



## **Visions of Paradise *Study Guide***

Version 02: 11 August 2009

By Sue Lockyer

copyright: evd 2009

This study guide remains the intellectual property of Educational Video & Design. It can be used by Ronin Films in accordance with the distribution agreement between Educational Video & Design and Ronin Films.

# Visions of Paradise

*Study Guide by Sue Lockyer*

## Overview

**Visions of Paradise** (directed by Adrian Norman, 2009) is a challenging, intelligent and thought-provoking documentary about the need to belong and find purpose and meaning in life. It is the story of four young idealists who thought they had found paradise on earth only to discover they were actually in mind-control cults. Through candid interviews and with reference to famous psychological studies along with commentary from cult experts, **Visions of Paradise** is a timely warning to all about the continuing attraction of cults and fundamentalist thinking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Visions of Paradise** is structured in five parts and can be viewed in one sitting (44 minutes) or watched part-by-part with activities prior to and following each viewing.

## About the Director

*Visions of Paradise* is Adrian Norman's first documentary. Adrian studied acting with Philippe Gaulier in Paris and directing at the National Institute of Dramatic Art. He worked as an actor, writer and director in Australia and Europe for more than a decade. In 2001 he returned to Australia and completed a Master of Education at the University of Wollongong. While working at the Australian Film Television and Radio School he became interested in filmmaking and began shooting this documentary. He now works as a consultant specialising in video and educational technologies.

<http://www.evd.net.au>

## Director's Notes

My aim in making this documentary was to educate school leavers about the danger of cults and to present an evidence-based argument as to how cults systematically change and control the beliefs of their members.

Firstly, you will notice that no cults are named in the documentary or in this guide. The reason for this is two-fold: firstly I didn't want to end up in court. No cult wishes to be identified as a 'cult' and will sue without hesitation; secondly my intention was to draw attention to the techniques that **all** cults use to indoctrinate rather than just a naming and shaming of some known cults. In any case cults have a habit of changing their names, so it's better to know a cult when you see one rather than just watch out for known cults. I have a particular interest in the subject of cults and mind control as I was in a cult myself for seven years.

At the age of 19 I was at a point of transition in my life. My father had died a few years before and I had just dropped out of uni to become an actor. By chance I met an actress who had just returned from acting school in England who was getting into a relationship with a self-development guru with a small following in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney. In a matter of months she abandoned her career to devote herself to him and his work. Together they formed a group that still recruits today in Australia offering a technique that purports to free you from everything that stops you from being happy or reaching your goals.

When I left, some seven years later, I was alone and very lost. I threw myself back into my first love, theatre, and flew to Paris to finally train as an actor. While overseas I read Steven Hassan's powerful book *Combatting Cult Mind Control* and it was only then that was I able to put my cult experience into perspective. The mind is an extraordinarily powerful and vulnerable organ that can be isolated and controlled using the right techniques.

As all ex-culties say "I wish I had known back then what I know now". My wish is that *Visions of Paradise* and this study guide will help others to think critically and to be able to see that when a group comes along that offers a 'life solution' that seems too good to be true, it probably is.

---

## Curriculum Applicability

*Visions of Paradise* can be used in:

- **Religious studies:** Faith Vs science; the power of belief; religions Vs sects Vs cults.
  - **English:** Analysis and deconstruction of persuasive text in the documentary genre.
  - **Personal development and mental health:** Understanding how the mind works, the psychology of influence.
  - **Media Studies:** Documentary genre, non-fictional narratives, cinematic language.
  - **Human Rights:** Individual Vs collective rights.
  - **Values education:** Finding purpose and value in life.
  - **History:** Political cults: Soviet Communism, NAZISM, Communist China, North Korean Communism.
- 

## Meet the Cult Experts

### Steven Hassan

As a young university student he was approached by an attractive young woman who invited him to attend a discussion group off-campus. He was then persuaded to attend a residential camp and was subjected to a range of psychological techniques designed to break his personality down and render him open to new beliefs. After a period of intense deliberation he decided to join. He gave up his studies, devoted himself to the group and the leader who he believed was the son of God.

Some years later Hassan fell asleep at the wheel while out collecting donations for the group. In hospital and distanced from the group and its control, he was taken home to recuperate. His parents organised an intervention with some ex-members who started to reveal to him the facts behind the facade of the group and its leader. Slowly the spell the cult had cast over him started to lift. With time Hassan recovered control of his mind and so began his fascination with cults and mind control.

