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You May Think You're Immune to Cult Thinking, but We're All Susceptible

Times of societal upheaval or [rapid social change](#) tend to generate new religious movements, and what are often called cults. The English Civil War in the 17th century roughly coincided with the emergence of Puritanism, with its sub-denominations including the Pilgrims. Similarly, the US Revolutionary War and national independence kicked off the [Second Great Awakening](#) (1790s-1840s), with the rise of an evangelical Protestant majority in antebellum America, along with new denominations and social reform organizations. The US Civil War coincided approximately with the founding of the Southern Baptist Convention, the rise of Mormonism, and the first appearance of Buddhist temples in the country. The 20th century, with its rapid industrialization and two world wars, saw a [bewildering variety](#) of new religious movements burst upon the scene, ranging from Assemblies of God to Transcendental Meditation, the Unification Church, and Scientology.

As documented in Post Carbon Institute's recent report, "[Welcome to the Great Unraveling](#)," humanity is on the cusp of unprecedented social and ecological turmoil. Climate change, resource depletion, and failing ecosystems will likely lead to disruptions in availability of food and water. Supply chains will be imperiled and economies will shrink. Human migration will increase. Historically high levels of economic inequality will fuel more political polarization. Faced with so many deepening challenges, people will demand explanations and answers. With the existing authorities fixated on maintaining the status quo and therefore unable to offer sufficient relief, many people will look elsewhere for new ways of understanding and responding to burgeoning problems.

For the past few decades, the United States has been overproducing elites and elite aspirants (e.g., billionaires and holders of law degrees). [As Peter Turchin and his colleagues have shown](#), throughout history people with frustrated elite aspirations sometimes become religious, political, or ideological entrepreneurs, drawing followers from the increasingly disgruntled general populace. These anti-establishment leaders may seek authoritarian power by providing their followers with a sense of having special knowledge, and of being members of a vanguard of "chosen ones" who will return society to a lost golden age of virtue and plenty.

If we are likely to see a surge in religious and secular cults in the years ahead,

it's worth spending a few minutes to consider: what should we watch out for in order to avoid being swept up in cultic thinking? What can we learn from history and sociology about what Turchin calls "[end times](#)"? And, is cultic thinking the only alternative to dysfunctional mainstream institutions and worldviews?

What's a Cult?

The words *cult*, *culture*, and *cultivate* all derive from the Latin word *cultus*, which refers to anything over which we toil. For scholars of early religions, a cult is a human activity that involves ritual and ceremony—which “cultivate” the human spirit and sense of community. However, in the modern world, *cult* has come to mean something more specific. Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad, in their useful book [The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power](#) (1993), defined cults as “groups with an authoritarian structure where the leader’s power is not constrained by scripture, tradition, or any other ‘higher’ authority.”

I have some personal experience to draw upon in this regard. From 1978 to 1991 I was a member of a spiritual organization that I’d prefer not to name (you’ve probably never heard of it anyway). It operated 12 intentional communities and dozens of communal households scattered through the US, Canada, England, France, and South Africa. The communities featured organic farms and geodesic domes. Bright, idealistic young people were attracted by the promise of changing the world by changing consciousness. We were living a “[Whole Earth Catalog](#)” lifestyle, but with added layers of quirky spirituality and top-down management. It wasn’t one of the most toxic of cults: people who chose to leave weren’t hounded or persecuted. Nevertheless, one man stood atop the pyramid of power, other subordinate male leaders had great privileges, and everyone was expected to regard the main leader’s weekly pronouncements as revealed truth. We believed that we had special knowledge that set us apart from the rest of humanity. And, as is the case in most cults, we were repeatedly told, “this is not a cult.”

My cult experience was not without its rewards. Through it I met my future wife, as well as many good friends I still stay in touch with. I had a satisfying sense of being part of a group that had visionary goals. And the group’s leaders nurtured my aspirations for writing and public speaking.

The main subjects I was researching and writing about in those days were world mythology and world religions. I began by looking at these subjects through the lens of the cult’s teachings. But after a couple of years of doing this I began to realize that, where our cult’s beliefs were unassailably true and valuable, they weren’t particularly original (they roughly corresponded with what Aldous Huxley called the [Perennial Philosophy](#)); however, where our cult’s beliefs were clearly original (e.g., in claiming that our leader was a reincarnation of a prominent biblical figure), they were often of questionable validity or usefulness. I was also growing weary of the group’s authoritarian structure and practices.

