

WHAT IS A “HIGH-DEMAND RELIGIOUS GROUP”?



OVERVIEW

The term “high-demand religious group” is used in academic literature to describe a particular type of religious group.

In simple terms, a high-demand religious group is one that has a significant impact on many areas of members’ lives, often including their education and employment opportunities, relationships, resources and lifestyle choices. A high level of commitment in these areas to the group’s norms and leadership is required for an individual to retain their group membership.

While there are high demands placed on members who remain in such groups, there are also high demands placed on those who leave them. This is because high-demand religious groups often maintain very strong psycho-social boundaries between members and non-members. As a result, any person who leaves faces significant challenges as they transition out of the group.

This article is intended to provide brief context for the Olive Leaf Network’s use of the term ‘high-demand religious group’ (HDRG). While specific details of high-demand religious communities can vary greatly, the following article seeks to briefly identify their common characteristics and to define the term in plain language. It also outlines why people who leave high-demand religious groups often need a high level of support as they integrate into wider society.

WHO IS ASKING THE QUESTION?

A number of different terms have been used by media, the public, religious groups themselves, and former members, to describe the variety of religious groups in modern society. Scholars from a range of academic fields including sociology, psychology, theology and history have vigorously debated the correct language. Are these groups cults, sects, or simply churches? Communes, or New-Age religions? Are descriptors such as fundamentalist, totalitarian, insular, and authoritarian appropriate and/or correctly used? Some of these religious groups have common characteristics in their social structures, the ways in which they relate to individual members, and the ways in which they relate to wider society.

Often the language employed depends on the perspective and positionality of the person asking the question.¹ Given that one’s perspective can influence the terminology used, we start by setting out the positionality and purpose of the author of this document, and of the Olive Leaf Network.

This document was written to describe the Olive Leaf Network’s use of the term. Olive Leaf contributors are often former members of such groups. The author of this document is a former member of what could qualify as a ‘high-demand religious group’; the Exclusive Brethren, now rebranded as the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC). As such, the author’s positionality of being raised in and excommunicated from this group has impacted their perspective and they have chosen terms that they believe most accurately represent their experience.

At the outset of this discussion, it is also worth noting that sometimes ‘high-demand’ groups are also described as ‘sectarian’, ‘closed’,² or ‘high-cost’,³ and these are equally valid terms with their own emphases.⁴

WHAT IS MEANT BY THE ADJECTIVE, 'HIGH'?

The label 'high-demand' is usually given to groups whereby members are required to have a high level of participation in shared beliefs, lifestyles and practices.⁵