He wrote the critically acclaimed *Combatting Cult Mind Control* in 1988. Hassan followed this up with *Releasing the Bonds* in 2000 and in it proposes a fresh strategy for helping those who are in cults. In the past it was not uncommon for family members to plan a forcible deprogramming of their loved ones who had joined cults. In *Releasing the Bonds*, Hassan advises against this high-risk strategy advocating a more compassionate relationship-building approach.

Hassan is a licensed Mental Health Counsellor and holds a Masters degree in counselling psychology from Cambridge College. Hassan is active in cult education and counselling and maintains a website with a wealth of information on the subject.

<http://www.freedomofmind.org>

## **Louise Samways**

Louise Samways is a clinical and health psychologist based in Melbourne, Australia. She is a recognised expert in the fields of psychological healing and health, has authored numerous books and is often called upon in the media as an expert. In 1992 she wrote *Your Mindbody Energy: How to access your hidden energies and take control of your life* and in it explained how cults use techniques to change belief systems. Following the response to this book and the increasing number of people she was seeing in her private practice who had been abused in cults and high-demand groups she decided to write *Dangerous Persuaders: An Expose of Cults in Australia* in 1994.

Unfortunately word got out that Louise was writing an expose on Australian cults and so began an organised campaign by many cults to influence the content as well as to stop the book altogether. Despite the intimidation, the book went ahead. *Dangerous Persuaders* can be downloaded from her website.

<http://www.louisksamways.com.au>

## **David Millikan**

David Millikan is a Uniting Church Minister and holds a PhD in Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary and is a filmmaker of some note. David took over Endeavour Films in 1983 and produced: *Run for Their Lives* - a documentary of the 1983 famine in Uganda and its aftermath; *The Ways of Giving* - the story of a unique aid project run by World Vision in a village in Sri Lanka (1984); *Reaching Across* - the story of the Karramajong people in Eastern Uganda and their struggle to survive in the years following Ida Amin and the famine of 1983; and *Island of Light* - the story of a unique Walbiri corroboree filmed in Central Australia, which has celebrated the crucifixion of Christ for 40 years.

David has appeared regularly on television and in print as an expert on cults and new religious movements and has also written and presented stories for *Four Corners*, *60 Minutes*, *Witness* and *A Current Affair*. In 1986 he was appointed Head of Religious Broadcasting for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and it was during his time at the ABC that *Compass* began broadcasting.

# **The Cults**

## **'Revolutionary Suicide' in Jonestown**

Jonestown was the informal name for a communal rural project set up in Guyana, South America by members of the Peoples Temple, a bible-based cult established by the Reverend Jim Jones in the 1950s in Indianapolis, Indiana. Jones attracted many followers, especially poor African Americans, who identified with his socialist and integrationist views. He moved his headquarters to California and became politically active and was even feted by influential politicians who no doubt had an eye on the growing number of followers he influenced. But the Church also attracted criticism. Following some negative newspaper articles in 1973 and the defection of eight members, Jones dreamed of escape and of setting up a socialist bible-based utopia away from media scrutiny. He chose Guyana in South America and sent a group of church members to start construction there in 1974.

By 1977 Jones was ready to leave the US altogether and took several hundred followers with him to his South American settlement. Over the next year Jones' health declined as his abuse of drugs grew. In November 1978 US congressmen Leo Ryan and a delegation of government officials, media and some concerned relatives of members decided to visit Jonestown to see exactly what was going on. An agitated and paranoid Jones staged a happy reception to demonstrate to Ryan that everyone was happy.

Initially Ryan was convinced but when some church members begged to be taken back to the US he realised all was not as it seemed. Jones found out about this betrayal and ordered his security to the airstrip where they shot dead Ryan and four of his party. Then Jones convinced his followers to take part in an act of 'revolutionary suicide' by drinking cordial laced with cyanide. Mothers used syringes to inject the poison into their baby's mouths. On November 18 1978, more than 900 people died in the largest act of mass suicide the world has ever seen.

## Us V Them

The Waco Siege refers to the 51 day siege of the Branch Davidian sect's headquarters in Waco, Texas. The siege began when Church members saw a huge armed convoy of federal agents approaching their compound on 28 February 1993. The agents had a warrant to search the secretive compound for a stockpile of weapons that they believed had been amassed there. Their raid depended on surprise but the cult members had been tipped off and were armed and waiting. An exchange of gunfire ensued as the unarmed sect leader David Koresh appeared at the gates of the compound to talk to the agents. Both sides claimed the other shot first. This initial skirmish cost the lives of four agents and six cult members. The siege ended on 19 April with the compound turning into a blazing inferno killing 76 Branch Davidians including Koresh.

