



## **Cult Trip: Inside the world of coercion and control**

**By Anke Richter**

**Reviewed by Joseph Szimhart**

*HarperCollins Publishers, 2023. ISBN: 978-1775492344, ISBN 10: 1775492346, ebook: \$10.99, paperback 352 pages.*

There is something perversely disordered about cult leaders who confuse entitlement with enlightenment. This confusion gets worse when primitive, narcissistic appetites drive power to express sex in predatory ways that non-human animals never imagine. Evil is the word we invented to indicate intentionally deceptive and harmful human behavior, no matter what the excuse. Anke Richter, a keen journalist who spent over a decade researching the groups featured in this book (first published in 2022 in New Zealand), deserves appreciation for a job well done: She managed to keep my interest in what for me is a saturated topic about the evil in insular cults. Too many lurid stories will turn a cult specialist and a student of quirky new movements like me into a jaded observer. However, I recently reviewed a new book about the Sullivanians<sup>1</sup> whose behaviors as a therapy cult and commune, with behaviors similar to the groups examined by Richter, left me with revulsion. We *should* feel revulsed. We *should* want to help the former members and assist with social change to prevent the worst from occurring at all. That is Richter's intent, and she achieves it.

We can recall the banality of evil observed by Hannah Arendt while reporting on the Nazi war-crime trials after World War II. Arendt was commenting on immoral behavior that became normalized within the Nazi regime—evil became commonplace. Hitler became the symbol of that evil, but he was not the cause of it. Instead, according to Arendt, Hitler was an immoderate catalyst for social change and national pride. He had a severe personality disorder. So, like most people I know, when I read this stuff, I want to stop the leaders, to rid the universe of them. But ridding the world of cult leaders is no guarantee of ending cult expansion—we still have Nazis, so we have to be as careful with solutions as Arendt was in her exploration of nuances. The nuances are the human nuances of knowing that these leaders and followers are, to some degree, us. Finding fault with, and exploring recovery from, cultic abuse is complicated. *Cult Trip* does not avoid the complicated.

“This book contains descriptions of rape, sexual assault and child sexual abuse” is the cautionary alert before the dedication and first pages of *Cult Trip*. In *Cult Trip* we learn, sometimes in graphic detail, that the male leaders of groups called Gloriavale, Centrepoint, and Agama used their charismatic powers of persuasion and the promises of salvation and enlightenment to satisfy their most perverse appetites to abuse children as well as adults. As a reviewer, it remains necessary for me, out of a desire for psychological self-stability, to sustain the difference between reading about pornography and reading pornography. How could any group descend into such disturbing behavior? And why am I reading about it? It is

certainly not out of voyeurism that too often marks audiences fascinated with a Netflix series about a horrible cult.

Before awakening to the structure of evil behavior deemed not only acceptable but encouraged as necessary in the deeper layers of some groups, the author participated in her share of eccentric and cult-like groups during her spiritual journey. As a result, Richter had inside access to ex-members, members, and leaders, and she participated firsthand in many of these groups' ecstatic and meditative rituals. Although many other groups are mentioned, the book concentrates on three:

1. Centrepoint commune was founded in a rural area around Albany, New Zealand in 1977 by Herbert "Bert" Potter (1925-2012) and a few dozen others as a therapeutic encounter group that employed ego-destruction techniques and psychedelic drugs like MDMA and LSD to create a higher, liberated self. The commune grew to over 200 at its peak, but it dissolved within 22 years after scandals and abuses were revealed by ex-members and in the press. Over three hundred children passed through its therapeutic abuses, most introduced between ages 11 and 13 to sex with adults. "Bert Says" was the authoritative clue that the voice of a god was speaking and must be heeded. Several leaders, including Bert Potter and his son, were sentenced to prison time for sexual abuse of minors. The leader remained unrepentant, a sign of deep personality disorder. Some former members have maintained that the experience at Centrepoint, overall, was good for them.
2. Agama Yoga, at one time the world's largest tantric yoga school, is located in Thailand. Agama was founded in 2003 by Romanian national Narcis Tarcau who renamed himself Swami Vivekananda Saraswati. Thousands of seekers have taken yoga courses there, while at its peak the commune or inner circle grew to around two hundred core members. After being outed on social media around 2020 as an abuser and sexual predator, Tarcau fled. He hid for a time, only to return, lauded by many followers still under his spell. The price of exposing the leader on two major media documentaries, including on Netflix, led to a feeling of deflation years later among the whistleblowers. Public interest in their sensational if truthful stories about a rape cult waned, and little was done legally to correct the wrongs. "Unlike with Harvey Weinstein or NXIVM founder Keith Raniere, justice hasn't been done" (p. 224).
3. Back in New Zealand, the author turns to a rural commune that appears most unlike Agama and Centrepoint at first glance. Agama and Centrepoint appeared to be erotically aligned, self-realization hippie cults that paid no attention to conservative Christian principles. Gloriavale residents who numbered in the six hundreds at its peak and were mostly children, looked more like a throwback Mennonite commune with its women in long blue dresses and men in modest, plain attire. Using the King James Bible and the superstar fame of Jesus as savior for bait, Gloriavale's founder, Hopeful Christian, aka Neville Cooper, found ways to sexually control and abuse all the women either through the men or personally for his own sick pleasure. Cooper was an Australian preacher who formed his cult in 1969. Outsiders initially called the group the Cooperites. As the commune developed, couples with more than eight children were not unusual. Women were expected to get pregnant again shortly after giving birth. The leader would expose his penis in open meetings to minors as well as adults to demonstrate sexual acts. All goods were held in common, the group was very productive with its farm and other businesses, and thousands of locals would come to watch theatrical performances by the group. What they saw as well-organized, happy people only hid what was truly happening offstage. Leaving the group by choice or being pressured to leave if non compliant meant hardship as ex-

members departed with little support and education. Save for some charitable outsiders at local Christian churches who offered care, many would not otherwise dare to quit the commune.

The author writes in her epilogue in July 2022, "I'm taking a break from researching cults— while processing my own involvement in what I was once so passionate about. My perspectives keep changing" (p. 333). That is an extraordinary statement, but it reflects what the book's title indicates: Anke Richter has been on a personal cult trip while examining other cults for decades. As a result, the book is as much a testament to remaining experimentally "spiritual" as it is about the mechanics or social psychology of harmful group behavior. I imagine that the author, like so many others fascinated by the lessons we can learn from cults, is wondering if there is something more substantial and sacred about living than what we can experience at another self-realization workshop, during a drug-induced ecstasy, or living in a specialized commune that manages your life so you can feel very special, if not superior.

Lately, during climbing season, it has become very crowded on Mt. Everest. The high is extraordinary and divine. The risks are enormous. Humans are not naturally meant to survive for long at that altitude. In the end, you always have to come back down. Peak experiences are highly overrated and oversold in the cult world.

Note:

[1] See Alexander Stille's *The Sullivanians: Sex, psychotherapy, and the wild life of an American commune*, published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux in 2023.

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