

# Conference in Italy studies cults, and 'anti-cult' movement

by Claudio Rossi

When we hear about the troubling proliferation of cults, our minds run perhaps to strange groups of youths with shaven heads, dressed in saffron tunics, who march through our streets in noisy parades, beating tambourines and obsessively repeating nonsense syllables. Or perhaps we think of the disturbing reports about horrible ritualistic crimes that appear on the police blotters.

These aspects are only the tip of the iceberg, the parts that most strike the popular imagination. The phenomenon of cults, or alternative religious movements, as they are defined by specialists, is very complex and variegated; and what may seem innocuous is not always so.

Recently, a leading expert, Prof. Remi Hoeckman, director of the Center for Research and Coordination of the International Federation of Catholic Universities, while stressing that the "numeric importance of the cults must be kept in mind while not overestimated," also noted:

The last 25 years have constituted in the West an authentic spiritual flowering, which has rapidly given rise to a series of religious or pseudo-religious groups and practices. This in the long term could generate transformations and perhaps even certain processes of *disintegration* for society and for the Church.

Such statements are not made lightly. The survival of a civilization is not a simple static event. For a society to survive, its culture has to be transmitted from generation to generation, and hence every generation must be capable of rediscovering, for itself, those principles of spiritual and scientific truth that make up the foundation of that civilization, as well as a correct relationship between man and nature. The active nature of this process, the education of new generations by "profound and impassioned concepts of nature and man," in the words of the poet Shelley, is precisely that which requires the capacity to identify and value what makes man like God.

The spread of relativism in religion and of anti-Christian ideologies in society is a threat for civilization insofar as in perverting God, man, too, is perverted.

The gravity of the problem merits constant reflection, and in the Catholic world has been the subject of intense study. Already in 1984 the Secretariat for the Union of Christians had begun a study of the presence and activities of cults, to which the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of all the continents contributed. In 1986, four departments of the Holy See collaborated to draft a provisional document on "The Phenomenon of the Cults, or New Religious Movements, Pastoral Challenge," in an attempt to give an overview of the complex phenomenon.

During this period, at the impetus of Msgr. Giovanni Marinelli, the Group for Research and Information on the Cults (GRIS) was formed, a Catholic association made up of priests, religious, and laymen which operates within the Roman Catholic Church, to respond to the cult phenomenon. Its purpose is to gather and study information about alternative religious movements and to analyze the appropriate pastoral means to both prevent and deal with this challenge. On Nov. 18-19, 1989, GRIS held a convention in Foggia, Italy on the topic "Let Us Give Reason for Our Faith."

## A pastoral response

Msgr. Giuseppe Casale, the archbishop of Foggia, set the stage for the discussions in such a way as to avoid ascribing to the cults more powers than they really have, but also to set the framework for preventing the "disintegration of society and the Church":

Above all we must know our own Faith better. At the root of secularization, even before there is open and convinced hostility toward religion, you find a kind of religious illiteracy. Only if one pays attention to this fact, can one understand why many Catholics are ill-prepared and receive the proposals of cults in an uncritical manner. Therefore this conference invites all of us to make ourselves capable of giving reason for our faith.

He said that Catholics must learn to confront the fundamental problems of the destiny of the soul, the resurrection of the body, and the ultimate meaning of life, to which the cults give a solution which satisfies insofar as it is simple—in fact, often simplistic.

The new religions, together with the growth of indifferentism and practical atheism, are a sign of the times: a sign which calls us back to the great task of our mission, not only in faraway lands, but in the secularized West itself, such that the Faith may again be known and loved. And it must be known in order to love it, because one cannot love that which one does not know.

The monsignor asserted that only those who live the Faith

as certainty, and see in Christ and in his word the source of salvation, can escape the trap of the relativistic Christian for whom all religions are equal. Only the certainty of the Faith can give an answer to projects of "unification of all religions which pervades the world of the new religiosity as well as certain occultist and masonic-type circles":

I think that this relativistic attitude is closely tied to the *collapse of metaphysics*, linked to a dominant historicism which does not want to refer to an objective, ontological criterion of truth, but which sees everything in the flux of history.

Doubtless, he continued, although we see Christians who happily go around believing in reincarnation, perhaps without understanding its implications, we also witness the impoverishment of the capacity of reflecting on ideas that cannot be reduced to a few slogans. And it is perhaps on this ground of simplistic thinking that the answers given by the cults can flourish.