The lineage of the Branch Davidians can be traced back to the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Church and is typical of how many cults emerge. In the 1930s a group formed within the SDA around Victor Houteff, an SDA teacher who claimed to have a new message for the Church. This group called themselves the Davidians and broke away from the mainstream Church. Following Houteff's death in the 50s and a dispute over leadership, another splinter group formed calling themselves the Branch Davidians and elected Vernon Howell, later to be known as David Koresh, as their head. Koresh was dyslexic, had a poor record at school but had memorised the New Testament by the age of 11. By 1993 was claiming to have the power of prophesy.

## All Aboard for the Gates of Heaven!

Heavens Gate was a new-age cult based in San Diego, California that became famous in 1997 when 39 of its members committed suicide. They left behind farewell videos, which can be viewed on YouTube and even a website <http://www.heavensgate.com> which documents their beliefs and reasons for leaving this world. They believed earth was about to be 'recycled' and the only chance to escape was to 'shed' their human 'vessels' and travel on a 'space craft from the Level Above' to the gates of heaven - hence the group's name.

The beginnings of Heavens Gate can be traced back to the early 70s when Marshall Applewhite, the charismatic and artistically talented son of a Presbyterian minister, had a vision while in hospital. Although Applewhite insisted he was recovering from a heart attack, former members of the group reported that he was actually in a psychiatric hospital seeking a cure for his homosexuality. In any case, his aversion to sex of any kind informed the belief system of Heavens Gate where it was forbidden to engage in any 'human-level relationship'. In fact Applewhite had himself castrated, a procedure that seven other members also elected.

The sign Applewhite was waiting for was the Hale-Bopp comet which began to be visible to the naked eye in January 1997. Applewhite believed that an alien spacecraft – **the** spacecraft - was travelling behind the comet and that there was only a little time left to escape the impending 'wiping clean' of the earth. It was the cue to exit and beam on board. In shifts they served each other a cocktail of Phenobarbital and vodka. They died neatly in their bunks in identical tracksuits, new Nikes trainers and *Heavens Gate Away Team* armbands. In each person's pocket was a five-dollar bill and three quarters.



# The Experiments

## The Asche Conformity Experiments

Solomon Asche, a pioneer in the field of social psychology, was born in Poland in 1907 and immigrated to the US in 1920. Asche is famous for a series of experiments he conducted in the 1950s that found that social pressure could induce a person to say something that they know to be incorrect.

The experiment was advertised as a vision test to volunteers who were unknowingly placed in groups where all the other participants were confederates of the experimenter. The experiment involved a series of tests; each test involved matching a line on one card to a line of the same length (A, B or C) on another card. The participant was always the last to give their answer in the group. The experiment would start with the confederates giving the correct answers, but on certain tests they had agreed to call out an obviously incorrect line. Asche found that 75% of volunteers would give at least one incorrect answer in the series and that 36.8% gave a high proportion of incorrect answers.

It is interesting to note that when volunteers who had knowingly given a wrong answer were confronted with the true nature of the test, they attributed their performance to 'poor eyesight'. A sad indictment perhaps on the nature of human pride. However, on a more hopeful note, in tests where there was a small dissenting minority, say when there was even just one confederate who chose the correct line as opposed to the incorrect line that the majority had chosen, the tendency to conform is greatly diminished.

## The Milgram Electric Shock Experiments

Social psychologist Stanley Milgram is famous for his experiment which looked into people's willingness to obey an authority figure. Commonly known as the Electric Shock Experiments, Milgram commenced these in 1961 advertising for paid volunteers to take part in a memory experiment.

Those who volunteered understood the test to involve one other volunteer. They were both asked to select one of two slips of paper which would determine their role: *teacher* or *learner*. In fact both slips of paper had *teacher* written on them and the other volunteer was in fact an actor who would claim the role of learner each time. After the roles had been determined, the participant could see the other volunteer being wired up to an electric shock machine in a conjoined room through a window.

The experiment itself involved the teacher reading out four word pairs that the learner was to memorise. The teacher would then read out the first word of a pair and four possible answers. If the answer was correct, the teacher would move on to the next question. If incorrect, he or she was to administer an electric shock of increasing 15 volt increments until the correct answer was given. Of course the sounds of the shocks emitted from the machine and the cries of pain from the learner were fake.

