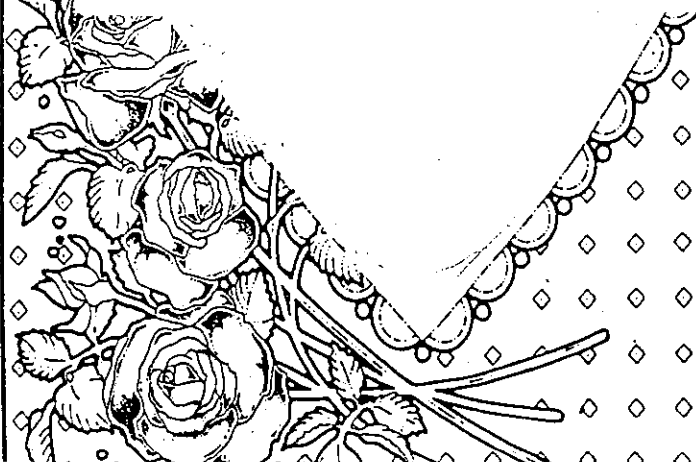


Dismantle - Newcastle, Pelaw Main & Croydon



The case against a cult watchdog

IT IS an unfortunate coincidence that the stand-off between the FBI and the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, came to such a climactic end just as the NSW Parliament was preparing to discuss the merits of setting up a committee to examine the activities and practices of local cults. True, the events in Waco are a reminder that cults can be unpredictable in their behaviour, destructive of individual personalities, and disruptive to the wider society. But the Branch Davidians under David Koresh were extreme even by the Twilight Zone standards of the more outlandish cults. And an emotional response to last week's tragedy in Waco could result in a cult watchdog that is just as offensive in its own way as the evil it tries to combat.

Consider the difficulty of defining a cult. One particular study of cults in the mid-1980s suggested that cults possessed a number of "distinctive" features: "These often are that they are authoritarian in structure, that they exercise forms of brainwashing and mind control, that they cultivate group pressure and instil feelings of guilt and fear." This study was undertaken by the Vatican but it wouldn't be hard to find some people prepared to argue that these features apply to the Catholic Church itself. Today's cults are often tomorrow's churches, as the Mormons or the Jehovah Witnesses attest. Moreover, eccentricity alone is not a sufficient reason for anyone's beliefs to attract the attention of the State. Only when there is evidence of abuse of cult members, of fraud, or of some tangible threat to the wider community has the State a legitimate interest in involving itself in a religious group's affairs.

But in those cases, the proper way for the State to involve itself is through the normal legal and police channels. Creating a spec-

ial watchdog committee to keep tabs on cults, risks tampering with religious freedom and civil liberties. As long as people obey the law, they have a fundamental right to believe anything they like, to join whatever church or religious group they choose, and to live according to their conscience without attracting attention or suspicion.

Of course, it could be countered that cults often do the most harm long before the police and the courts get a chance to become involved. Through cult membership, children may become alienated from their parents (and, in some cases, vice versa), and individuals may undergo lasting psychological damage long before any actual laws are broken. But it is impossible to provide a gilt-edged guarantee against that sort of thing. The British Home Office employs an academic to update a standard guide to New Religious Movements. Some such similar record of cults, their histories and their basic teachings could be started here with a minimum of fuss and cost and it could be made available to interested members of the public as a kind of basic shopper's guide to what specific cults have to offer.

A more elaborate oversight system would be dangerous without necessarily being any more effective. On the last point, the Branch Davidian experience is again instructive. During the 51-day siege at Waco, the US Justice Department consulted scores of law-enforcement, religious, social, psychological and legal experts, as well as former cult members all over the world, on how it should deal with David Koresh and his followers. None of them countenanced the possibility that the group would commit mass suicide. How much more is a parliamentary committee likely to be able to predict the behaviour of cults?

LITTLE POEM

(Calin Costian - 27/04 - US)

Dear all,

Looking over some old Nirmala Yoga numbers, I have discovered a little poem written by Shri Mataji's youngest grand daughter, Anupama, who was then a very little girl. Here it is:

"I am a little cabbage,
Divided into two,
I give my leaves to others,
And my heart to you."

Jay Shri Mataji !

Love, Calin

* * * * *

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* * * * *



"When you wake up in the morning, Pooh," said Piglet at last, "what's the first thing you say to yourself?"

"What's for breakfast?" said Pooh. "What do you say, Piglet?"

"I say, I wonder what's going to happen exciting today?" said Piglet.

Pooh nodded thoughtfully.

"It's the same thing," he said.

"What's that?" the Unbeliever asked.

"Wisdom from a Western Taoist," I said.

"It sounds like something from Winnie-the-Pooh," he said.

"It is," I said.

"That's not about Taoism," he said.

"Oh, yes it is," I said.

"No, it's not," he said.

"What do you think it's about?" I said.

"It's about this dumpy little bear that wanders around asking silly questions, making up songs, and going through all kinds of adventures, without ever accumulating any amount of intellectual knowledge or losing his simpleminded sort of happiness. That's what it's about," he said.

"Same thing," I said.

THE TAO OF POOH

While Eeyore frets...

and Piglet hesitates

and Owl pontificates

... Pooh just is.

FINDING GOD

Then I became a bird, whose body was of Oneness, and whose wings were Everlastingness, and I continued to fly in the air of the Absolute until I passed into the sphere of Purification, and gazed upon the field of Eternity, and beheld there the tree of Oneness.

ABU YAZID OF BISTAM (died 875)
The Diwan

I rest not from my great task!
To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination.

WILLIAM BLAKE (1757-1827)
Jerusalem