neo-Christian organizations and Hindu groups vary; but most of these movements have become religions because of the wonderful protection that the First Amendment and many state tax laws give to religious entities. By using the term religion, the new cults try to blend themselves in and appear as if they are no different from 'institutionalized' religions. The point we're all trying to make is: 'Yes, they are different — at a social and political and informational and power level!'"

Singer says that today's cults are usually led by charismatic males who center the love, devotion, and allegiance of the members on themselves. Rabbis, ministers, priests, and other "legitimate" religious leaders, on the other hand, keep the veneration of adherents focused on God, abstract principles, and group purposes.

"At the time they arise, cults try to tell people that they're innovative and exclusive because part of their appeal is to say that they're all-millennium," she explains. "Doomsday cults say that the end of the world is coming in one way or another — the A-bomb, et cetera — and that if you join brand X cult you'll be part of the elite who survive and take over and lead the new order. But they usually turn out to be pseudo-revolutionary in their actual practices. While these cults and cult-like groups are saying they are the new way, they are really far more restrictive than any of the life-styles in the surrounding community.

"Cults have only two basic purposes: recruiting new members and fund raising. Cults may claim to make real social contributions, but, in reality, these remain mere claims or minimal gestures."

According to Singer, cults tend to have a double set of ethics. The "love bombing" that Moonies (members of Reverend Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church) are famous for, the personality test that Scientologists give, and the unconditional acceptance that almost all of these groups show toward potential members, she claims, are totally contrived. "If I apply to be a Catholic, the priest will spell out in utter detail the church's doctrine and practices by making me take religious instructions," she says. "If I go off to be an Episcopalian, a Baptist, a Seventh-Day Adventist, a Jew — any of the 'institutionalized' religions — they want full-capacity informed consent. Whereas, the cults start with duplicity and deception.

"These groups are able to attract people who don't really know that it's totally staged. And then, after they get in, these young men and women are unaware of what the methods — the social and psychological manipulative tools that are applied to them — are going to do to their thinking and how they are going to be separated off from their families and from their past lives and their past religions and past consciousness."

How Cults Work

Gary Scharff, once a religious studies major at Princeton University, was recruited by the Unification Church in 1972. After finishing his junior year, Scharff says he started feeling cynical about the merits of learning theology from a textbook. Deciding that he needed some time to sort things out, he went home to Louisville, Kentucky, and got a job in a tool factory. It was there that the Moonies recruited him.

"I just met a couple of people from their bus team and was very intrigued by them," he explains. "I had never heard of 'cult' or 'brainwashing' at that point. I had a mixed reaction. First, I felt somewhat amused by the literature they gave me, which seemed to be fairly childish and juvenile. They were proposing to answer the profound questions of life in a series of three or four lectures, and here I had spent three years trying to understand the questions. But then, on the other hand, there was this really powerful devotion and commitment in the young woman who handed me the literature and struck up a conversation with me."

Scharff knew that she must be from a fringe religious group, but he thought it would be interesting to try to understand what real belief was like without an intellectual foundation. Gradually, he got more and more emotionally involved with members of the group. After eight months, he moved into the Unification Church's local center. Still, Scharff had no intention of signing up for life. He just wanted to share their faith with them for a while. But soon he was asked to attend a 100-day leadership training program near New York City. Church officials assured him and his parents that he would be back in Louisville in a couple of months. The camp, which operated on a rigid schedule, was physically, emotionally, and mentally overpowering.