### **The danger of the anti-cult movement**

But to face the problem seriously, first we must pinpoint the criteria for distinguishing cults from churches properly so-called. Attorney Massimo Introvigne, author of a forthcoming book on this subject, stressed the bias of the criteria of sociological or psychological analysis (the use of techniques of mental manipulation, fanaticism, etc.). In particular he exposed the danger represented by the secular anti-cult movement.

The idea that one can distinguish between various types of religious experience *only* on the basis of psychological criteria has been revealed to be completely wrong, even in experiments where the exclusively psychological aspects of the diaries of some Carmelite nuns and some Hare Krishnas are compared. Introvigne observed:

This does not mean that there are no criteria for distinguishing the experience of the Carmelites from that of the Hare Krishnas, but simply that these criteria are rather of a doctrinal order, and that the idea is a total myth, that you can completely take away the doctrine and find parameters by which, without knowing what they believe in, what they think, and what God they turn to, you can still judge if their experience is good or bad.

The American anti-cult movement seems to have become an instrument that threatens freedom of thought and of religion, he suggested:

An American anti-cult group, the *American Family Foundation*, which also publicizes the books of the GRIS, publishes in its newspaper an article which says

that that new catechumens use the same methods as the Unification Church of the Reverend Moon. In my opinion this is not true at all and demonstrates the danger of these approaches which are of an external, and psychological type.

We may add, organizations like the American Family Foundation, the Cult Awareness Network, or Citizens Engaged in Reuniting Families claim to use "deprogramming" techniques to save youths who have been brainwashed. What is worrying, though, is that the psychiatrists who take part in this are frequently the very same ones who 30 years ago took part in those experimental projects for spreading psychotropic drugs, out of which precisely those cults they now claim to combat, emerged. Moreover, their techniques of "deprogramming" are the very same techniques of mind manipulation used in brainwashing. Hence Introvigne's fear is well founded, when he states that the anti-cult movement considers as a cult anyone who does not accept relativism and insists

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on believing, even in the religious field, in *one* truth. Also well founded was Monsignor Casale's concern when, in announcing that a conference would be held in 1991 in the United States on the anti-cult movement, he stated that "the system of criteria of the anti-cult movement is extremely dangerous, because the behavior they want to be banned by the public authorities is described in terms so vague as to leave ample room for arbitrariness in application. Just think of all this in the hands of dictatorial governments."

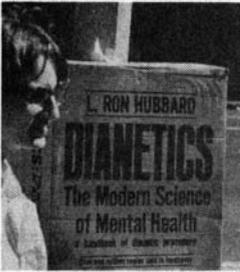
Indeed, it is symptomatic that these "anti-cult" groups have acted to repress political dissent and have played a key role in the persecution of the political movement of Lyndon LaRouche in the United States.

### **What is a cult?**

So the initial question remains open: What is a cult? Introvigne believes that history helps to clarify this. Introvigne, following the papal teaching of *Reconciliation and Penitence*, underlines that the Christian vision of the world and history has been denied in the course of a process and that by retracing the stages of this process we may discover



Philip Ujanowsky



Stuart Lewis



Matthew Moriarty

Three styles of paganism. Above, Hare Krishnas; left, a Scientology recruiter; right, a Gaia display at the "Earth Shrine" in New York's St. John the Divine cathedral.

the route by which the cults have arrived.

The Christian vision presupposes a great framework of theological reference which includes five fundamental elements. 1) The cosmos which has a sacred and mysterious dimension, which reveals its character as created. 2) The religious sense, the question that arises in man before this mysterious dimension of the cosmos. 3) God, as the unique and only adequate response to the question that arises in man. 4) Christ as the way and necessary mediator so that man, despite his sin, can find in God the response to that question which arose in him before the world. 5) The Church as the place which permits man to encounter Christ and find the answer to his question.

Introvigne said that the steps of the denial of the Christian vision started from the fifth point, the denial of the Church's role, which took place with the Reformation and especially with the *radical reformation*, to arrive at the rejection of Jesus Christ:

Thanks to the Enlightenment-inspired Deist out-

look, the search for alternatives to Christianity becomes overt with the French Revolution. This was also documented by Marxist historian Albert Mathieu who, apart from economicist categories, shows that the search for a new religion is one of the primary stimuli of the revolution.

Starting from this quest, many Westerners not only study Oriental religions, as in the past, but now convert to them, Introvigne pointed out.

There also exists a new religiosity which is both Deist and which reserves some role to Jesus Christ, but not his proper role because, either they don't consider him God, or in any case, they don't recognize him as the only Lord. I am here thinking not just of religions that bring together Oriental and Western elements, like Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy, but also of the vast influx of various masonic currents which are seldom discussed, but with which whoever wants to study the history of the new religiosity in the West will have to come to terms sooner or later.