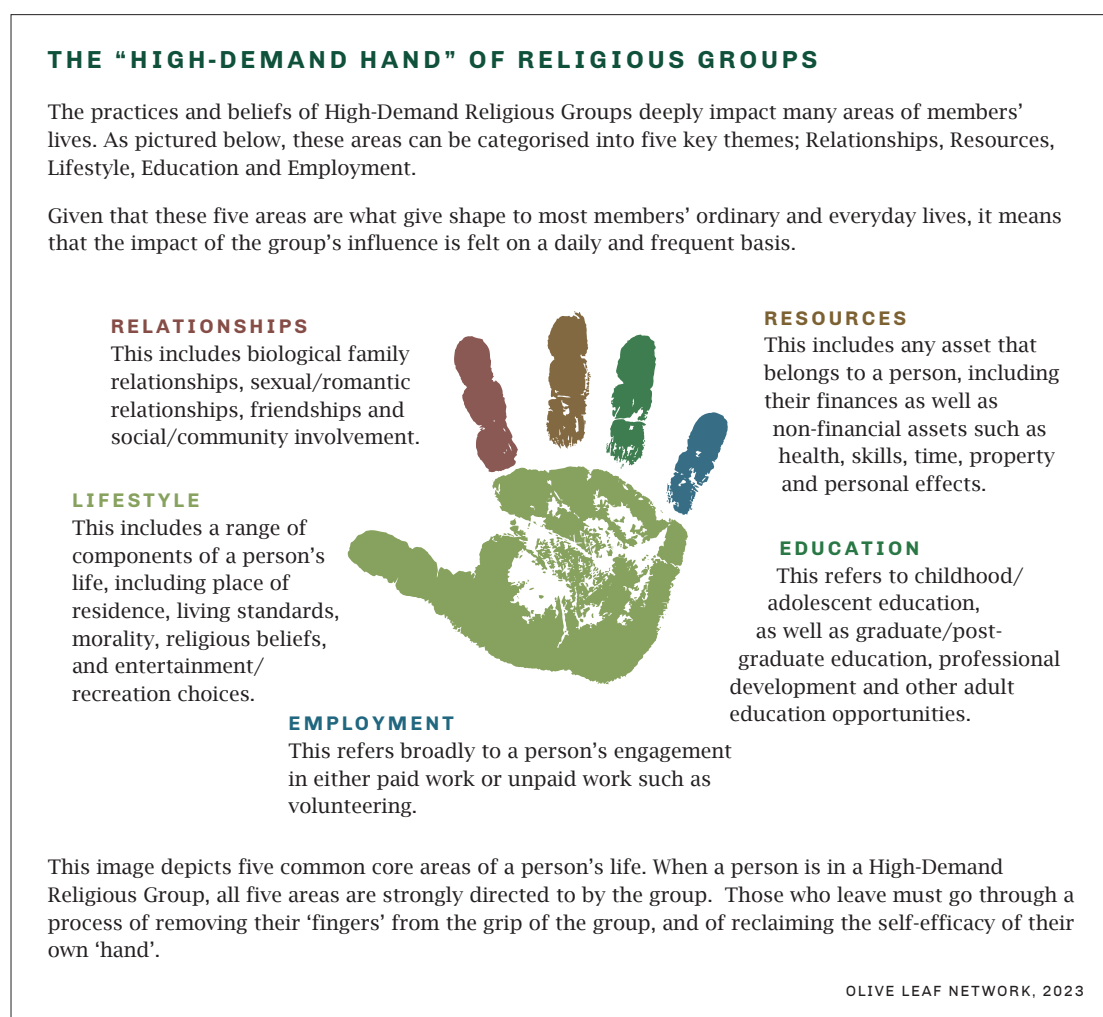
There is no widely-used scientific or sociological measurement available to define exactly what comprises a 'high' level of participation. However, a primary indicator is that a high number of core elements of a member's life are impacted by the group's requirements.⁶

These elements can be broadly categorised into the following five areas; education, employment, relationships, resources, and lifestyle (see Fig.1). If there are multi-weekly or daily requirements in each of these five areas for members of a group, it is likely that the group could be termed 'high-demand'.

In summary, the adjective 'high' describes that a high number of elements of a member's social, economic and personal life are directed by the religious group, and that this is necessary in order to sustain membership.

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FIG. 1.



WHAT IS MEANT BY THE WORD 'DEMAND'?

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word 'demand' means to call for something "in an authoritative way",⁷ or to make a "claim as a right" or "pressing requirement" on another.⁸

To demand is to ask for something in a manner that implies the recipient of the request has little or no alternative other than to comply. This is the difference between a 'request' and a 'demand'; in the former, there is an implication that a person feels able to either freely comply with or deny what is being asked of them; whereas the latter implies no viable option other than compliance.

If a religious group has requirements for members where there is no viable alternative other than compliance, then those 'requests' can be termed 'demands'. In a high-demand group, the costs of not acquiescing to a requirement may make it a demand. For example, demands regarding clothing may not mean that a woman is physically forced to wear long skirts or dresses instead of trousers or shorts. However, if she were to refuse to comply with the dress requirements, the resultant negative social, familial, and personal consequences may mean that she feels psychologically unable to do anything other than as the group requires. The cost of not meeting the requirements placed upon her in terms of clothing are too great for her to do anything other than comply, and so this request can be seen as being a 'demand'.

There are many ways for a high-demand religious group to ensure its members acquiesce to its demands. The most obvious is by enforcing group discipline on members who fail to meet demands. These forms of group discipline often involve highly effective psychosocial means, such as strict familial and social excommunication and/or persistent visitation by authority figures representing the group. These practices and their consequences create a high cost for any member who refuses to comply with group demands.⁹

A religious group may view such consequences, however challenging for the recipient, as divinely endorsed and therefore acceptable measures for gaining submission. Regardless, the net outcome is that certain demands are made by the group, and the member either meets them, or pays the high psychosocial costs of non-compliance.

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WHAT IS MEANT BY THE WORD 'RELIGIOUS'?

Our post-modern and increasingly pluralistic world frequently contests what is really meant by 'sacred' and 'secular', and what constitutes 'religious'. Social phenomena observed at rugby games and concerts might be described as 'worship' by some, and census returns show a growing number of people identifying as Jedi or Pastafarian - belief structures centred around a way of life rather than belief in a higher power. For the purpose of this article we state the more traditional view that a 'religious group' is one that believes its lifestyle, doctrines and practices are the outworking of faith in one or more deities.

