Background

"There's always a pretty good number of self-appointed pied pipers, self-appointed messianic people, self-appointed gurus in any society who say to the confused masses: 'Follow me! I have a simple solution for the complex problems of life.' But if the social structure has not broken down, very few people will follow them," says Margaret Singer, a clinical psychologist and a professor at the University of California's medical school in San Francisco and in the Psychology Department at the University of California, Berkeley. Singer has talked to more than 500 cultists and ex-cult members, and has worked individually and in group therapy with more than 200 people who have come out of cults.

Cults are not new. When Eastern and Western cultures collided during the last days of the Roman Empire, a number of apocalyptic movements appeared. After the French Revolution in 1789, France witnessed a tremendous rise in the number of cults. Cultic groups did not arrive on the scene in England until the 18th century, during the Industrial Revolution. And the United States had to wait until its citizens pushed west before these assemblies proliferated. But many social observers believe that the recent growth of cults in this country, which began in the late 1960's and became really visible in the mid-1970's, has been something special.

Singer estimates that three million young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 are affiliated with these movements. There are at least 250 different cults, she says, and, depending on the definition you use, as many as 2,500 cults can be identified. According to Singer, these groups fall into ten classes: neo-Christian-based cults; Hindu- and eastern-based groups; occult, satanic, and witchcraft movements; spiritualistic-based groups; Zen-based assemblies; race-based cults; flying saucer-based cliques; psychological movements; political cults; and communal-living groups.

"It's important to note that all cults are not religious in their content," Singer points out. "Some of them were communal living arrangements at first. Synanon was started to help drug addicts, and Scientology began as a new psychology and evolved into a religious body. The contents of witchcraft and occult groups, psychological movements,