After a series of shocks the learner would start banging on the wall that joined the two rooms and complain about a heart condition. At this point many subjects wanted to check on the other volunteer but were urged to continue by the experimenter with escalating commands emphasising the need to complete the experiment.

In the first series of experiments 65% of the volunteers administered 450 volts, the highest shock possible in the test and only one volunteer refused to go above the 300-volt level. Like the Asche Conformity Experiment, Milgram's Experiment revealed more disturbing tendencies in human nature. Just as the subjects in the Asche experiments were able to distance themselves from their poor performance by blaming their eyesight, so too could the subjects in the Milgram experiment who blamed the experimenter – a not too distant echo of the Nazi war crime trials.

## The Stanford Prison Experiment and Abu Ghraib

In the same way that the Milgram experiment was criticised from an ethical viewpoint for the manipulation of its participants, psychologist Philip Zimbardo's famous Stanford Prison experiment caused such emotional and psychological distress to its subjects that it had to be abandoned after just six days of what was planned



to be a 14-day study.

Zimbardo's experiment took place in 1971 in the basement of the Stanford University Psychology building. He selected 24 undergraduates from a pool of 70 for their psychological and emotional stability to take part in a prison scenario in which they were randomly assigned the role of prisoner or warden by the toss of a coin. The volunteers quickly adapted to their roles and many of the students playing guards started to perpetrate sadistic acts on their fellow students playing prisoners. When confronted by one of his own students about the psychological and emotional distress that the experiment was causing, Zimbardo realised that he had gone too far and so shut it down.

Zimbardo's experiment showed how systems that are set up with an underpinning legitimising ideology can induce the people within them to perform to roles and expectations that they would normally find unconscionable.

When the systemic acts of torture and sadism at the Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq were exposed in 2004, many noted how similar this scenario was to the Stanford University Experiment of '33 before. Zimbardo himself was dismayed that the US military blamed a 'few bad apples' for what went on at Abu Ghraib and asserted that it was not the *apples* or even the *apple barrel* (the prison itself) that enabled such behaviour but it was the *barrel maker* (the US military leadership). In this instance, as was shown at Stanford University, even *good* people can perpetrate sadistic acts on others when participating in a system where such behaviour is expected and tacitly sanctioned.



# Using Visions of Paradise in the Classroom

*Visions of Paradise* is a persuasive documentary that warns the viewer about the dangers of cults and of the techniques they use to recruit and manipulate their members. Framed by an evidence-based argument about the vulnerability of the mind in social settings, *Visions of Paradise* takes the position that cults use a matrix of psychological techniques systematically to change the beliefs of their members with the potential for devastating consequences.

## Learning Outcomes

After viewing the documentary and participating in related classroom activities, students should be able to:

- Define what a cult is.
- Understand at a basic level the psychological makeup of cult leaders.
- Identify some seminal studies in the field of social psychology.
- Identify natural and induced hypnotic or trance states in themselves and others.
- Understand how cults use attention, interest and affection to recruit new members.
- Understand how the systematic use of psychological techniques can be used to change beliefs and behaviour.
- Appreciate their own and others' psychological vulnerabilities with more insight.

## Educating Young People about Cults

*There are at least a hundred known cults operating in Australia and it has been estimated that there are over one thousand operating in the United States. Personal development courses alone are currently attracting a turnover of one billion dollars annually in Australia. Nobody knows exactly what the financial turnover in cults is worth, as large scale tax avoidance is common.*

- Louise Samways (1994)

Cults are a continuing problem. Although we usually only hear about cults when they make the news, there are many cults that fly under the media radar, high-demand groups that meet in community halls or hotel conference rooms that have the same power to destroy families, careers and lives as the prominent cults that get caught in the media spotlight. For this reason *Visions of Paradise* is a valuable resource that will educate your students about the universal human vulnerabilities that cults exploit.

*Cult: a quasi-religious organisation using devious psychological techniques to gain and control adherents.*

- Collins English Dictionary



### **Different Types of Cults**

According to Louise Samways the dictionary definition of a cult is not broad enough. Cults can also include high-demand groups that are non-religious. Commercial groups based on pyramid selling, self-development groups promising you riches and superhuman powers and even political and terrorist groups that aim to replace economic and societal systems at a local and global level all use the same psychological techniques as the *Peoples Temple* and *Heavens Gate*.

Also cults do not need to have many members; the membership can be as small as one. Abusive cultic relationships can take place between a husband and wife, boyfriend and girlfriend or even psychic and client using exactly the same techniques to manipulate and control as their larger counterparts.

