

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #229

Doomsday Cults

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[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to be talking about [Doomsday](#)¹ Cults, times when a [charismatic](#)² person has managed to [convince](#)³ large groups of people that the world is about to end, or at least [plunge](#)⁴ into chaos.

[00:00:36] And as a result, tragic things have happened.

¹ the end of the world

² someone with attractive qualities, charming

³ cause people to believe that something is true

⁴ fall suddenly

Doomsday Cults

[00:00:40] I have to warn you, this episode will have plenty of slightly [unpleasant](#)⁵ stories.

[00:00:45] There will be sex, drugs, suicide and murder, and plenty of people claiming that the world is about to end.

[00:00:54] OK, you've had your warning. If you're ready for it, let's get started.

[00:01:00] Let's first start with a quick definition.

[00:01:04] What is a cult?

[00:01:07] If you look it up in a dictionary you will find definitions such as “a small religious group that is not part of a larger and more accepted religion and that has beliefs regarded by many people as extreme or dangerous”.

[00:01:23] For a cult to be a cult, and not simply a “belief”, it really needs to have three things:

[00:01:30] Firstly, it needs to be relatively small.

[00:01:34] Once a cult becomes too large, well, it becomes [mainstream](#)⁶, it becomes normalised, and it isn't really a cult at all any more. There are plenty of religions that started out being viewed as dangerous cults, and as they grew they stopped being referred to as cults.

⁵ not pleasant or enjoyable

⁶ accepted by most people, normal

Doomsday Cults

[00:01:54] And secondly, for a group to be considered to be a cult, the beliefs they hold need to be considered dangerous or extreme by [mainstream](#) society. A cult needs to pose a danger, either to normal society or to itself, to its members.

[00:02:13] And in every example we'll learn about today, there was plenty of danger, and in the next twenty minutes we will step over plenty of dead bodies.

[00:02:23] Now, there's one more thing that almost every cult has, and without which it's hard for a cult to really get started.

[00:02:32] A [charismatic](#) leader.

[00:02:34] If you've listened to our episodes on Scientology and Mormonism, you will remember the stories of how Joseph Smith and L. Ron Hubbard were incredibly [charismatic](#) men and managed to encourage others to follow them.

[00:02:51] The [doomsday](#) cults we'll learn about today have similarly [charismatic](#) leaders, men who may well have been [insane](#)⁷ and in some cases [horrendously](#)⁸ evil, but certainly men with the ability to persuade others to follow them, to do what they said, which meant killing [on their behalf](#)⁹, and even killing themselves for them.

⁷ mentally ill, mad

⁸ in a terrifying or horrible way

⁹ in their name or interests

Doomsday Cults

[00:03:15] And when you add in the [doomsday](#) element, the idea that the end of the world is [imminent](#)¹⁰, people can clearly be persuaded to do all sorts of slightly unusual things.

[00:03:30] So, let's just get right into it and [kick off](#)¹¹ with our first [doomsday](#) cult, the Branch Davidians.

[00:03:39] This cult had been active since the 1930s, and was based in a large [compound](#)¹² called New Mount Carmel in Texas, in the United States.

[00:03:50] The hundred or so members of the cult lived in that [compound](#) where they were waiting for the Second Coming, they believed that Jesus Christ would come to Earth and they needed to get ready for it.

[00:04:03] For the first fifty years or so of its existence, nobody knew much about it, but one day in 1993 that all changed.

[00:04:15] The cult had been taken over by a 28-year-old man named Vernon Wayne Howell.

¹⁰ coming very soon

¹¹ start

¹² an area with buildings that are surrounded by a fence or a barrier

Doomsday Cults

[00:04:22] Howell changed his name to David Koresh, to suggest that he was a [descendant¹³](#) of both King David of Israel and the Persian king Cyrus the Great, and he most certainly suffered from [delusions of grandeur¹⁴](#).