And so, in January 1992, my partner Janet and I packed up what little we owned and left. Ever since then, I’ve been hyper-aware of cults and cult-think.

The Cult Spectrum and the Conspiracy Dynamic

While actual cults (in the sense that Alstad and Kramer defined them) are relatively rare, cultic thinking is everywhere. The modern world is full of authoritarian institutions (including the military, many businesses, and most religions), and some expend considerable effort to control people's perceptions and thoughts. Entire professions are dedicated to the goal of winning a cultic following for commercial brands or political parties. Further, many people—whether due to their upbringing or some still-unidentified genetic trait—have a greater tendency than others either to follow leaders unquestioningly, or to seek unquestioning followers. Some religions operate as cults, especially in their early stages of formation, when founders have immense power. Indeed, as American sociologists Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge commented in their influential book [*The Future of Religion*](#) (1986), “In the beginning, all religions are obscure, tiny, deviant cult movements.” But even after a religion has established checks on the power of its clergy, individual churches or temples can become cultish.

At the core of cultic thinking is a social power dynamic between leader and followers. The leader provides an explanation of the world that resists critical examination. Belief in, or rejection of this explanation establishes an in-group and an out-group. Good and evil are then defined in terms of the interests of the in-group. Followers are encouraged to surrender their critical thinking abilities. Cult leaders typically show narcissistic personality traits, while followers may exhibit low self-esteem, or may just be motivated by a desire to belong to something larger than themselves.

There's a relationship between cults and what are often called conspiracy theories (I use the term reluctantly, as many conspiracies throughout history are well documented). Every society has a dominant worldview: in Europe during the Middle Ages, that worldview was determined by the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church; today's mainstream worldview is far more complicated, and it's largely shaped by science and commercial interests rather than by a single religion. Because our dominant worldview is constructed and supported by armies of experts, as well as by the formal power structures of society (political and economic institutions), it tends to be robust and resilient. But all worldviews have blind spots, and, partly because challenges to the dominant view are usually systematically discouraged, more blind spots tend to accumulate over time. Eventually a big blind spot can no longer be ignored, and either the dominant worldview changes, or society fractures, as many people abandon the mainstream and seek novel ways of thinking and living.

At first, the alternative beliefs that cognitive rebels adopt aren't supported by experts or powerful institutions, so they're not as robust as the dominant narrative, and they always have their own blind spots. Indeed, in some instances these new beliefs are complete fabrications with no factual validity. So, most cults disappear fairly quickly. But some manage to create enough social “glue” so as to persist long after their founder's demise, even if some of their beliefs are highly questionable.

Conspiracy theories are not the same as cults, but the two phenomena often coexist. Would-be cult leaders frequently adopt conspiracy theories, or invent them, so as to have an ideological basis for attracting followers. People who

are aware of society's blind spots are often attracted to would-be cult leaders, because the former need a new worldview to replace the flawed one they are reacting against, and the latter fill that need.

What I'm describing is part of the process of cultural evolution. Conspiracy theories (in the generalized sense of alternative narratives) and cults are products of spontaneous cultural mutation; gradually they are winnowed out by natural selection, and the eventual result is a new dominant worldview that may endure for decades or centuries. But times when the dominant narrative is collapsing and a new one hasn't yet formed can be messy and confusing. In the modern world of social media, the process of worldview breakdown and narrative mutation is speeding up and intensifying.

Cults Galore: Take Your Pick

The modern dominant worldview's blind spots are highly contested. Name nearly any major area of interest (politics, economics, science, or public health), and it is possible to point to disputes that are deepening to the point where they threaten to divide society into armed camps—often quite literally.

One blind spot I've [written about extensively](#) is society's acceptance and promotion of economic growth. The expansion of global industry inevitably leads to resource depletion and the destruction of ecosystems, and so it will surely be limited by Earth's bounded capacity to yield minerals, timber, water, and other essential raw materials. Yet mainstream economists remain growthist diehards, and "[degrowth](#)" alternative economic theorists are regarded by the authorities as dangerous cultists.