### **Classroom Sensitivity**

Your classroom may be made up of people from different cultures and faiths and so for this reason you need to take a very balanced and reasoned approach to any discussion that leads into the realm of personal belief. At the same time these types of discussions are an invaluable classroom activity. Your common sense in dealing with sensitive subjects should always prevail.



# Longer Activities

## Research

*Visions of Paradise* uses the documentary form to promote a particular point of view. As you work through the documentary in class, students could be conducting their own research that would enhance their understanding of the film. This task could be introduced after viewing Part 1 of the documentary.

- Choose one of the three cults mentioned in Part 1: the Peoples Temple, the Branch Davidians or Heavens Gate. Do some research and find out what the beliefs were of the group and why they did what they did. Present your findings to the class.
- Choose one of the three studies mentioned in Part 1: Solomon Asche's Conformity Experiment, Stanley Milgram's Electric Shock Experiment or Phillip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment. Research the study and present a summary to the class.
- Do some research and identify a group not mentioned in the documentary that you consider to be a cult. Be prepared to justify your claim to the class.

## Multimedia Projects

For a longer more challenging activity with substantive and measurable outcomes students could construct their own persuasive text in the form of a multimedia project. This task could also be introduced after viewing Part 1 of the documentary.

### Description

Students research a current or past controversial **real-world** group, phenomenon or cause in order to construct a coherent and synthesised multimedia text that **promotes a particular point of view**. Students could choose to:

- Pitch an idea for a documentary and shoot a trailer for it
- Make a presentation to be delivered in class with accompanying slides and music
- Design and develop a multimedia website or CD
- Present a storyboard for a TV commercial or Infomercial
- Present a current affairs style news story or storyboard
- Evaluate in essay form a persuasive documentary such as Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* or Mike Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* or *Sicko*.

### Learning focus

- The persuasive text type
- History - controversial groups, causes, events
- Multimedia literacy
- Information literacy
- Research skills.

# Part 1: Cults & Mind Control

Duration: 9 mins 25 secs

## Snapshot

In **Part 1** you learn about some famous cults and one very famous political cult of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. You learn what a cult is and how some people become cult leaders. With reference to three notorious cults and the research into how the mind works in social situations you learn that no one is immune to being influenced by others. You meet three cult experts: **Steven Hassan** an ex-cult member and cult counsellor, **Louise Samways**, a clinical and health psychologist and **David Millikan** a Uniting Church Minister.

You also meet a **young woman** who is curious about cults but thinks only the weak or stupid join them. **Samways** and **Millikan** point out that this is a myth – normal people join cults too! Finally you are introduced to four people who joined cults: **Tore**, **Bevin**, **Matt** and **Emma**.

## Notes to the Teacher

Part 1 includes a prologue involving one of the documentary subjects talking about how he felt when he joined the cult. This is overlaid with images of a child drawing. This is an intriguing sequence which lasts a couple of minutes which aims to concentrate the viewers' attention. The first viewing should include the prologue and Part 1 without stopping.

## Pre-Viewing Discussion

- Write on the whiteboard the word **Cult** and draw a circle around it. Elicit from students **anything** that relates to the word. Accept any and all ideas and put them up.
- Put students into small groups and get each group to come up with a definition of the word *cult* and to also make a quick list of all the cults they have heard of.
- Quickly go around the room and get quick reports from each group. Avoid further discussion at this stage.

## Introduction to the documentary

- Tell students they are going to watch the first part of a documentary that has strong views about cults. Ask them to see how closely the definition they have come up with is to the one put forward in the documentary.

## Post-Viewing Discussion

- What according to the documentary is a cult? Do you agree?
- The documentary suggests that anyone could join a cult. Do you agree?
- Is there a difference between a religion and a cult? What is it?
- Do we have the right to believe anything we like? Should this right ever be limited?

## Part 1: Deconstructing the Text

**Visions of Paradise** (Norman 2009) uses several content types to build a narrative. The weaving together of narration, expert commentary, research findings, reconstructions and even a fictional character create a non-fictional narrative that argues 'normal' people join cults. It is important at this stage that students understand the conventions of the documentary and the techniques that are used to persuade the audience to a particular point of view.

- What sort of film is *Visions of Paradise*? What are the conventions of documentary? Are there different types of documentary? What are they?
- What do you think the message is that Norman wishes to convey?
- Are there different sides to the argument that Norman is proposing? Do you see them in Part 1?
- Part 1 is made up of various types of content, from interviews with experts to archival footage. What other content types can you identify in Part 1?

