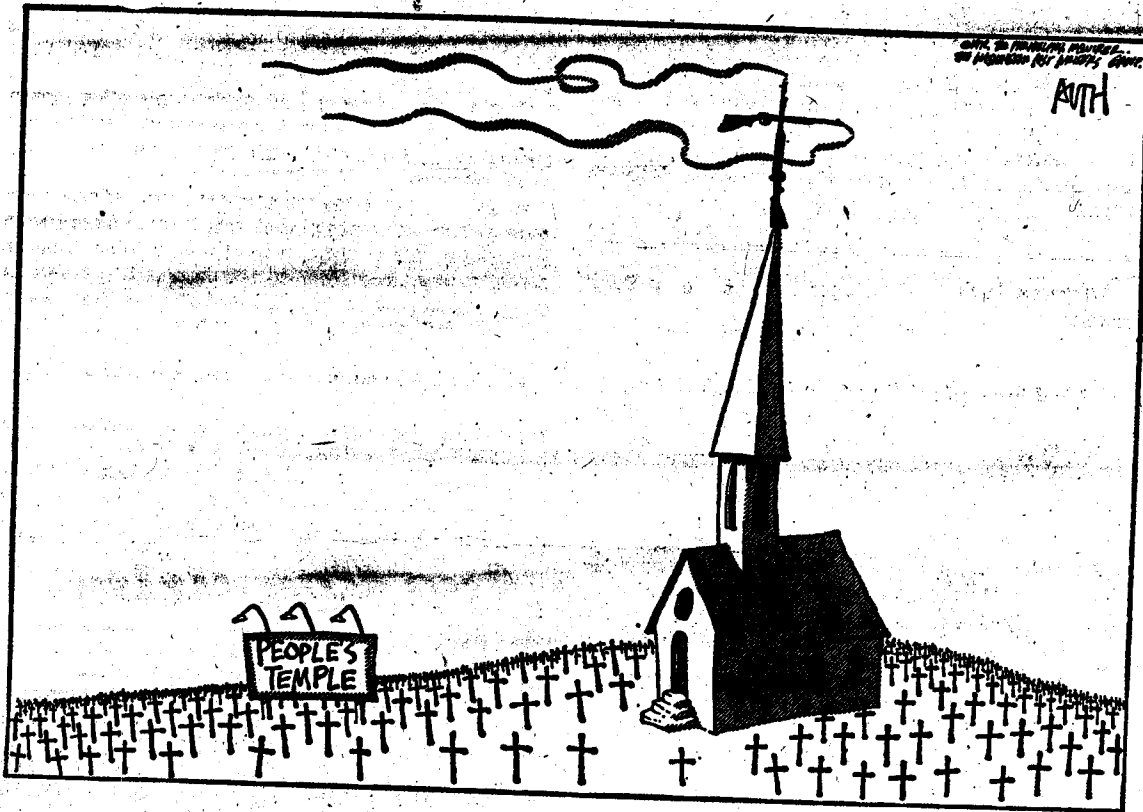


The Lure of Our Many Cults



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from India to found the Divine Light Mission. Meanwhile, Sun Myung Moon had come from Korea to build his Unification Church into the most controversial of all the cults, which seemed to exist in a constant barrage of charges ranging from financial malfeasance to brainwashing.

A host of smaller or less controversial movements accompanied the cults: Yogi Bhaajan's JHO group (one cell of which runs the Golden Temple Restaurant) Transcendental Meditation and Rev. Jim Jones' Peoples Temple, among hundreds, perhaps thousands, of groups.

The quest was for certainty. Just as Christians in late antiquity had sought to flee the iron determinism of astrology, these cultists sought an escape from chaos. They tended to stress their identification with middle-class American values, often dressing conservatively.

"The cult promises to provide, and indeed does provide for the convinced convert, the assurance and absolutism the large society so conspicuously lacks," state S. P. Herah of the National Institute of Mental Health and Ann Macleod of the University of Maryland, in a paper entitled "Cults and Youth Today." "Once the initial decision is taken — to join — the rest comes ready-made: what is right, what is wrong, who shall be saved and who not, how to eat, how to dress, how to live."

The cults represent what anthropologists have long identified in cultures around the world as a revitalization movement, following on what anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace calls "a period of cultural distortion," marked by such things as alcoholism, "extreme passivity and indolence, intragroup violence, disregard of kinship and sexual mores, irresponsibility in public officials . . ."

movement develops, a crystallization of counter-hostility against unbelievers frequently occurs, and emphasis shifts from cultivation of the ideal to combat against the unbeliever."

SUCH IS the fate of a large number of American cults. That combat sometimes takes the form of ridiculously high-stakes gambles: the Children of God predicted the end of the world with the arrival of the comet Kohoutek; Guru Maharaj Ji's adherents rented the Houston Astrodome for a mammoth convention at which they predicted apocalyptic confirmation of their doctrine, even setting aside spaces in the parking lot for flying saucers.

More recently, the Transcendental Meditation movement tried to bolster declining membership with claims that they could teach adherents to levitate and fly.

The combat has taken harsher forms. In the past year, members of Synanon, a California group originally founded in the 1950s to treat drug addiction, have been accused of attempting to murder a prosecutor by putting a rattlesnake in his mailbox. Members of the Church of Scientology, another group dating from the '50s, were indicted for stealing files the government had maintained on the group. One prankster who hit Guru Maharaj Ji in the face with a pie later had his skull fractured with a hammer wielded, he charged, by a Divine Light Mission official. Last summer, a self-styled renegade Mormon prophet named Immanuel David, who had been visited like Jones by holocaustic visions, killed himself.