

The belief business

The need to believe is as old as humanity, and has always proven a reliable source of revenue for the unscrupulous.

By Brett Hetherington.

There are some 54,000 cult members across Catalunya, according to an estimate by Atención e Investigación de Socioadicciones (AIS), a nonprofit organisation, with no religious, political or philosophical connections.

AIS has at least 90 well-established "coercive groups" under observation, according to Miguel Perlado, a clinical psychologist with the organisation. He said the groups that generate the most demand for help are the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Gnostic Movement, Nueva Acropolis and Scientology.

Also known as a 'sect', a cult can be defined as a group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to a person, idea or thing, employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control. These include isolation from former friends and family in addition to the use of specific methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience.

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Cults also typically exploit powerful group pressure, which results in the suspension of individuality and critical judgment. They make use of strategies that eventually lead to nearly total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it. These techniques are designed to

advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families or the wider community.

The Church of Scientology has about 10,000 members in Spain, according to a spokesman at the church's Madrid headquarters, who declined to provide his name, and who said that figures for individual cities were not available. A recent decision by the Audiencia Nacional in Madrid to allow Scientology to be registered as a religion was long overdue, he said.

Jordi, a spokesperson from the Scientology centre in Sant Just Desvern, who declined to give his last name, commended the decision. "Of course we are happy about it. It was a good idea and the right thing to do."

That is definitely not Miguel Perlado's opinion. He said the decision was surprising and illogical. "There is a large amount of critical documentation around the coercive practices of Scientology."

Nueva Acropolis defines itself as "a school of philosophy in the classical tradition", offering courses and conferences, while its critics claim that it enriches itself by capturing its enrollees with techniques of mass psychology. A spokesperson at Nueva Acropolis's Barcelona headquarters estimated that the city is home to some 100 members.

The Gnostic Movement, which began in Australia and now has followers around the world, did not reply to numerous e-mail re-

▲ Anyone offering to sell self-knowledge techniques should be regarded sceptically.



quests for information, but their website provides some details of the courses they offer on, for example, self-discovery and learning about "the astral", which seems to be loosely defined as dreams and out-of-body experiences.

A 30-year-old Catalan, who asked to be called Jordi, and a former member of the Gnostic Movement, recalled: "I still remember the first time I went to them because I felt a sense of relief. I was able to find people who could answer my questions without any reservations and who were happy to help anyone who had problems. It was wonderful."

At face value, there may seem little that is objectionable about Jordi's experiences up to this point. But even before agreeing to leave

Barcelona for a week-long immersion seminar, his life began to change drastically. "In conference after conference, [the teachers] created a

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sense of disgust towards all the people around us so that [we believed] there is no one else who has the supreme knowledge that they have," he said. "Their doctrine is to set up an

emotional and psychological barrier between our social environment and family, where they possess the only truth that can free us from suffering and isolate us from rational thinking, or being critical or objective."

In fact, this pattern of what some experts call 're-programming' became, for Jordi, an expensive exercise. The seven-day 'seminar' he attended cost him €1,650, on top of additional expenses for compulsory book purchases and other fees before departure. He was just one of 1,400 participants from all around the world who stayed in low-cost hotels, he said, where they ate only cheap set-menu meals once a day.

"We started the workshops at nine in the morning and left at 11pm at night. We had



▲ Common sense is a good defence against belief hucksters.

to get up every day at 6.30 in the morning and we went to sleep at 1.30 in the morning, taking into account that the hotel where we stayed was several kilometres from the city centre.

"There was hardly any time available for us to do anything else and no time to think at all. You could guess, I'm sure, that from a combination of built-up exhaustion and hunger, due to the extreme length of the conferences, this hindered our capabilities and drove down our mental defences."

AIS psychologist Miguel Perlado said that this is typical of how cults operate. The organisation has plenty of experience dealing with these coercive groups and their members.

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Founded in 1977, it assists people affected by cults across Spain. Its Barcelona headquarters is made up of a team of professionals who provide services of information, therapeutic help and legal assistance to members of cults or extremist hate groups, their families and former members.

Perlado voiced concern over what he sees as a trend in cults away from religious, mass-worship manipulation to a more personalised approach. "In recent years, we have observed an increasing demand for help from people in situations related to one-way manipulation, and therapeutic or curative groups.

"The same people that promise to make you feel better can actually do much more harm than good." □

SCIENTOLOGY: What is it?

- The Church of Scientology was founded in 1953 by the science-fiction writer L Ron Hubbard.
- Scientology is a body of beliefs and related techniques composed of 15 basic books, 15,000 pages of technical writing and more than 3,000 lectures. All its texts are said to have been written by Hubbard, who died in 1986.
- Scientology describes itself as "the study and handling of the spirit in relationship to itself, others and all of life".
- According to the Church of Scientology, the ultimate goal is to get the individual being (the "I", called Thetan) back to its native state of total freedom, thus gaining control over matter, energy, space, time, thoughts, form and life. This freed state is called Operating Thetan.
- Through the Scientology process of 'auditing', people can free themselves of specific traumatic incidents and prior transgressions, which restrict the person from reaching the state of 'Clear', and after that, the state of 'Operating Thetan'.
- Members believe psychiatry and psychology are destructive and abusive.
- Scientology keeps its texts secret until devotees have paid money to learn what they say, and opponents of the church have claimed the cost of completing all the courses can set an individual back \$380,000.

Source: *The Scotsman* [online Version], September 5, 2007

More information:

- AIS regularly participates in seminars and courses in public and private forums to publicise the main techniques of cults.
www.ais-info.org
- International Cultic Studies Association:
www.icsahome.com
- Info Cult:
www.infocult.org
- Wellspring Retreat:
www.wellspringretreat.org