

# "The Anti-Cult Movement in America"

By Charles R. MacLeod  
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**The Anti-Cult Movement in America: A Bibliographical and Historical Survey**, by Anson D. Shupe, Jr., David G. Bromley, and Donna L. Oliver. Garland Publishing. New York. 1984. 169 pages.

Authors Bromley, Shupe, and Oliver have used "The Anti-Cult Movement in America" as a further opportunity to criticize the shortcomings of this movement. Although the survey represents an accurate historical perspective on counter-cult organizations, it nevertheless makes no secret of its bias against the movement. Indeed, while as in their past publications the authors portray the new religious movements—"cults" to some—from an objective social perspective, they seem reluctant to examine the anti-cult movement in the same fashion.

There is no doubting the authors' point that many anti-cultists exhibit a Neanderthal approach toward new religious movements. Some of these people have inherited their opinions and attitudes about the subject just as we inherit genetic traits, with little consideration for the consequences of the actions to which these opinions lead. Others have proposed sweeping and dramatic legislative changes based on nebulous concepts and terminology, to disarm the problems posed by new religions. Still others have enveloped the public forum in a miasma of propaganda, rhetoric, and slogans designed to inflame rather than to inform. Self-styled "deprogrammers" have conducted reckless abductions of members of a variety of groups, showing small concern for their civil rights or psychological welfare, and charging exorbitant fees for these services in the process.

Given the ramifications of such

conduct, the great pains the authors' take in articulating their concerns is understandable. But they have already consistently expressed these concerns in earlier publications. Perhaps it is time to move on and avoid the temptation to overkill. By giving in to this temptation, however, the authors give the impression that the anti-cult movement consists of little more than a gang of self-serving activists, vigilantes, and uninformed individuals who use the moral high ground as a substitute for whistling in the dark. Although this shoe might fit certain factions of the anti-cult movement, it results in a vacuum of understanding of the very real and valid

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concerns which have been raised by families, ex-members, professionals, and others regarding the conduct of certain new religious (and other) movements. A recurring theme of the authors seems to be that adverse constitutional and human rights ramifications of certain anti-cultist proposals and actions outweigh the concerns expressed about harms caused by new religious (and other) groups. Perhaps. But the fact that the former outweighs the latter does not negate the concerns expressed by many about the new religions.

An important but neglected factor in "The Anti-Cult Movement" is that

since the early 1980's there has been a growing voice of moderation within the anti-cult movement. There are now emerging to the forefront groups and individuals seeking to combine religious tolerance and concern for civil liberties with preventive education and consumer education. Rather than propose sweeping legislative and constitutional changes, these people choose to inform the public of the rights and protections afforded them under existing laws and regulations.

There is no question that many new religions have been subjected to unwarranted harassment and unmerited adverse publicity. Conversely, many new religions have been involved in fraudulent activities, mistreatment of members and children, exploitation of the elderly, handicapped, the unemployed, and the underemployed, as well as in other forms of illegal or doubtful behavior. The authors point out that this phenomenon is not limited to the twentieth century; it has been native to past ages. But historical precedent is not a condition for ignoring an issue. World hunger has also been with us since the dawn of civilization, yet this has not prevented us from seeking ways to deal effectively with the problem.

The merits of this book are obvious. The authors have presented the anti-cult movement within a thought-provoking historical perspective, and they have addressed issues which merit serious consideration. They have also provided a comprehensive bibliography at the end of each chapter which should prove a useful resource. If "The Anti-Cult Movement in America" does not make better thinkers of us, Bromley, Shupe, and Oliver can hardly be blamed.

*Charles MacLeod is Research Coordinator for the Cult Project, An Education and Resource Center on Cultism, based in Montreal.*