

Hank Hanegraaff Defends Teen Mania Against 'Cult' Accusations

Teen Mania Ministries (TMM), the youth organization founded by Ron Luce, was portrayed as a mind control cult in a Sunday MSNBC exposé titled "Mind over Mania." In reality, the MSNBC piece is a case study in sophistry, sloppy journalism and sensationalism.

In "Mind over Mania," Doug and Wendy Duncan, billed as experts specializing in recovery from mind control, seek to establish the allegation that all eight criteria of Robert Jay Lifton's "Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China"* are active in the teachings and practices of TMM.

In reality, the anecdotal evidence they provide clearly fails to establish the outrageous "brainwashing" allegations. Moreover, many of the arguments proffered against TMM could just as easily be used to establish historic Christianity as a thought reform cult. Equally significant is the fact that cult mind control as a sociological model has been utterly discredited.

If brainwashing techniques did not work in the 20th century reeducation camps of communist China, it is sophistry to suppose it to be effectively employed in the ES0AL (Emotionally Stretching Opportunity of A Lifetime) weekend retreat of TMM's Honor Academy.

Furthermore, while it is viscerally arresting to watch sensationalistic images of teenagers gagging on organic worms, it should be noted that footage hyped ad nauseum by the MSNBC promotion machine was recorded during the heyday of NBC's *Fear Factor*, a TV program that elevated consumption of worms to

veritable cult status.

Nonetheless, Teen Mania leadership readily acknowledges that such practices were unwise and thus have rescinded them. As well, participants were clearly warned that the ESOAL event was designed to be physically and mentally challenging and were free to end their participation at will.

Finally, on a personal note, I have been acquainted with Ron Luce and TMM for over 20 years. I have found Ron to be a passionate father, husband and ministry leader. Indeed, I still remember how impressed I was upon initially meeting one of his daughters. Since then I have recognized him to be thoughtful, teachable and thoroughly committed to the essentials of historic Christianity.

While I strongly disagree with Ron on various secondary matters, I stand shoulder to shoulder with him on the doctrines that form the line of demarcation between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the cults. It is likewise noteworthy that TMM is a member in good standing with the Evangelical Council of Financial Accountability (ECFA) and operates under the oversight of a credible board of directors, which includes Paul Nelson, former director of ECFA.

* The following are Lifton's eight criteria of thought reform as presented in "Mind over Mania":

Milieu Control. Control of information and communication from without and within the group environment resulting in isolation.

Mystical Manipulation. The claim of divine authority or spiritual advancement that allows the leader to reinterpret events as he wishes.

Demand for Purity. The world is viewed as black and white and group members are constantly exhorted to strive for perfection.

The Cult of Confession. Serious sins, as defined by the group, are to be confessed either privately to a personal monitor or publicly to the group at large.

The “Sacred Science.” The doctrine of the group is considered to be the ultimate truth, beyond all questioning or dispute.

Loading the Language. The group interprets or uses words and phrases in new ways so that often the outside world does not understand. This jargon consists of thought-terminating clichés, which serve to alter members’ thought processes to conform to the group’s way of thinking.

Doctrine over Person. The personal experiences of the group members are subordinated to the Truth held by the group.

Dispensing of Existence. Those outside the group are unspiritual, worldly, satanic, “unconscious,” and they must be converted to the ideas of the group or they will be lost.

Hank Hanegraaff *is president of the Christian Research Institute, host of the Bible Answer Man broadcast, and author of many best-selling books, including Christianity in Crisis: 21st Century.*