The next stage of this process is that of denying God's role in the response to the question of the sacred which arises from inquiring about the mystery of the cosmos, he said:

Thus there arose an entire family of new religions which struggle to be called religions and which in effect propose an articulated system of relations between man, the world, and the sacred, but where God either does not exist or has a role that could be considered insignificant. This happens, for example, in Scientology, where one does speak of a God who, however, has no importance in the system.

This process of abandonment of the Christian conception of the world and of history shows a singular parallelism between cults and fascist ideologies. Thus it is that today the secularist ideology, of which the anti-cult movement is an expression, proposes to Catholics an alliance in the name of reason, against the cults' irrationalism and fanaticism, Introvigne said. But the cults themselves, on the other hand, put themselves forward as allies of the Catholics in the struggle against atheism and secularism. The picture is even more complicated, and the well-founded criticisms of the anti-cult movement must not be turned upside-down into a paradoxical pro-cult movement, which is the last thing Catholics need:

These are the two poles between which the Catholic who has formed an idea of what "cult" means, is called upon to find a balance. But this is not a problem that arose with the invasion of the cults in recent years, because our divine Master tried to tell us something

not so different when he invited us to be as pure as doves but at the same time as prudent as serpents. (Matt. 10,16)

### **Jehovah's Witnesses—worse than they seem**

Much of the GRIS convention was concerned with the Jehovah's Witnesses, the most widespread cult in Italy, where it has 160,000 preachers. Hardly any Italian has escaped encountering the hawkers of *Awake!* and *Watchtower*, and from time to time they crop up in the press, when some tragedy results from their refusal, on religious grounds, to take blood transfusions. Few, however, know their doctrine well enough to understand why—other than their periodic and always wrong predictions of the coming of the Judgment Day—the Jehovah's Witnesses so virulently attack the Catholic Church.

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For one thing, they fiercely oppose the idea of the Trinitarian nature of God. Like the oldest heresies, they deny the fact that Christ, while being truly man, was also truly God. In the Catholic conception, shared by other mainstream Christian churches, God is not just our Father, but is a Father who loves us to the point of becoming incarnate, making himself man, and dying, humiliated, on a cross, for our salvation. He became man to make us like him. The denial of this fact and this idea brings on that passivity in the face of this world's injustices which is evident in the Jehovah's Witnesses. They eliminate the constant intervention of God into human history, to create a society which can know God's will only through the authoritative and unquestionable interpretation of the Watchtower Society's board of directors.

During the convention, the basic boast of the Jehovah's Witnesses—Walter Farneti's statement that "the only basis of our doctrine is the Bible as it is"—was demolished. Msgr. Lorenzo Minuti, the chairman of GRIS in the region of Latium, who has prepared a radio series on this subject, explained:

This is a fraud. He should have said, "The only basis of our doctrines is the Bible as it *has been adapted by us.*"

Monsignor Minuti gave numerous examples of the way in which the Jehovah's Witnesses change the Bible—changes which are almost always nearly imperceptible, but each of which forms the basis for a Jehovahist doctrine. Minuti explained that the GRIS is basing itself rigorously on the Jehovahists' own texts so as to be irrefutable. Let's take one case in the words of Monsignor Minuti:

In the Epistle to the Colossians the Jehovah's Witnesses find a way to demonstrate that Jesus is not God. In the first chapter, verses 16-20, St. Paul says, referring to Christ, "all things were created by him," repeated five times, and they translate, "all other things." Why? When I object to this addition they respond, "But why does this make such a big impression on you? According to you what value does this 'other' have?" So I give my interlocutors an example. If I say to them that "You and the other Mormons use the Bible," they immediately object, "Oh, no! You are trying to make us Mormons." . . . You asked me what importance it has to add *others*, and you have figured it out for yourselves. It is important because it is different to say with St. Paul "all things were created by him," because there the Lord is on the one side, and things, clearly distinguished, on the other. It is different to say "all the other things were created by him." Thus Jesus has become one of the other things. This is so that you can say, there, he is a creature, he is not God.

"But you are saying this." No, it is not I who say this. If you take the little book, *Let Us Reason*. . . . After citing the verses of Colossians they write: "Thus it is indicated that even He is a created being, part of creation." Sure, *thus*. It is true, *thus*, it is indicated. And with just this adverb, *thus*, changing the Bible, one demonstrates that Jesus is not God but a creature. But if the text of the Colossians is respected, you cannot prove that Jesus is a created being, part of creation.

We document that the Bible in the New World translation is no longer the Bible, because there are so many such alterations, additions, and subtractions, albeit imperceptible.