[00:04:38] He declared that he was the [messiah¹⁵](#), and that all women living in the [compound](#) were his spiritual wives.

[00:04:47] If you think this sounds [harmless¹⁶](#) and innocent, think again.

[00:04:52] Koresh forced young girls to [bear his children¹⁷](#), and essentially turned the entire cult into his own private [hareem¹⁸](#).

[00:05:03] It wasn't to be the sex abuse that brought the Branch Davidians to the public eye though.

¹³ belonging to the same family line as

¹⁴ false beliefs of being very important and special

¹⁵ leader who would solve all their problems

¹⁶ not likely to cause damage or harm

¹⁷ have his children

¹⁸ group of women who lived in the same house and belonged to a master (usually a Muslim one)

Doomsday Cults

[00:05:09] Instead, the American authorities suspected Koresh of [stockpiling](#)¹⁹ illegal weapons in the [compound](#), of buying guns illegally, in preparation for the Second Coming and all of the chaos that would [ensue](#)²⁰.

[00:05:25] The police certainly had reason to believe that the Branch Davidians were [stockpiling](#) weapons because, well, Koresh had publicly stated that God had told him to do so.

[00:05:36] In 1989, shortly after taking control of the cult, he released a piece of audio in which he revealed firstly that God had told him to sleep with all of the women in the cult, and that all of the other men in the cult should be [celibate](#)²¹.

[00:05:54] And, importantly, that God had also told him to start building an army to prepare for the Second Coming and the [Apocalypse](#)²².

[00:06:04] There was also plenty of evidence that Koresh and his followers were [stockpiling](#) and modifying weapons - neighbours had heard machine guns [going off](#)²³, delivery people had seen guards with weapons, it seemed pretty clear what was going on.

¹⁹ collecting, gathering

²⁰ happen as a result

²¹ having no sexual relations for religious reasons

²² the complete final destruction of the world according to the Bible

²³ being fired or used

Doomsday Cults

[00:06:21] So, the US authorities, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms to be precise, decided to go and have a look for themselves.

[00:06:31] But they weren't prepared for what was to come.

[00:06:35] When the authorities raided the compound on February 28th of 1993, the Branch Davidians fought back. 4 government agents were shot and killed, and 6 Branch Davidians lost their lives in the [ensuing](#)²⁴ firefight.

[00:06:53] That wasn't it though.

[00:06:55] There was a [standoff](#)²⁵, and the entire [compound](#) was [under siege](#)²⁶ for the next 51 days.

[00:07:03] It all ended when the FBI launched a [tear gas](#)²⁷ attack on the compound, there was a huge fire, and 76 members of the cult, including its leader, David Koresh, [perished](#)²⁸.

²⁴ happening as a result

²⁵ a situation in which neither side could gain advantage

²⁶ surrounded by the authorities

²⁷ a gas that hurts the eyes and is used to control crowds of people

²⁸ died in a violent way

Doomsday Cults

[00:07:18] Strangely enough, the Branch Davidians are still active today, they still have a [compound](#) in the same area of Texas, but they are keeping a low profile, certainly not publicly claiming that they are building an army and preparing for the Second Coming.

[00:07:36] Our second [doomsday](#) cult is The People's Temple.

[00:07:41] It might have a fairly innocent-sounding name, but it has gone down in history as one of the most destructive cults ever, and resulted in the [needless²⁹](#) loss of life of almost a thousand people.

[00:07:55] It all started with a young, [charismatic](#) American, a man named Jim Jones.

[00:08:02] In 1955 he founded "The People's Temple", which was a Christian-socialist organisation, meaning a group whose beliefs came in part from Christianity, and in part from communist and socialist thought.

[00:08:18] That was the theory at least.

[00:08:21] In practice, what being part of The People's Temple meant was that all followers of The People's Temple had to give all of their property, income and possessions to Jones and the cult.