### Cinematic devices

Music and narrative tone plays a big part in setting mood in Part 1 as well as the juxtaposition of images and music.

- Why do you think the director starts the film with a sequence of black and white images and an unidentified voiceover?
- Does Part 1 have different moods? How are these moods created?
- What is the tone of the narration? What effect does this have on the viewer?
- What techniques are used to build tension in Part 1?



## Part 2: A Type of Paradise

Duration: 8 mins 20 secs

### Snapshot

In **Part 2** you get to know the four people who joined cults and learn of their circumstances at the time of joining.

You meet **Tore**, a lonely traveller who met an extraordinarily friendly bunch of people in Amsterdam. Tore was overwhelmed by the attention and love he felt from his new friends. When he was asked by two women to move in with them, he did so.

You meet **Matt**, a married man, whose wife had just given birth to a sick baby. Both exhausted, they sought help from their family doctor who advised them to visit a nearby Christian group for some respite care. His wife was immediately attracted to the friendly people she met.

You meet **Bevin**, who had just landed in Australia from New Zealand looking for a fresh start. He and his newly-formed band to attend a clowning workshop to learn some stage skills. He was immediately attracted to the charismatic and workshop leader he met.

And you meet **Emma**, new to the city and far from her home and family. From a chance encounter with a friendly person on the street who asks the time to an invitation to a movie night with some committed Christians, she was impressed by enthusiasm of the people she meets.

### Notes for the Teacher

Tell your students that in Part 2 they are going to find out how the four people introduced in Part 1 joined cults.

### Pre-Viewing Discussion

- In your group write a profile of the type of person who might join a cult. Share this with the class.
- In what circumstances do you think someone might be more inclined to join a cult?

### Post-Viewing Discussion

- What do you think each person was looking for when they joined their respective cults?
- Were there any similarities with each person's story?
- What do you now think is the typical profile of someone likely to join a cult?

## Part 2: Deconstructing the Text

In Part 2 the four subjects start to tell their stories. The interviewee's eye-line helps to convey a confessional-type atmosphere. The use of title cards helps with narrative structure. As well, commentary from the cult experts introduced in Part 1 serves to frame the personal stories with a psychological argument.

- In Part 2, the four subjects start to tell their stories. What device(s) does the director use to help the viewer keep track of each story?
- The interviews for this documentary were conducted in such a way that the interviewer is never seen or heard. As well, the subjects are looking more or less towards the camera. Why do you think the director chose to present the subjects' stories in this way?
- Why are title cards used in Part 2?
- Why does the director use the family photographs in the film?
- What is the climax of Part 2? How do we know this?
- Is one person's story favoured over the others at this point?





## Part 3: Changing the Belief System

Duration: 8 mins 14 secs

### Snapshot

In **Part 3**, you find out about what happened to each person once they joined their respective cults. You hear how groups use love and attention to pull in new members and create social bonds with existing members. You also learn how cults use hypnotic techniques and peer pressure to change their members' behaviours and belief systems.

As time goes by each person finds that their relationships are controlled more and more by the group. **Matt** gets sent to Canada to remove him from contact with his family. **Emma** is told to cut off all contact with her family.

### Notes for the Teacher

In Part 3, you find out what happens inside cults. Once committed to the group's purpose and socially bonded to other followers, new members are subject to a range of techniques that are designed to change the belief system.

Tell your class that Part 3 is about the techniques cults use to change beliefs. It may be worthwhile spending some time briefly on the topic of *belief* before you watch.

### Pre-Viewing Discussion

- What is a belief exactly?
- Can beliefs be changed?
- What sorts of life events can change beliefs?
- What sort of techniques do you think cults use to change people's beliefs?

