

# The Cult Deficit

By Ross Douthat NYT SEPT. 27, 2014

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/28/opinion/sunday/ross-douthat-the-cult-deficit.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=c-column-top-span-region&region=c-column-top-span-region&WT.nav=c-column-top-span-region>

LIKE most children of the Reagan era, I grew up with a steady diet of media warnings about the *perils of religious cults* — the gurus who lurked in wait for the unwary and confused, *offering absolute certainty with the aftertaste of poisoned Kool-Aid*. From the *1970s through the 1990s*, from Jonestown to Heaven's Gate, frightening fringe groups and their charismatic leaders seemed like an essential element of the American religious landscape.

*Yet we don't hear nearly as much about them anymore*, and it isn't just that the media have moved on. Some strange experiments have aged into respectability, some sinister ones still flourish, but over all the *cult phenomenon feels increasingly antique*, like lava lamps and bell bottoms. *Spiritual gurus still flourish in our era, of course, but they are generally comforting, vapid, safe* — a Joel Osteen rather than a Jim Jones, a Deepak Chopra rather than a David Koresh.

Twice in the last few months I've encountered writers taking note of this shift, and both have made a similar (and provocative) point: The *decline of cults*, while good news for anxious parents of potential devotees, *might actually be a worrying sign for Western culture*, an indicator not only of *religious stagnation* but of *declining creativity writ large*.

The first writer is [Philip Jenkins](#), a prolific religious historian, who argues that the *decline in "the number and scale of controversial fringe sects" is both "genuine and epochal," and something that should worry more mainstream religious believers rather than comfort them*. A *wild fringe*, he suggests, is often a *sign of a healthy, vital center*, and a *religious culture that lacks* for *charismatic weirdos* may *lack "a solid core of spiritual activism and inquiry" as well*.

The second writer is Peter Thiel, the PayPal co-founder, venture capitalist and controversialist, who includes an interesting aside about the decline of cults in his new book, "[Zero to One](#)" — officially a book of advice to would-be entrepreneurs, but really a treatise on escaping what he regards as the developed world's 40-year economic, technological and cultural malaise.

The implications of Jenkins's argument are specific to religion. Cults can be dangerous, even murderous, but they can also be mistreated and misjudged ([as Koresh's followers were](#), with fatal consequences); moreover, *spiritual experiments led by the charismatic and the zealous are essential to religious creativity and fruitful change*. From the Franciscans to the Jesuits, *groups that*

*looked cultlike to their critics have repeatedly revitalized the Catholic Church,* and a similar story can be told about the role of charismatic visionaries in the American experience. (The enduring influence of one of the 19th century's most despised and feared religious movements, for instance, is the reason the state of Utah now leads the United States on many social indicators.)

Thiel's argument is broader: *Not only religious vitality but the entirety of human innovation, he argues, depends on the belief that there are major secrets left to be uncovered, insights that existing institutions have failed to unlock (or perhaps forgotten), better ways of living that a small group might successfully embrace.*

This means that **every transformative business enterprise, every radical political movement, every truly innovative project contains some cultish elements and impulses** — and the *decline of those impulses may be a sign that the innovative spirit itself is on the wane.* When “people were more open to the idea that not all knowledge was widely known,” Thiel writes, there was more interest in groups that claimed access to some secret knowledge, or offered some revolutionary vision. But today, many fewer Americans “take unorthodox ideas seriously,” and while this has clear upsides — “*fewer crazy cults*” — it may also be a *sign that “we have given up our sense of wonder at secrets left to be discovered.”*

Thiel's view of our overall situation is hotly contested, not surprisingly, on his own Silicon Valley turf. The Internet is cluttered with debates (some [friendly](#), some [less so](#)) between Thiel and his peers over whether innovation has actually slowed down, whether recent technological progress is actually as disappointing as he [frequently suggests](#).

But in the intellectual realm, the stagnation he identifies seems readily apparent, since *whole swaths of political, ideological and religious terrain that fascinated earlier generations have been mostly written off in ours.* As [Mark Lilla noted](#) in a recent New Republic essay, it's not just that alternatives — reactionary, radical, religious — to managerial capitalism and social liberalism are no longer much embraced; it's that *our best and brightest no longer seem to have any sense of why anyone ever found alternatives worth exploring in the first place.*

Perhaps the sacrifice is worth it, and a little intellectual stagnation is a reasonable price to pay for fewer cults and Communists.

Or maybe the *quest for secrets — material or metaphysical, undiscovered or too-long forgotten — is worth a little extra risk.*