²⁹ completely unnecessary

Doomsday Cults

[00:08:34] Much like the other stories we'll hear today, Jones also required female members of the cult to [be willing to](#)³⁰ turn over not just their material possessions but also their bodies to him.

[00:08:48] For the first 15 years or so of the cult's existence, it had bases in California, but after a growing [backlash](#)³¹ against it, Jones relocated the entire cult to a remote settlement in the jungle of Guyana, the small South American country to the east of Venezuela.

[00:09:09] Approximately 1,000 followers came with him, moving their entire lives from the United States to the Guyana jungle, which gives you some idea of quite how much power he held over his followers.

[00:09:24] This settlement was to be a jungle [utopia](#)³², a communist Christian heaven where believers could live a true, honest life.

[00:09:35] So, what happened next?

[00:09:37] Well, it didn't last for long.

³⁰ be wanting to, or be happy to

³¹ reaction

³² perfect society

Doomsday Cults

[00:09:40] A US [Congressman](#)³³ named Leo Ryan came to investigate in 1978, after receiving [pleas](#)³⁴ from [concerned](#)³⁵ relatives of members of the cult. There were now almost a thousand people living in this [compound](#) in the Guyana jungle, people who had [cut off](#)³⁶ all contact with the outside world, and this [congressman](#) came down to see what was actually going on.

[00:10:07] The [congressman](#) arrived in the Guyana jungle, [checked out](#)³⁷ the [compound](#), and as he was on the plane about to leave back to the United States he was murdered with five of his party.

[00:10:21] Meanwhile, back at the [compound](#) Jones had convinced all of his followers that they were about to be taken from the [compound](#) and converted to fascism, a [fate](#)³⁸ worse than death for anyone [subscribing](#)³⁹ to this Communist Christian ideology.

[00:10:40] So, Jones convinced his followers to [line up](#)⁴⁰, one by one, and drink poison, to kill themselves.

³³ a member of the US House of Representatives

³⁴ requests made in an emotional way

³⁵ worried

³⁶ stopped

³⁷ had a look, inspected

³⁸ the outcome or the end of a situation

³⁹ agreeing with, following

⁴⁰ be arranged in a line, form a line

Doomsday Cults

[00:10:49] Men, women, children. 918 people in total died at Jonestown after drinking a soft drink called “Flavor Aid” which had been [laced with](#)⁴¹ cyanide.

[00:11:03] This was, until the September 11th attacks, the single event that caused the largest loss of American lives in history.

[00:11:13] Mad, right?

[00:11:15] It also [gave rise to](#)⁴² an expression in English that you may have heard of, to “drink the Kool-aid”.

[00:11:22] If you “drink the Kool-aid”, it means you believe everything someone says, no matter whether it is right or not. This expression comes from the Jonestown Massacre, as this event has come to be known, even though it’s not technically correct - the cult members didn’t actually drink “Kool-aid”, they drank something very similar called “Flavor Aid”.

[00:11:47] For our next [doomsday](#) cult we actually move away from America and cross the Pacific to Japan.

⁴¹ mixed with

⁴² was the cause of

Doomsday Cults

[00:11:56] Although this is a [decidedly](#)⁴³ non-American cult, we will [encounter](#)⁴⁴ many familiar themes.

[00:12:03] A [charismatic](#) leader. A belief that the end of the world is [imminent](#).

Violence. And followers prepared to do anything the cult leader says.

[00:12:15] The [protagonist](#)⁴⁵ of this particular story is a man named Shoko Asahara.

[00:12:21] He was born in 1955, and when he was in his twenties he became interested in a wide variety of religions, everything from Buddhism to Christianity as well as Astrology, Taoism and yoga.

[00:12:37] Out of this he created his own belief system, which he called Aum Shinrikyo.

[00:12:44] [Surprise surprise](#)⁴⁶, he was the head and most important figure in Aum Shinrikyo. He said he was Jesus Christ and was the first truly [enlightened](#)⁴⁷ being since Buddha.