In this instance, society's blind spot is so huge and critical that it is leading to environmental, social, and political catastrophe. And I happen to agree with the proponents of degrowth (even though the likelihood of their diagnosis and prescription becoming the new mainstream is exceedingly low, at least in the near term).

But there are plenty of instances where alternatives to the dominant view are silly or repulsive. Here's an example: for decades, as a result of bipartisan Congressional gridlock, the US has failed to implement a reasonable, fair immigration policy. As a result, a large and poorly regulated flow of documented and undocumented migrants is exacerbating political tensions within the country. Because [recent migrants' political views](#) tend to align more with one of the country's political parties (the Democrats), that party has sought to win migrants' votes. So, the other party (the Republicans) is toying with [Great Replacement](#) theory as a way to solidify support from native-born Euro-Americans. Great Replacement theory starts by pointing out real demographic trends; but tying these trends to a hypothesized secret, malevolent plot to replace white citizens with migrants is pure hokum, a full-on conspiracy theory. Still, it pretends to fill a blind spot and plays to a voter base.

Politics in the US have become far more cult-like in recent years. And that's not due just to the rise of conspiracy theories like the Great Replacement. During stable times, politics tend to be driven by institutions seeking competent leaders and ways to adapt to a changing economic and geopolitical terrain. But, in times of greater stress, politics often center more on

personality rather than policy. Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini were leaders whose support flowed largely from personality. Donald Trump is cut from the same cloth, and his rivals for the Republican presidential nomination in 2024 struggle to overcome the personality gap: just proposing Trump-like policies doesn't seem to gain them traction.

One of the features of leadership by personality, not policy, is the tendency to promote Big Lies. In his book *Mein Kampf* (1925), Hitler described how the public can be induced to believe a colossal falsehood simply because they cannot accept that a leader “could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously.” For political personality cultists, the Big Lie serves the practical purpose of binding followers closer to their leader. Accepting Big Lies is a badge of membership in a cult. The bigger the lie you accept, the more loyal other cult members perceive you to be, and the more of a sense of belonging you are able to enjoy.

Trump has, of course, trotted out [lies large and small](#), none bigger or more dangerous than the notion that the 2020 presidential election (which he lost) was stolen by Democrats. In effect, the Trump-dominated Republican Party has become a huge cult. But it would not have done so if not for giant [blind spots in the policies of both the political parties](#).

One other example of dangerous cultic thinking is worthy of brief discussion. As [Lewis Mumford \(1895-1990\) explained at length](#), the modern world has developed a cult of technology. We look to technology to solve basic human problems that were formerly addressed by family, community, or personal toil. Machines inform us, connect us, transport us, feed us, and entertain us. Not only do consumers love their gizmos, but manufacturers do, too, since gadgets produce profits; so do workers and politicians, who benefit from jobs created by industrial expansion. Shopping for the latest smart watch, drone, or mosquito zapper is a sacred ritual of consumerism. And we worship inventors and industrialists like Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Elon Musk.

Collectively, most of us appear to believe that renewable-energy technologies, including electric cars, will save us from climate change—a biblical-scale apocalypse that's punishment for our use of fossil-fueled technologies. Like angels soaring to our rescue, new machines will suck surplus carbon out of the atmosphere and safely store it underground. So miraculous are these technologies that we will never have to confront the problems of overpopulation, overconsumption, pollution, and resource depletion, because we will have achieved the beatific status of net-zero carbon emissions. Yes, climate change is a horrific problem and renewable-energy technologies are better than fossil-fuel technologies, but the notion that solar panels will enable us to continue consuming resources at unsustainable rates (i.e., that we will be able to maintain our current consumerist lifestyle indefinitely, but guilt-free) [should be questioned](#).