HIGH-DEMAND AND HIGH-COST: A TRUE DILEMMA

'High-cost' and 'high-demand' have a symbiotic relationship whereby members are left with little personal choice regarding compliance. This may be acceptable in situations where an adult has made a voluntary choice to join such a group, and has knowingly and willingly accepted a life of high demands and high costs (for example, monks who choose to forgo personal ownership of material goods and accept other restrictions). However, many high-demand religious groups actively encourage procreation and the raising of children within the particular beliefs and practices of the group. These children have not personally chosen to join the group, and are rarely encouraged to consider the validity of other beliefs or lifestyles. High-demand religious groups often actively shelter born-and-raised members from exposure to alternative belief systems, and restrict opportunities for external engagement. For example, access to education and employment opportunities outside of the group may be heavily curtailed. This creates significant barriers for any member raised in the group who wishes to leave, and means they may struggle with integration into wider society if or when they do.

Another hallmark of high-demand religious groups is a substantial power differentiation between the group leader(s) and an individual member. The group, via its leader(s)/representative(s), is able to make demands of an individual and discipline any denial of those demands, but the reverse never applies. High-demand groups usually have a strongly authoritarian leadership hierarchy, where group leader(s) have a high level of power and authority over other members' lives. A life of submission to a powerful religious leader may be acceptable for an adult who has willingly and knowingly chosen this, but those born and raised in such groups are not given a meaningful, low-cost opportunity to make this choice for themselves. Their 'choice' is a true dilemma; they must either accept for themselves the stringent lifestyle into which they were born, or face the unavoidably high cost of leaving.

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Religious groups all exist on a commitment-cost axis, and it's possible to be high-commitment but low-cost. For example, some Anglican orders require a high level of participation, but leaving is relatively low-cost and does not result in familial or social excommunication or a change of employment. Historically, many religious groups were both high-demand and high-cost, as seen by the ostracism and sometimes even execution of so-called heretics in past centuries. Some religious subsets still hold such beliefs, however in the 21st Century high-demand and high-cost religious practices that cause harm, trauma or death are seen as anachronistic and a violation of human rights.

SUMMARY

In summary, there are two aspects that set apart a 'high-demand' religious group from other religious groups, namely:

- The group has a significant and frequent impact on key elements of members' lives, including their education, employment, resources, relationships and lifestyle choices.
- Group members receive these 'requests' as demands they must meet, because the costs of refusal are too high to be considered viable.

Accordingly, in order to retain membership in a high-demand religious group, a member must acquiesce to the group's high demands on these five core elements of their life. For those who desire to stay in such a group, the perceived benefits, such as belonging to a close-knit group or believing one has special status in the eyes of a deity/deities, may outweigh the costs of staying. However, if a member refuses to meet those demands, they will face high-cost consequences. Frequently, those costs are significantly life-altering or even traumatic, especially when disaffiliation from the group results in social, spiritual and familial excommunication.

Leaving a high-demand religious group has been called a kind of death,¹⁰ involving enormous changes to a person's social, economic, spiritual, familial and mental spheres. It often entails significant upheaval and reconstruction of a person's identity.¹¹

The authors of a recent study of such leavers conclude:

"Leaving a high-cost religious group may mean significant changes and challenges in one's life and experiences of living in between two different worlds. At first, one may experience being an outsider in a new world and not belonging anywhere. However, disaffiliation also leads to many beneficial aspects, such as positive feelings, experiences and life changes. Life after leaving a religious affiliation can be described as living in a movement back and forth between difficulties and well-being. Eventually, when one gains one's 'foothold' again, life takes on a new, positive direction."¹²

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It is for these reasons that the Olive Leaf Network exists: to provide aid and advocacy for former members of high-demand religious groups as they navigate the complexities of disaffiliation, excommunication, and of building new lives. Though the experiences of leaving a high-demand religious group may be intimidating, the Olive Leaf Network is here to show former members they are far from alone in their journey. It is possible to not only survive leaving a high-demand religious group, but to thrive after doing so!