### **Ecologism, paganism, New Age, and satanism**

A very timely theme was addressed by the speech of Giuseppe Ferrari, national secretary of GRIS, on the influx of cults into the dominant cultural parameters of society:

It appears that both faith and reason have retreated, leaving open a kind of no man's land. All this has the

tendency to cause there to be created in many people's minds an attraction, albeit naive, toward cults or alternative religious movements which mix, without much subtlety, *ecology*, *naturism*, faith, morality, esotericism, and occultism, according to more or less utopian or millenaristic perspectives.

The pernicious nature of ecologism had also been observed by Monsignor Casale in a conversation with this author: "A nature without man, I don't know what good it would be. A man who destroys nature destroys himself and his habitat. We must always carry out ecological actions which have man as their center, which do not mistrust man nor idolatry nature."

In fact it is evident in many cases that the ecologist movement feeds on a pagan philosophy which goes back to the mystery cults and especially the idolatry of Mother Earth. Exemplary in this regard is the *Gaia* theory, which considers Earth as a living being, and which was developed by James Lovelock for NASA in the research program about life on Mars. The religious implications of *Gaia* were clarified by Lovelock himself in an interview in *Orion Nature Quarterly*:

Gaia is Mother Earth. Gaia is immortal. She is the eternal source of life. She is surely a virgin, she does not need to reproduce herself as she is immortal. She is certainly the mother of all of us, including Jesus. . . . Gaia is not a tolerant mother. She is rigid and inflexible, ruthless in the destruction of whoever transgresses. Her unconscious objective is that of maintaining a world adapted to life. If we men hinder this objective we will be eliminated without pity.

Even Stephen Schneider, one of the main propagandists of the so-called greenhouse effect, stated in the 1988 *Yearbook of Science and the Future* of Encyclopedia Britannica, that "Gaia seems to be more of a religion than a science." Lovelock is a self-confessed member of the Lindisfarne Community, affiliated with the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, whose current bishop, Paul Moore, in 1977 ordained a lesbian, Marie Ellen Barrett, who had told *Time* magazine that it was her homosexual relations that gave her "the strength to serve God."

This background highlights the depth of Ferrari's observations on the danger of the New Age cults:

In society are manifested, among various tendencies, some which are clearly directly toward the expulsion of God from human thought. . . . Some tend clearly to replace the Christian God with pagan and orientalizing beliefs. In fact some scientists, called neo-agnostics, are inspired by a pseudo-religious kind of scientific knowledge of esoteric type.

These philosophies of "weak reason" and these sciences which have wandered out of their own boundaries open the way to attitudes and beliefs which are strongly irrational and paganizing—so much so, that behind the spread of the so-called *New Age* movement there is an ideology permeated by philosophical and scientific thinking of the sort just mentioned. This movement, which is unstructured, without a centralized organization, formed by a manifold composition of groups which are structurally independent of each other, is mainly attracting people from the middle and upper classes. For the New Age, the world as such is something divine, and whoever knows its laws can reach harmony with it. Jesus Christ is neither the Creator nor the Savior of man, rather man must and can save himself, discovering divinity in himself and becoming God himself.

Ideologies of this sort, which in some cases lead to satanic practices, can today be encountered in various groups which appear to have little in common. . . . We witness the revival of a great number of mystery cults in which divinities such as Dionysius, Osiris, Isis, Mithra are honored and worshiped, and the rise of gnostic beliefs. This phenomenon, however, sometimes attempts to reconcile irrational cults of this sort with Christian beliefs. . . .

Mystery cults and gnostic beliefs have a pantheistic vision of divinity and tend toward more of a physical than a moral union with it; moreover in these beliefs salvation is substantially a conquest of the intellect. Rationalism—which is no more to be confused with reason than pneumonia with lungs—involves for some thinkers the attempt to give value to mystery and gnostic cults, bringing noble and beautiful aspirations into them, presenting them on a plane of the highest mysticism.

On the other hand, the massive harm to humanity caused by the neo-paganism by which Nazism was inspired, is still today before our eyes. In his Apostolic Letter "On the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Beginning of World War II," John Paul II reminded us that "the new paganism and the systems connected to it certainly ruthlessly attacked the Jews, but likewise Christianity, whose teachings had formed the soul of Europe." He went on to make it clear that both Marxist dogma and Nazi paganism allied against Christianity, unified by the fact of being "totalitarian ideologies, with a tendency to become substitute religions."

These are observations that ought to be attentively meditated not only by believers, but by all men and women of good will, if we want to understand that cults are not a marginal phenomenon of shantytowns, but a very real threat to civilization.