared to give an answer to every man concerning the hope that is in them. (Cf. I Peter 3:15.)

In order to understand more specifically what the content and direction of a course such as this should be, I will ask and answer four basic questions.

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I. What is the significance of the growth of the cults in today’s world?

In the first place we ought to notice that the rise of the cults is one

of the signs of Christ's coming. Jesus told His disciples that false Christs and false prophets shall arise and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch, that if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect (Matt. 24:24).

In the second place we ought to observe that today's religious deception and the outright rejection of Biblical Christianity is taught in I Timothy 4:1-2.

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly that in latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their consciences seared with a hot iron.

The same idea comes out strongly in II Peter 2:1,

But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.

More concerning the religious deception of our day is proclaimed by the apostle John in I John 4:1, 3.

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.

. . . And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God and this is that spirit of anti-Christ, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.

In the Christian school the rise of the cults must be interpreted in terms of the development of the system of anti-Christ. This does not mean that a particular individual cult be identified as *the anti-Christian system* but it does mean that it be identified as one that is associated with the spirit of anti-Christ.

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## II. What is a cult?

The *Random House Dictionary* defines a cult in several ways. In the first place a cult is a religion that is considered false or unorthodox. In the second place a cult can be understood to be a group or sect bound together by devotion to or veneration of the same thing, person, or ideal. One can therefore speak of the "Cult of Hitler." In the third place a cult can be defined as a particular system of religious worship especially with reference to its rites and ceremonies.

The fundamental idea in all of these definitions is that a cult is a false religion, humanistic and man-centered. This also means that the

cults are usually "one-man shows." The authority for their authenticity goes back no farther than their founders or leaders. Hoekema in his book the *Four Major Cults* says that all cults hold to an extra-scriptural source of authority. This extra-scriptural source of authority can be some additional extra-scriptural and contra-scriptural written material; it can also be some person or the pronouncements of that person and his colleagues.

On the basis of the definition that we have adopted particularly with respect to the cult being usually a one-man system, we can conclude that a cult is a religious group often claiming the authorization of Christ and the Bible but in actual fact being guilty of neglecting or distorting that gospel.

The Bible in the Old and New Testaments defines a cult. A cult consists of those who lead and those who follow and are like those condemned by Moses in Deuteronomy 13:1-6 and Deuteronomy 18:22. "If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder. . . . Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. . . . And that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death. . . ."

The New Testament Scriptures also refer to those who are false prophets and whose spirit one cannot trust. (Cf. again I Peter 2:1, Matthew 24:11, and I John 4:1.) Jesus says in Matthew 24:11, "And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many."

The difference between a cult and the church is that the church is the spirit-led flock of Christ. The promise of Christ comes in John 14:26 and John 16:13. "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things. . . ." "...when the Spirit of truth is come, he will guide you into all truth. . . ."

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III. Why do the cults claim to uphold and follow the Bible and why is this dangerous?

We should note in the first place that the cults in distinction from the non-Christian religions have Christian roots and are led by apostate infidels. The cults that we study with the exception of some of the cults with Eastern religious roots come out of Christianity — often Presbyterian or Reformed branches of the church. They leave the paths of orthodoxy.

Article IX of the Belgic Confession in talking about those who deny one of the cardinal truths — the Holy Trinity — as many cults do, refers to such deniers as “Jews and Mohammedans, and some false christians.” This is noteworthy because here we have a clear indication that the Christian church takes as its historic position that there are those who *claim to follow the Scriptures but are heretics*.

That which makes these false Christians so deceitful is that they have Sunday Schools, radio programs, telecasts, Bible correspondence schools, and mission societies. In all these ways they often look so much like the true church. Often these groups do not show their true colors and hide behind guarded and deceitful statements of their real doctrinal position.

It is not that the church has not received warning that this would happen. Christ warned of false prophets in Matthew 7:15, “Beware, of false prophets which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits.” Paul warned the church of deceitful workers that transformed themselves into apostles of Christ. (Cf. II Corinthians 11:13-15.) Paul in II Corinthians 4:2 speaks of those who handle the word of God deceitfully. In verse 4 of the same chapter these deceitful handlers of the word are said to have been blinded lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ should shine unto them.

Bible-professing cults such as the Way Movement International or the Jehovah’s Witnesses are sometimes difficult to detect. It is exactly because of their seeming allegiance to the Scriptures that they are difficult to detect. In fact there may be some validity to the claim made by some not so well-informed Christians that they do not know who to believe. Cults and the leaders of cults claim to be true professors of the Christian religion. It is then most important that we bear in mind the warning of John in I John 4:1, “Beloved believe not every spirit but try the spirits.”

Because a program on the radio in the name of Christ is replete with Scripture quotation does not guarantee the orthodoxy of the program or the orthodoxy of the group that sponsors the program. What does guarantee the orthodoxy of that group? Allegiance to the heart of Biblical revelation as this is properly stated in the Ecumenical Creeds and the Reformed Confessions.

In this connection it should be noticed that all heretics in the history of the Christian church have brought in destructive and damnable heresies *not by ignoring the Scriptures but by distorting and subverting the Scriptures*. It is for this reason that Peter says in II Peter 1:20-21,



“that no scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation.” Scripture came not by the will of man but by the will of God and therefore Scripture must explain Scripture.