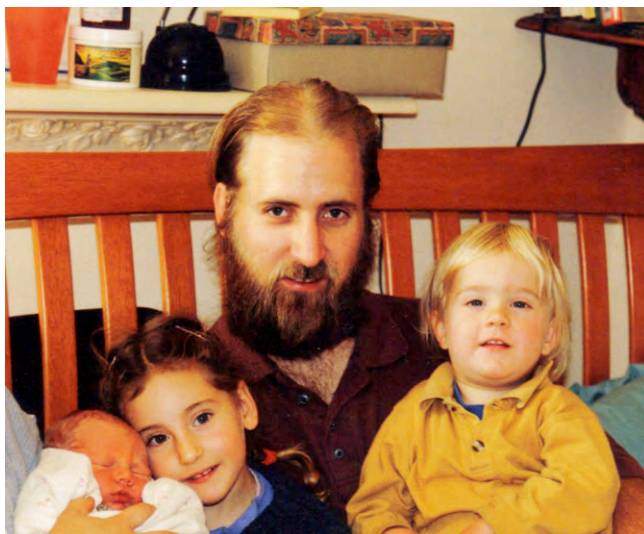
### Post-Viewing Discussion

- Do you agree that we live in an era where people are more isolated from each other than other eras? Why do you think this is?
- What are the techniques presented in Part 3 that change belief systems?
- Can you think of any groups that use these techniques in a beneficial way?
- Can you think of a time when you were influenced by peer pressure? Do you agree that peer pressure is a powerful means of controlling people? Is peer pressure always a bad thing?
- Do you agree with Samways' definition of hypnosis? Can you think of time when you went into a trance or dream state? What caused this state? Is this an inherently bad state to be in?
- Why do you think the people in cults put up with being told who they can see or what they can do?

### Part 3: Deconstructing the Text

Part 3 opens with a montage of people on an escalator at a train station and walking on the streets in a city. Another sequence involves the young woman in a shopping centre. In both sequences filmic techniques in post-production have been applied to affect the viewer and support the story being told. Use of colour saturation, blurring and time changes from slow to fast motion help to create feelings of isolation, chaos and disorientation.

- In Part 3, in the train station/city and shopping centre sequence some techniques have been applied to the vision in post production. What are they? How do they affect the viewer? Why do you think they are used here?
- Look at Part 3 in terms of rhythm and contrast. Are there different types of rhythms being used here? Why do you think they are used?



## Part 4: Escaping a Cult

Duration: 8 mins 45 seconds

### Snapshot

In **Part 4**, you learn of the struggle each person went through in order to leave the cult they were in.

**Tore** is sent to India to do missionary work with his wife and family. Following a disagreement on a minor point of scripture he is kicked out of the group with no money to get home.

**Matt** makes a friend in Canada and starts to ask difficult questions that the cult leaders cannot answer. He is kicked out but his wife decides to stay.

**Bevin** hears some disturbing news about some 'seedy' activities in the cult and leaves taking his family with him.

**Emma** is tricked into speaking to a cult counsellor on a trip home for Christmas. During the intervention she starts to see her group for what it really is.

### Notes for the Teacher

By now your students should be keen to know how **Tore**, **Matt**, **Bevin** and **Emma** escaped their respective cults. As Part 5 is quite short you could view Parts 4 and 5 together (15 minutes duration).

In Samways' book *Dangerous Persuaders* she explains that people who voluntarily leave cults do so because they either become disillusioned with the reality of the group not living up the rhetoric or they leave because they cannot keep up with the cult's constant demands. Other cult members though are forcibly ejected. Breaking a rule, questioning authority and even not being happy are all reasons for members being asked to leave. In Part 4 you find out that **Tore** and **Matt** were asked to leave for questioning authority. **Bevin** becomes disillusioned and **Emma** escapes as a result of an intervention staged by her parents. She is tricked into talking to an expert counsellor who skilfully breaks through her perception of the group.

### Pre-Viewing

It is recommended you view Parts 4 and 5 together. This will take around 15 minutes.

- Do a recap on each person's story so far. On the whiteboard write up the names **Matt**, **Emma**, **Tore** and **Bevin**. Elicit from your students each person's story.
- After the recap, explain what an intervention is. Tell your students that one of these four was tricked into leaving through an intervention. Ask them to guess which one.

## Part 5: Dealing with Cults

Duration: 6 mins 33 secs

### Snapshot

In **Part 5**, Hassan explains the universal longing to return to the comfort and simplicity of life as a child and the safety of having a God-like parent to protect you.

**Matt** and **Tore** have trouble adjusting to life outside and **Bevin** talks of how his views of his cult experience changed over time. **Emma** however, decides to go back and try to change things in the group. She is denounced in church for being the 'daughter of Satan'.

You meet the **young woman** again. She is approached by a young man who invites her to a free lecture on happiness. She is tempted to go but a quick search on the internet throws up some information that makes her think twice.

### Notes for the Teacher

In Part 5 Hassan explains that the reason why cults are so attractive is that they offer a retreat from the complexities of life. Inside a cult you return to the simplicity and clarity of life as a child who has an all-loving-all-knowing-all-powerful parent. It may be worthwhile spending some time discussing the nature of growing up and the inevitable challenges that arise as one moves from dependence to independence.

