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# *The Limits of "Coercive Persuasion" as an Explanation for Conversion to Authoritarian Sects*

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*This paper offers a critique of the application of models of "coercive persuasion" to processes of conversion and commitment within religious movements. Although models of coercive persuasion have a definite, if limited, heuristic value in the analysis of identity transformation within relatively authoritarian groups, current applications to "cults" have involved a number of distortions which appear to be related to the pejorative use of these models as conceptual weapons to legitimate coercive measures employed to "rescue" allegedly "brainwashed" devotees. Key problem areas include: (1) overgeneralized "cult" stereotypes; (2) implicit equation of religious movements with government-operated institutions employing forcible constraint (e.g., POW camps); (3) assumptions that persons subjected to certain persuasive techniques necessarily lack "free will"; and (4) methodological problems arising from exclusive or primary reliance upon the testimony of ex-converts who have negotiated their accounts in persuasive relationships with therapists or deprogrammers.*

In recent years controversy has swirled around contemporary "cults" and "new religions." Although various aspects of today's nontraditional religious and therapeutic movements, including financing, violence, and political lobbying, have elicited critical comment, the most persistent criticism has involved processes of indoctrination within "cults," which have been stigmatized as involving insidious "mind-control" techniques that perpetrate "psychological kidnapping" on vulnerable potential recruits. A recent major series in the *New York Times* (January 21–23, 1979) cited behavior control through "brainwashing" as a central feature of contemporary "cults." The recent tragedy at Jonestown has greatly intensified public concern; however, controversies over alleged cultic brainwashing and methods of "deprogramming" utilized to "rescue" converts have been raging for several years (Sage, 1976; Enroth, 1977; Pritchard, 1977; Robbins, 1977; Lemoult, 1977; Robbins & Anthony, 1978). As one sociologist noted in 1977, "the general public is not so concerned with societal conditions that led to the new movements, or to the characteristics of individuals who join. Instead attention at the popular level is focused on the organization of recruitment efforts by the new groups" (Richardson, 1977, p. 800).

It is arguable that "brainwashing" is not a legitimate scientific concept. Dr. Walter Reich has argued, apropos the Hearst case, that psychiatry lacks the expertise and clinical experience for making definitive pronouncements on alleged "brainwashing." "Psychiatry endangers itself—debases its coinage—by entering areas which it lacks expertise" (Reich, 1976, p. 403). Dr. Thomas Szasz has pointed out, also apropos

of the Hearst case, that “washing” a brain is like drawing blood with a “cutting” comment. For Szasz, “brainwashing” is essentially a *metaphor*, which produces mystification when it is employed as an analytical construct for psychological explanation (Szasz, 1976).<sup>1</sup> In *The Mind Manipulators*, Alan Schefflin and Edward Opton comment that “brainwashing is first and foremost an emotional scare word. . . . Like ‘witch,’ ‘demonic possession,’ or ‘satan,’ the idea of brainwashing is one that people invoke when they want to frighten, when they want to move an audience not to thought, but to action” (Schefflin & Opton, 1978, p. 23). Yet, as the authors subsequently comment, “brainwashing” is not only a frightening label, but also a reassuring notion. It reassures us because “it sounds like an explanation, so it excuses both speaker and audience from the need to contemplate alternative explanations that might be even more disquieting. The same paradox applies to ‘witch,’ ‘demonic possession,’ and other scare words” (Schefflin & Opton, 1978, p. 23).

Along these lines a team of sociologists who have been studying deprogramming and what they term the “anticult movement” have argued that the manner in which imputations of “brainwashing” and “mind control” are applied to contemporary “cults” is evocative of late medieval notions of “spirit possession” (Shupe et al., 1977).<sup>2</sup> Mystiques of spirit possession, exorcism, and body snatching pervade popular culture and may have created the basis for an occult pseudopsychology.

