

THE SOLAR TEMPLE

(Free Inquiry, winter 1994-95)

By James A. Haught

The Rev. Jim Jones led 900 fervent believers into mass murder-suicide at Jonestown in 1977. Many swallowed cyanide and gave it to their children.

Ohio cult leader Jeffrey Lundgren made a human sacrifice of a family of five in 1989. Then he and his followers wandered through West Virginia, Missouri and California before being caught and convicted of murder.

David Koresh led 85 adherents to fiery death last year at his Bible prophecy compound at Waco, Texas.

Yahweh ben Yahweh, founder of the black Temple of Love in Florida, ordered his aides to kill "white devils" and backsliders. Victims' ears were brought to Yahweh. Seven sect leaders were convicted in 1992 of 14 murders.

At the Hare Krishna "golden temple" near Moundsville, murders were plotted, and two swamis were convicted.

Ervil LeBaron, leader of the Church of the First Born of the Lamb of God, ordered his 13 wives, 54 children and various lieutenants to kill "false prophets" and dissenters in the U.S. Southwest. Since LeBaron died in prison in 1982, more than a dozen of his disciples have been shot to death in sect rivalry.

Then the dilemma of deadly cults surfaced again. In western Switzerland, 48 members of a sect known as the Solar Temple, and also as the Cross and the Rose, died in a mass murder-suicide.

Many of the victims were found in a secret underground chapel lined with mirrors. Bodies in ceremonial robes were in a circle, feet together, heads outward, most with plastic bags tied over their heads, which bore bullet wounds. Other victims were in three ski chalets. Several dead children were lying together. The tragedy was found by officers rushing to fight fires which had been ignited by remote-control devices. Farewell letters said the believers were "leaving this earth" to escape "hypocrisies and oppression of this world."

Simultaneously, in Quebec, fire ignited by a timer killed four people at a different branch of the Solar Temple. The Canadian group had been stockpiling weapons to prepare for the end of the world. The cult leader had pleaded guilty to weapons conspiracy in 1993 and had gone to Switzerland. One of his disciples was charged with trying to buy guns with silencers -- instruments with no purpose except covert murder.

Good Lord! What possesses some people, to make them believe crackpot gurus so intensely that they're willing to kill rivals, strangers, their own children and themselves? This recurring pattern defies comprehension.

There may be as many as 2,000 religious groups in North America that can be classified as cults, according to Connecticut analyst Kevin Garvey. (A cult differs from other churches in that it's usually

controlled by a single charismatic leader, and the members isolate themselves from the world.) If only 1 percent of those 2,000 resort to killing, that's still a serious threat.

How can society be protected from potentially dangerous "fringies" -- and what can be done to rescue the naive, vulnerable people who are drawn into such groups? The only method we can see is constant warnings.

America has watchdog groups such as the Cult Awareness Network which issue information about irrational cliques. These warnings should be disseminated as widely as possible. Maybe they'll dissuade some trusting souls from joining secretive sects that end up as horror stories.