The documentary ends with a very strong message about doing research before making any big life decisions. In the documentary you see the young woman use a search engine to find out about the lecturer who is giving a free talk.

### Post-Viewing

- What are the views of each of the four ex-cult members looking back on their experience?
- Do you think each person's view of their experience changed over time? Why?
- Do you think Emma's family had the right to trick her the way they did?
- At what point do you think deceiving someone for their own good is justified?
- If you had a friend who is doing something that you believe is bad for them, how far would you go to help them?
- What do you think is the best strategy for dealing with friends or loved ones who join cults?

### Part 5: Deconstructing the Text

Part 5 begins with a reprise of the black and white child images that opened the film. The film ends with a strong message to the viewer about how to search the internet to find out about groups that may be cults.

- What purpose does the series of black and white images of the child serve in the documentary?
- Are there any other documentaries you have seen that are like *Visions of Paradise*? How are they similar?
- What do you think is the other side of the argument that Norman proposes?
- Does it weaken or strengthen Norman's argument that the other side of the argument is not presented?

- How could the other side have been presented to help support Norman's argument?
- Who do you think the audience is for this documentary? Why do you think this?
- To make this documentary more suitable for adults would it need to change? How would you change it?
- Can you think of any other medium that would be appropriate for the message of **Visions of Paradise**? How would it need to change if you made it into a newspaper article, an academic essay, a website or even a dramatic mini-series?

### Dealing with People in Cults

Hassan argues that the most important thing to do when someone you know joins a cult is to remain in relationship with them. The last thing you want to say to them is "Hey! You are in a cult! Get out!". If you say that and give the cult member a choice of losing you as a friend or their identity and reason for living, you will lose every time.

In the past concerned families enlisted professionals to forcibly deprogram their loved ones lost in cults. This approach was not always successful, highly risky and above all illegal. Today Steven Hassan proposes a much gentler approach to helping people in cults. He calls this the **Strategic Interaction Approach**. It involves:

- Building rapport and trust with the cult member. Be curious about what the cult member believes and be careful to not dismiss it or be directly critical.
- Studying and understanding how mind control works.
- Studying and understanding what the cult believes and how its tactics for controlling its members.
- Interacting with the cult and pre-cult identity of your friend.
- Unlocking cult-induced phobias. The phobias that a cult implants in its members will be specific and work to stop cult members from being able to contemplate a life outside. Find out what they believe will happen if they leave.
- Conducting goal-oriented mini-interactions. Be realistic about what you can achieve with the cult member. Keep in mind the big picture which may take time.

According to Hassan, it is not easy to get someone out of a cult, you need to be well prepared and in the game for the long haul.

*For more information about the **Strategic Interaction Approach** read Hassan's book **Releasing the Bonds**.*

# References

## Books

- Aron, R. *Cults: Too Good to Be True*
- Hassan, S. *Combatting Cult Mind Control: The #1 Best-selling Guide to Protection, Rescue, and Recovery from Destructive Cults*
- Hassan, S. *Releasing the Bonds: Empowering people to think for themselves*
- Lifton, R.J. *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*
- Samways, L. *Your Mindbody Energy: How to Access your Hidden Energies and Take Control of Your Life*
- Samways, L. *Dangerous Persuaders: An Expose of Cults in Australia*
- Singer, M. *Cults in Our Midst: The Continuing Fight Against their Hidden Menace*

## Websites

### Cult Education

<http://www.freedomofmind.org>

<http://www.louisesamways.com>

<http://www.rickross.com>

### Jonestown

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonestown>

### Waco Siege

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Koresh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Koresh)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waco\\_Siege](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waco_Siege)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Branch\\_Davidian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Branch_Davidian)

### Heavens Gate

<http://www.heavensgate.com>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heaven%27s\\_Gate\\_\(religious\\_group\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heaven%27s_Gate_(religious_group))

<http://www.rickross.com/groups/heavensgate.html>

### Asche Conformity Experiments

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asch\\_conformity\\_experiments](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asch_conformity_experiments)

### Milgram Electric Shock Experiment

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram\\_experiment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram_experiment)

### Stanford Prison Experiment

<http://www.prisonexp.org/>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford\\_prison\\_experiment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford_prison_experiment)

### CULT HELP IN AUSTRALIA

<http://www.cifs.org.au>

email: [info@cifs.org.au](mailto:info@cifs.org.au)

mobile: 0423 332 766

#### In Queensland

email: [infoqld@cifs.org.au](mailto:infoqld@cifs.org.au)

mobile: 0413 082 344

<http://www.evd.net.au>