It is thus possible to dismiss crude polemical evocations of “brainwashing” as metaphoric nonconcepts and mystifications that impede serious analysis. However, the same cannot really be said of “coercive persuasion,” a concept that has some scholarly status and that appears to have had some utility in the analysis of the indoctrination of prisoners of war, deviant intellectuals, and foreign nationals by Chinese communists (Lifton, 1961; Schein et al., 1961). Several recent studies by sociologists indicate that models of coercive persuasion and “thought reform” have heuristic value in illuminating some aspects of identity transformation within today’s authoritarian religious sects, although these models also distort or desensitize the observer to other important aspects of these movements (Richardson et al., 1972, 1980; Taylor, 1977; Barker, 1977, 1978; Kim, 1977). It appears to the authors, however, that some analyses of “destructive cultism” have employed related concepts of coercive persuasion, brainwashing, and behavior modification in a somewhat sloppy or even demagogic fashion and have bootlegged unwarranted assumptions into the analyses. To some degree these distortions have arisen because of the partisan manner in which “coercion” concepts have been utilized as intellectual weapons to stigmatize “cults” and rationalize the seizure and forcible confinement of “brainwashed” devotees.

In the remainder of this paper we will be concerned with four problem areas or issues in which distortions have arisen in the application of “coercive persuasion” and related concepts to controversial spiritual movements: (1) the generic fallacy; (2) the problem of degree or drawing the line; (3) the question of “free will”; and (4) the methodological problems arising from the controversiality of “cults” and the use of deprogrammed apostates as a data source.

### THE GENERIC FALLACY

The “generic fallacy” denotes the assumption that properties imputed to one notorious “cult” necessarily apply to other unconventional or controversial groups, or that all such movements are basically similar. To some degree the problem arises because labels such as “cult,” “brainwashing” and “coercive persuasion” not only oversimplify but actually “tend to become substitutes for the complex realities to which they refer. The labels obscure the differences that do exist even among relatively

authoritarian communal movements" (Robbins & Anthony, 1979b, p. 3). This fallacy manifests itself in gross forms, such as the recent statement by Rabbi Maurice Davis that "the path of cults leads to Jonestown,"<sup>3</sup> and in more subtle "scholarly" forms. We will be primarily concerned with the latter.

The basic stereotype of the manipulative mind-controlling "cult" has recently been delineated in a law professor's argument for the legitimacy of government "intervention" in this area. The "cult" is alleged to deceive unwary individuals into thinking they have encountered a conventional and undemanding group. It is confidently maintained that if the recruit were "informed that the group whose meeting he is asked to attend is a well-known cult, he would react by leaving" (Delgado, 1978, p. A27). Subsequently, the convert's

capacity to rationally evaluate his continued involvement is allegedly undermined by fatigue conditioning in a context of totalistic regimentation. The convert is only given information about the identity of the group and the conditions of membership, but he is permitted to learn this information only as the cult perceives that he has become so weakened by fatigue, sensory bombardment, peer pressure. . . . (Delgado, 1978, p. A27)

Professor Delgado writes generically about "cults" and "the process by which cults attract and indoctrinate members"; however, at the beginning of his essay he mentions Synanon, the Unification Church, and Hare Krishna as controversial groups against which allegations have been made, and which the reader is entitled to assume share the "cult" properties adumbrated in the remainder of the essay. Nevertheless, it is difficult to envision anyone joining the Hare Krishna movement without being aware at the outset of involvement that this sect, whose members are visible on streets dancing and singing and wearing long robes and shaved heads, constitutes a highly unusual group possessing a distinctly eccentric and ritualized life-style.<sup>4</sup> The present writers have, moreover, become aware through their own observation that there are other "cults," often relatively authoritarian and regimented communal movements, in which the "deviant" and regulated quality of membership is fairly apparent to even a casual observer.<sup>5</sup> It is also apparent that many unconventional religious and psychotherapeutic movements are not totalistic and regimented or even communal (Robbins et al., 1975).