[00:12:56] Some big claims, right?

⁴³ certainly

⁴⁴ meet

⁴⁵ the main character of the story

⁴⁶ used ironically when something is believed to be entirely predictable or expected

⁴⁷ having knowledge and being spiritually more advanced than usual people

Doomsday Cults

[00:12:59] In any case, Aum Shinrikyo was recognised as a real religion in Japan, and it soon started [amassing](#)⁴⁸ a relatively large following, with tens of thousands of members around the world, most of them in Japan and Russia.

[00:13:16] Part of Asahara's teaching was that the world was ending, that Armageddon was [imminent](#).

[00:13:23] He believed that conflict between America and Japan was inevitable, it would result in a Third World War and the [subsequent](#)⁴⁹ end of the world.

[00:13:34] The only way to avoid this, and to achieve [salvation](#)⁵⁰ would be for people to give up everything and join Aum Shinrikyo.

[00:13:44] Anyone who didn't join the cult would be [doomed](#)⁵¹ to [eternal](#)⁵² hell unless they were killed by members of the cult.

[00:13:53] The cult became increasingly violent in the early 1990s, and then on March 20th, 1995, members of the cult went on to commit what would become, and still is for that matter, the most deadly terrorist attack in Japanese history.

⁴⁸ getting a large amount of, gathering together

⁴⁹ following

⁵⁰ a way of being saved from danger or from ending up in hell

⁵¹ caused to have a bad end

⁵² lasting forever

Doomsday Cults

[00:14:12] Members of the cult [boarded](#)⁵³ the Tokyo metro, the underground train network, and released the deadly chemical agent [sarin](#)⁵⁴.

[00:14:22] 14 people were killed and over a thousand injured.

[00:14:27] It's still not completely clear why they did it. One theory is that members thought that they were actually saving the souls of members of the public by killing them.

[00:14:38] Another theory is that they were trying to distract attention away from investigations into other crimes that had been committed by members of the cult.

[00:14:48] And another theory is that they thought that this might be a way of [triggering](#)⁵⁵ the [apocalypse](#) and kick-starting the [Armageddon](#)⁵⁶ that they so [fervently](#)⁵⁷ believed was [inevitable](#)⁵⁸.

⁵³ got on

⁵⁴ a poisonous gas

⁵⁵ causing something to begin, setting off

⁵⁶ the last battle between good and evil before the end of the world

⁵⁷ in a enthusiastic and passionate way

⁵⁸ certain to happen

Doomsday Cults

[00:15:02] In any case, the world didn't end, and launching a deadly terrorist attack might be a good way of distracting attention away from something else but it certainly isn't a good way of [deflecting](#)⁵⁹ attention away from you.

[00:15:18] In the [aftermath](#)⁶⁰ of the attack Shoko Asahara and other senior cult leaders were [tracked down](#)⁶¹, arrested, and all either sentenced to lengthy prison sentences or executed.

[00:15:32] Now, [doomsday](#) cult number four, our last [doomsday](#) cult, is probably the most famous cult in the world, although at least in terms of the number of people who died, it's far from the most deadly.

[00:15:46] Charles Manson and the so-called "Manson Family".

[00:15:51] Indeed, there is probably no name more associated with the term cult leader than "Charles Manson".

[00:15:59] Manson was a failed musician, who started his own cult in the late 1960s in California.

[00:16:07] Like the other characters we've come across in today's episode, he believed that he was the [Messiah](#).

⁵⁹ causing it to change direction

⁶⁰ the period after the unpleasant event

⁶¹ found after a search

Doomsday Cults

[00:16:14] His cult started simply as a group of friends engaging in a hippie life of drugs and open relationships, but by the late 1960s his views became more and more extreme, and his [delusions](#)⁶² of his own [grandeur](#)⁶³ had continued to grow and grow.

