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Television

Bill Mandel



The righteousness hustle

The ABC News Closeup "New Religions: Holiness or Heresy?" which will air at 10 tonight on Channel 7 (KGO) represents a frightening erosion of journalistic standards and values.

The title of the program promises a look on a spiritual level at the ideas, such as they may be, underlying some of America's new religious-philosophical wrinkles. Instead, the program labors for an hour in very secular ways to prove what a thinking person might agree to before an argument—that deeply-held religious belief can lead to gullibility and fanaticism.

"Holiness or Heresy?" has chosen to focus on two current "fad" religions, Scientology and the Unification Church of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

Both of these belief systems invite close analysis and explanation. I, for one, would love to know what force could yank a typical American middle-class youngster away from home, school and normal social development and turn him or her into no more than a beggar, trying any story to eadge money from strangers on filthy street corners for Rev. Moon. I've read a lot of print stories on Moon and his ways, but TV offers a special chance for person-to-person communication. What does Moon really say to these kids?

That, however, is not the aim of "Holiness or Heresy?" Rather, the show chugs along at the lowest level of journalism's arsenal—the smear by association. We are told that Moon, a wealthy Korean industrialist who, like many business tycoons, has been bitten by the God bug, is tied intimately to South Korean dictator Park Chung Hee, and the implication is made that the whole Church is a front for a pro-Park propaganda machine.

ABC must consider objectivity, or at least its appearance, vestigial. Because correspondent-narrator Jim Kincaid says flat-out, "Moon uses religion as a shield for his military and political aims. His Unification Church is a political organization contributing to Moon's personal wealth and the aims of South Korea."

I am no sympathizer of Moon's. In fact, his clean-cut sales minions are the only ones I refuse to buy junk from on the street, because they will tell any lie just to get money. But thousands of American youngsters have left their normal lives to give everything, literally, to Moon. Is a TV journalist fulfilling his mandate by rehashing old, well-known information that the would-be Messiah is well-connected to his government? I think not.

As long as we're discussing questions I'd like to see answered on "Holiness or Heresy?" why didn't the producer, Tony Batten, ponder this thought: When a young woman renounces the world to enter a convent, it's a happy occasion; when a young woman does the same for Moon, it's a tragedy, something worth hiring a paid kidnaper over. Why? And weren't the early Christians wild-eyed zealots, doing very extreme things to protect themselves from persecution, as today's new cultists perceive themselves as doing? We get no hint on this program, which is a wasted opportunity, a damn shame.

And as for the Scientology segment, Kincaid labors long to prove that Scientology is just another dance lesson con, a weird system of bogus ideas, backed up by specious technical gadgets, all aimed at getting the unwary to buy more lessons.

—10:00 P.M.—

- ①—News: Hambrick-Richmond
- ②—10—Sarnady Jones: Betty becomes personally involved in a murder inquiry is investigating when the suspect turns out to be a man she once loved (repeat)
- ③—11-13—ABC News Closeup: "New Religions — Holiness or Heresy?" Examination of why young people are increasingly attracted to new religions; focusing on the Unification Church founded by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, and the Church of Scientology, started by L. Ron Hubbard (60 min.)