The most extreme of tech cults center on artificial intelligence (AI). In a [recent article](#), philosopher and historian Émile P. Torres introduced his readers to TESCREAL, an acronym denoting a set of secular cults (transhumanism, extropianism, singularitarianism, cosmism, rationalism, effective altruism, and longtermism) all widely shared within the AI development community. Torres's description of TESCREAL is so clearly relevant to the discussion of contemporary secular cults that it deserves to be

quoted at length:

Essentially, a bunch of 20th-century atheists concluded that their lives lacked the meaning, purpose and hope provided by traditional religion. In response to this realization, they invented a new, secular religion, in which “heaven” is something we create ourselves, in this world. This new religion offered the promise of eternal life, just like Christianity, and has its own version of resurrection: those who don’t become immortal can have their bodies cryogenized by a company named Alcor, based in California, so they can be revived when the technological know-how becomes available. . . . As for God, if he doesn’t exist, then why not just create him? This is what AGI [artificial general intelligence] is supposed to be: an all-knowing, all-powerful entity capable of solving all our problems and creating utopia. Indeed, the phrase “God-like AI” has become a popular way of referring to AGI over the past few months.

For an entertaining dive into the cult of TESCREAL, check out my colleagues’ Crazy Town [podcast episode on William MacAskill](#), one of its gurus.

As [AI threatens to drive economic inequality](#) to unprecedented levels, social upheaval is an easily predictable consequence. In that case, even more people will abandon faith in mainstream institutions and explanations, and grasp at cultic alternatives. Simultaneously, AI will make truth ever harder to determine by flooding every communications medium with thoroughly convincing fake images, video, audio, and text. Everyone will frantically be looking for villains and heroes, and AI will deftly supply them.

Living Cult-Free

Perhaps the most emotionally satisfying ending for this essay would be a forecast that society is evolving toward perfect rationality, and that cultic thinking will disappear as we approach this inevitable utopia. However, the yearning for utopia is actually a feature of the cultic mindset. Modern post-Enlightenment democracies—with the benefit of science and its iterative method of getting ever closer to truth—perhaps come closest to the unachievable ideal of a perfectly logic-driven society; but these are nations currently undermining their own rational futures through increasing economic inequality, climate change, overconsumption, and the development of AI.

We humans are probably genetically wired for cult-think. Nevertheless, some societies appear more rational than others, and some waver back and forth over time from a majoritarian adherence to facts to a contentious spinning off of cults and misguided notions. If we want to move toward the former condition, it may be best to start by acknowledging that we humans are cognitively complex creatures. We have perfectly good reasons for being attracted to cults and popular fallacies: they give us a sense of security, clarity, and community. But they lead us into error, sometimes fatally so.

Building on that acknowledgment, we must get in the habit of examining our own beliefs, while paying attention to changing conditions and new information. In other words, we must identify our blind spots and fill them

with accurate knowledge, not seductive delusions. And we must do this while avoiding the tendency to accept evidence only if it confirms our beliefs.

Most people are familiar with the phrases “critical thinking” and “scientific method,” but many misunderstand them to mean simply basing one’s views on evidence. Our natural tendency is to sort evidence according to our biases. And given today’s blizzard of media sources and increasingly powerful internet algorithms that feed us news and advertising based on our previous searches, there’s no lack of information to confirm any bias we may have. Science and critical thinking don’t just mean gathering evidence. They mean deliberately looking for evidence that disconfirms our existing beliefs (or hypotheses), then changing our beliefs when they’re contradicted by credible facts.

In the end, uncertainty remains. We can’t answer every question through rational analysis because we don’t have perfect information. And some subjects, by their very nature, will always have to be approached through values rather than reason. What’s a good life? What should our daily priorities consist of? How much of our income should we donate to charity? We can apply critical thinking skills to such questions, but still come away with differing answers.

For a few years after Janet and I left our cult, we met frequently with other ex-members so that we all could compare notes about our experiences. We benefitted enormously from this community of mutual support. I also read books on cults and critical thinking, and consulted experts. Still, over time I observed that some other ex-members of our group went on to seek out different cults, or continued to think in cultic ways. And I still frequently catch myself looking for evidence to confirm already-formed conclusions that I share with an in-group. Cultic thinking is habit-forming, because it fills human needs for meaning and belonging. It takes effort to break the habit.

As old societal norms break down, there will be ever greater temptation to gravitate toward comforting tribal narratives. Resisting doing so can be a lonely experience if we drift apart from friends, relatives, and neighbors who join new in-groups that we choose to avoid. On the other hand, if we make the effort to align ourselves with reason and reality, we can serve as a bulwark for others in our community. Living cult-free is much easier if we support one another in thinking critically.

Reducing our cult-think means living with ambiguity during tumultuous times. But it’s worth the effort if we put a high value on truth.