[00:16:35] His followers numbered around 100, most of whom were middle-class women. Hallucinogenic drugs and sex were a common [feature](#)⁶⁴.

[00:16:46] There was a much darker side though. He had become obsessed with the idea that America was [on the cusp of](#)⁶⁵ a race war between the black and the white community, and that this was going to cause the end of the world.

[00:17:02] He believed that the black community was going to win this race war, and that when the war was won, the black community would need a white person to lead them, and Manson would be that man.

[00:17:16] At the same time, Manson had been trying to break into Hollywood, he had been trying to make it as a singer.

[00:17:23] The problem was, he just really wasn't very good, and although he had managed to make friends with some famous musicians, such as Dennis Wilson, the drummer from the Beach Boys, Manson was continually rejected.

⁶² false beliefs

⁶³ the quality of being very important and special

⁶⁴ typical quality or characteristic

⁶⁵ just before

Doomsday Cults

[00:17:39] As a result, Charles Manson wanted revenge on Hollywood, revenge on the people he believed had rejected him.

[00:17:48] He instructed his followers to go to the house that Roman Polanski and his actress wife, Sharon Tate, were renting, and to kill everyone they found there.

[00:18:00] Polanski wasn't there at the time, but Manson's followers brutally murdered the five people they found there, including the eight-and-a-half-month-pregnant Sharon Tate.

[00:18:12] The murderers weren't immediately caught, allowing them to kill again the following night, when they went out and murdered two more celebrities.

[00:18:22] These crimes shocked the nation.

[00:18:25] They were [brutal](#)⁶⁶, [unprovoked](#)⁶⁷, and committed in the heart of Hollywood.

[00:18:31] Charles Manson, [it turns out](#)⁶⁸, did not personally murder anyone, but the murders were all carried out on his orders. He forced his followers into committing these [heinous](#)⁶⁹ acts.

[00:18:45] And, of course, he paid the price, or at least he was sentenced to death.

⁶⁶ violent or cruel

⁶⁷ not caused by anything, unfair

⁶⁸ it was found to be, proved to be the case

⁶⁹ very bad and shocking

Doomsday Cults

[00:18:51] But he was never actually executed - his sentence was changed to life imprisonment, and he died in prison in 2017 at the age of 83.

[00:19:03] Now, we have evidently just [skimmed the surface](#)⁷⁰ of these stories, there is so much more to them than we've covered today.

[00:19:10] We could certainly have done an episode on each of these four [barbaric](#)⁷¹ but fascinating [doomsday](#) cults. Maybe we'll do just that.

[00:19:19] In any case, the stories of these four cults show quite what people will believe, and what people can be forced to believe, and therefore forced to do.

[00:19:31] Equally interesting, and perhaps even more shocking, is to think about the [manipulative](#)⁷², [insane](#) and [barbaric](#) behaviour of the leaders of these [doomsday](#) cults, to think about the men who [sought](#)⁷³ power, sex, and [adoration](#)⁷⁴ from their followers, only to force them to do horrible things either to themselves, to each other, or to innocent people who had nothing to do with the cult [whatsoever](#)⁷⁵.

⁷⁰ dealt only with the basic facts

⁷¹ violent and extremely unpleasant

⁷² controlling others to their advantage

⁷³ looked for, tried to find

⁷⁴ deep love, dedication and respect

⁷⁵ at all

Doomsday Cults

[00:19:58] The four characters in our story certainly aren't the only [doomsday](#) cult leaders, they weren't the first and unfortunately they won't be the last.

[00:20:08] Perhaps if there's one thing we can take away from all this, it's that if a strange man claiming to be the [Messiah](#) offers you a glass of Kool-Aid, or should I say "Flavor Aid", it's probably time to [make a run for it](#)⁷⁶.

[00:20:25] OK then, that is it for this little look into our four [creepy](#)⁷⁷ [Doomsday](#) Cults.