Am I in a High-Demand Religious Group?
Take a two-minute survey by scanning this code.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 It is notable that recently, even government agencies have wrestled with what language to use. This was demonstrated in April 2022 when the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care in New Zealand released a statement on its website announcing an investigation into three 'closed faith-based communities'. It specifically named three groups; the Exclusive Brethren or Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC), Gloriavale, and the Jehovah's Witnesses. The use of the word 'closed' in this announcement and in other documentation referring to these groups has since been amended to refer simply to 'other faith-based groups'. The Royal Commission has not publicly explained this change in language, but it was possibly requested by one of the named groups.
- 2 Sometimes the adjective 'closed' is also added to 'high-demand religious group', with the acronym 'CHDG'. The word 'closed' has obvious connotations that may be applicable to a group such as the Exclusive Brethren (PBCC). However, for brevity's sake, we have not attempted to add this to our description of terms. For more on the term 'CHDG' see, Leona Furnari, "Born or Raised in Closed, High-Demand Groups: Developmental Considerations," no. e-News Vol. 4, No. 3 (2005), <https://www.spiritualabuseresources.com/articles/born-or-raised-in-closed-high-demand-groups-developmental-considerations>.
- 3 See, for example, Christopher Scheitle and Amy Adamczyk, "High-Cost Religion, Religious Switching, and Health," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 3, no. 51 (September 2010): 325-42. This article presents descriptions of "theologically, socially, and culturally exclusive" high-cost groups and provides research on the negative impacts on the health of those who leave them.
- 4 Research on 'communes' also provides significant overlap with the sociology of these groups. This is because, while some of these groups may not physically live on communal land, they may in essence be living in psycho-social communes due to the strict boundaries separating their physical, social, and personal lives from wider society. Due to this, they share many characteristics with commune-based religious groups.
- 5 Summer Anne Myers says that: "religions can be described as high-demand when they involve high time and resource commitments; emphasis on leadership, orthodox belief, and scriptural inerrancy or literalism; and strict behavioral codes including rules of diet, dress, tithing, education, sexual practices, media and technology use, language, social involvement, and marriage..." She continues: "most authors discuss a degree of social, cultural, theological, and sometimes educational, economical, or geographic separation between high-demand groups and mainstream society." Summer Anne Myers, "Visualizing the Transition Out of High-Demand Religions" (Los Angeles, Loyola Marymount University, 2017), 5.
- 6 Scholar David G. Bromley discusses disaffiliation from high-demand religious groups in his research article, *Unraveling Religious Disaffiliation*. See, David Bromley, "Unraveling Religious Disaffiliation: The Meaning and Significance of Falling From the Faith in Contemporary Society," *Counseling and Values* 35, no. 3 (April 1991): 164-85. He describes them as follows: "by definition high-demand groups occupy a special niche in society. They stand outside of mainstream society, reinforce in-group-out-group boundaries, and actively pursue suppression of individualism in favor of collective unity..." He notes they "make primary claim on individual loyalties." Bromley, 170.
- 7 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/demand>
- 8 <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/demand>
- 9 Bromley also discusses some of the factors that contribute to the high costs involved with leaving a HDRG, noting that: "individuals have so much of their lives tied up in the group, which can involve community, marriage, occupational, and religious relationships. To give up the group may well mean giving up the entire fabric of one's social life. Another reason is that affiliation often is based on a sense that the group possesses beliefs and a way of life that are qualitatively different from and superior to anything..." See Bromley, "Unraveling Religious Disaffiliation: The Meaning and Significance of Falling From the Faith in Contemporary Society," 179.
- 10 In the article "Life after Social Death", the authors describe the effects of excommunication as a "social death", stating that "by now it has become apparent that religious shunning can be associated with an array of negative impacts (e.g., social, intellectual, legal, and logistical challenges) on the individuals involved." See Heather J. Ransom et al., "Life after Social Death: Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, Identity Transition and Recovery," *Pastoral Psychology*, no. 70 (2021): 54. Note that in this article, the authors use the terms 'high-control' and 'high-cost' to describe religious groups.
- 11 Bromley describes the "considerable personal turbulence" and "arduous transition" involved in leaving a high-demand religious group, stating that "the entire process typically is fraught with ambivalence, tension, and conflict. Individuals frequently spend months, or even years, working through this process and building new lives if they have been deeply involved in the group." See Bromley, "Unraveling Religious Disaffiliation: The Meaning and Significance of Falling From the Faith in Contemporary Society," 183.
- 12 See Maria Björkmark, Peter Nynäs, and Camilla Koskinen, "Living Between Two Different Worlds': Experiences of Leaving a High-Cost Religious Group", *Journal of Religion and Health*, August 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01397-1>.

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For further reading, many articles referred to in this document can be easily accessed with a Google search.

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