Heretics always arise claiming they have a new revelation or that they have an inside track to the truth. They have received something that only the initiated and specially informed have. But this is not the truth that shall make us free (cf. John 8:32).

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#### IV. What must be the attitude of the Christian toward the cults?

II John 9-11 teaches us about those who deny the doctrine of Christ and what the attitude of the “elect lady” (i.e., the church of Jesus Christ) must be toward those who transgress the doctrine of Christ — i.e., the truth that shall make us free.

Usually this has been explained to mean that we must slam the door in the face of all those who devalue and destroy the doctrines of Christ. If someone comes to your home with the *Watchtower* or *Awake* magazines, mediums for doctrines of Satan taught by Jehovah’s Witnesses, you should simply slam the door in the face of that peddler of untruths. However, the books that we use in our classroom do not advocate this simplistic approach. The approach advocated in books like *Confronting the Cults* by Gordon R. Lewis; *Cults and the Occult* by Edmond C. Gruss; and *Cults and Isms* by Russel P. Spittler, to name just a few, is to attempt to reach the cultists and those involved in the occult. Edmond C. Gruss says, “This writer was also won to Christ from the Jehovah’s Witnesses as the result of the faithful testimony of his teenage friends. They were not well-trained in the Scriptures, but they did know Christ as a living reality in their lives” (p. 147).

Gordon R. Lewis in his book *Confronting the Cults*, page 10, takes the position that the church has been too apathetic and has not confronted the cults but instead has been confronted by the cults. Lewis quotes Horton Davies, who says, “The challenge of the sects is a summons to reformation. The Church of Christ has nothing to fear from the zeal and competition of the sects. She has everything to fear from her own missionary apathy and lethargy.”

Lewis challenges the church to confront the misrepresentation of the gospel and those who wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction (II Peter 3:16). Having no obvious love of the truth (cf. II Thess. 2:10) men must know that the cults deliver to them cleverly contrived counterfeits and not the message of reconciliation and redemption.

People must hear that Jesus Christ is totally other than a spiritualistic medium as the Spiritualists say, and that Christ is certainly not the first successful Christian Science practitioner, and most surely Christ is not the archangel of Jehovah's Witness theology.

Although we are not all ordained missionaries and therefore preachers of the gospel, it is true that every Christian is in his own station in life "set for the defense of the gospel of Grace" (cf. Phil. 1:17). Every Christian is exhorted by the great apostle Peter to "be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh a reason of the hope that is in him with meekness and fear" (I Pet. 3:15).

Among the followers of the leaders of the cults there are sworn heretics. Advocates of the ideology of the cults who place their trust in an extra- and contra-scriptural source of authority, who deny justification by faith alone, who claim that the cult is an exclusive community of the saved, who claim that Christ is not really God, who devalue and change the doctrine of Christ, and who claim that the members and leaders of the group have a central role in bringing to a conclusion all things as they now exist, are apostates and infidels. They are those servants of Satan who formerly claimed to be sworn allies of Christ but who have crucified the Son of God afresh (cf. Heb. 6:4-6).

This does not mean, however, that we simply ignore the cults. We have a responsibility to know and to judge the error of those committed to heresy and falsehood and if possible to be assistive in converting them from the error of their way.

The apostle Paul assured Timothy, the preacher in wicked Ephesus where evil Demetrius lived and where others had been in the snare of Satan, that God will give repentance and recovery out of the snare of the devil to some who are taken captive by Satan at his will (II Tim. 2:25-26).

Mere man cannot change a fanatical cultist but the Holy Spirit can. He, who converted and changed fanatical Saul into the missionary Paul, does not quake at the sight of a cultist.

Gordon R. Lewis writes as follows in *Confronting the Cults*, page 11-12,

In conclusion we may say, "The veritable tidal wave of strange cults that is now swirling alarmingly across the world" is one of the greatest challenges to orthodox Christianity today. That is the judgment of Philip Edgcumbe Hughes who includes with theological relativism, the ecumenical movement, and reunion with Rome, "The cultic hordes."

From *Christianity Today*, September 11, 1961, the chairman of the International Association for Reformed Faith and Action is quoted:

If this satanic assault on the unique gospel is to be repelled it will only be, humanly speaking, as a result of penetrating study of the teaching and practices of the cults and a counter-attack in depth, not merely exposing their spurious and deceitful pretensions, but piercing their armour with the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, and by God's grace reclaiming through the trumpet call of the genuine gospel many who have been deluded by their falsehoods.

Although a concerned approach may seem to be contradictory to what II John 9-11 says, this is not the case. A concerned approach is not to be confused with support for the cults. In John's day itinerate teachers were not given salaries and to care for them by giving them shelter and food and by giving them hospitality was tantamount to sharing or supporting their deceptive work. Christians may not do this with respect to cults today either. Christians should not give money or goods to cultists.

However, patiently seeking to help them understand the error of their way so that they may understand and by God's grace receive the gospel in no way aids or abets their cause.

In all this instruction, the Christian teacher must remember the words of the apostle Paul who said in II Timothy 3:13-17,

But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived. But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

Remember it is the sovereign, free grace of God that we are what we are. Our weapons in the battle of faith are described in II Corinthians 10:4, "They are not carnal, but are mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds."

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