[00:20:32] I hope you enjoyed it, and that it wasn't too difficult to listen to - in fact I left out a lot of the bloodiest parts, but if you are the sort of person who enjoys that kind of detail, well you can go and read up on it for yourself.

[00:20:47] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:20:51] Do you know anyone, either directly or indirectly, who has ever been [caught up](#)⁷⁸ in a cult? I imagine you might not know anyone who was part of any of these four cults, but perhaps you might have a weird cult story that you would like to share.

⁷⁶ try to run away

⁷⁷ strange and frightening

⁷⁸ involved with

Doomsday Cults

[00:21:07] Or are there other [chilling](#)⁷⁹ stories of cults from your country? Are there similar situations where someone has predicted the end of the world and used that as cover to do terrible things?

[00:21:19] I would love to know. The place for that is our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com.

[00:21:27] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:21:33] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

⁷⁹ frightening

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Doomsday	the end of the world
Charismatic	someone with attractive qualities, charming
Convince	cause people to believe that something is true
Plunge	fall suddenly
Unpleasant	not pleasant or enjoyable
Mainstream	accepted by most people, normal
Insane	mentally ill, mad
Horrendously	in a terrifying or horrible way
On their behalf	in their name or interests
Imminent	coming very soon
Kick off	start
Compound	an area with buildings that are surrounded by a fence or a barrier

Doomsday Cults

Descendant	belonging to the same family line as
Delusions of grandeur	false beliefs of being very important and special
Messiah	leader who would solve all their problems
Harmless	not likely to cause damage or harm
Bear his children	have his children
Hareem	group of women who lived in the same house and belonged to a master (usually a Muslim one)
Stockpiling	collecting, gathering
Ensnue	happen as a result
Celibate	having no sexual relations for religious reasons
Apocalypse	the complete final destruction of the world according to the Bible
Going off	being fired or used
Ensuing	happening as a result
Standoff	a situation in which neither side could gain advantage
Under siege	surrounded by the authorities

Doomsday Cults

Tear gas	a gas that hurts the eyes and is used to control crowds of people
Perished	died in a violent way
Needless	completely unnecessary
Be willing to	be wanting to, or be happy to
Backlash	reaction
Utopia	perfect society
Congressman	a member of the US House of Representatives
Pleas	requests made in an emotional way
Concerned	worried
Cut off	stopped
Checked out	had a look, inspected
Fate	the outcome or the end of a situation
Subscribing	agreeing with, following
Line up	be arranged in a line, form a line
Laced with	mixed with

Doomsday Cults

Gave rise to	was the cause of
Decidedly	certainly
Encounter	meet
Protagonist	the main character of the story
Surprise surprise	used ironically when something is believed to be entirely predictable or expected
Enlightened	having knowledge and being spiritually more advanced than usual people
Amassing	getting a large amount of, gathering together
Subsequent	following
Salvation	a way of being saved from danger or from ending up in hell
Doomed	caused to have a bad end
Eternal	lasting forever
Boarded	got on
Sarin	a poisonous gas
Triggering	causing something to begin, setting off

Doomsday Cults

Armageddon	the last battle between good and evil before the end of the world
Fervently	in a enthusiastic and passionate way
Inevitable	certain to happen
Deflecting	causing it to change direction
Aftermath	the period after the unpleasant event
Tracked down	found after a search
Delusions	false beliefs
Grandeur	the quality of being very important and special
Feature	typical quality or characteristic
On the cusp of	just before
Brutal	violent or cruel
Unprovoked	not caused by anything, unfair
It turns out	it was found to be, proved to be the case
Heinous	very bad and shocking
Skimmed the surface	dealt only with the basic facts

Doomsday Cults

Barbaric	violent and extremely unpleasant
Manipulative	controlling others to their advantage
Sought	looked for, tried to find
Adoration	deep love, dedication and respect
Whatsoever	at all
Make a run for it	try to run away
Creepy	strange and frightening
Caught up	involved with
Chilling	frightening

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com