There is evidence that a certain degree of objectionable deception and manipulation has characterized the recruitment tactics of the Unification Church (Lofland, 1978; Banner, 1976). There may be other groups that also practice significant deception. Yet very many groups do not practice major deception qua concealment from potential recruits of the group's identity and the obligations of membership; moreover, it appears to the authors that a large proportion of allegations regarding deception refer implicitly or explicitly to the Unification Church, although the claimant's comments may imply a broader generality.<sup>6</sup> If deception is not as widespread as Delgado and others allege, and if, moreover, many "cults" are not "totalistic," then the claim that involvement with a "cult" is not typically developed under conditions of "informed consent" (Delgado, 1978) is undermined.

Other examples of overgeneralized "cult" stereotypes purveyed by respected scholars can easily be found. Recently a clinical psychologist who works with ex-"cultists" published an article in *Psychology Today* on the psychological problems experienced by individuals "coming out of the cults" (Singer, 1979). The subjects came primarily from a number of well-known movements "such as The Children of God, The Unification Church of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, the Krishna Consciousness movement, The Divine Light Mission, and The Church of Scientology" (Singer, 1979, p. 72). Although Dr. Singer recognizes some variation among these

groups, she is nevertheless “struck by similarities in their accounts. For example, the groups’ recruitment and indoctrination procedures seemed to involve highly sophisticated techniques for inducing behavioral change” (Singer, 1979, p. 72). The remainder of the article presents an image of a “cult” as a communal total institution in which participants are cut off from personal ties and associations outside of the group, provided with “24-hour regimes of work and ritual,” totally regimented and conditioned into uncritical passivity and dependency, and assimilated to simple menial tasks such that they lose or fail to acquire advanced career skills and competencies.

The portrait of the “cult” that emerges from Singer’s study may indeed be substantially valid for authoritarian communal movements such as the Unification Church or the Hare Krishna sect, although even here there are important qualifications, which should be noted.<sup>7</sup> However, some distortions arise with respect to two groups mentioned by Singer, Scientology and The Divine Light Mission. As the author of a recent sociological monograph on the Scientology movement comments: “Scientology is a movement with some totalitarian features” (Wallis, 1976, p. 180). Yet he goes on to point out only a small minority of Scientologists are actually encapsulated in the sense of working or living within the movement. “Most Scientologists remain in fulltime employment outside the movement, utilizing Scientology facilities only occasionally and limiting their involvement to a level compatible with their occupational and domestic responsibilities” (Wallis, 1976, p. 189). Far from being menials, many and possibly most Scientologists are either successful careerists or career-oriented persons who hope to use Scientology skills to achieve worldly success. What Scientology purports to offer its adherents is apparently not a communal retreat or enclave but an “enhancement of competence with which to deal with the everyday events of life” (Wilson, 1976, p. 64).

Available scholarly literature on The Divine Light Mission of the Guru Maharaj-Ji is also inconsistent with totalistic “cult” stereotypes presented by Singer, Delgado and others. In a comparative analysis of Hare Krishna and The Divine Light Mission, a sociologist notes that “The Divine Light Mission community’s fluid organizational structure contributed to the higher rate of attrition. The lack of mechanisms which insulate communal life was evident in the large number of noncommunal members and the lack of ‘bridgeburning’” (Pilarzyk, 1978, p. 400). According to Pilarzyk, the process of becoming involved in The Divine Light Mission “was highly individualistic in orientation. It involved only a partial transformation of identity and subjective reality by cultivating a religious experience through meditation without a rigorous internalization of numerous group norms and values. Demands for inculcating the group ideology were minimal” (Pilarzyk, 1978, p. 400). An account written under scholarly auspices by an adherent of the Guru Maharaj-Ji states that “most ashram residents are either employed outside full time or self-employed” (Messer, 1976, p. 65). At the time many converts to The Divine Light Mission had formerly participated in bohemian “hippie” milieux and had “dropped out” of conventional vocational roles. According to Messer, assimilation into The Divine Light Mission tended to be concomitant with “an increasing willingness to rejoin the mainstream of society, in whatever area they felt alienated or separated. . . . Most devotees, whatever their background, are employed full time, have short hair and own suits if they are male, and generally present a conventional face to the world” (Messer, 1976, pp. 61–62).<sup>8</sup>

It is, of course, conceivable that Dr. Singer’s image of “cults,” including The Divine Light Mission, is correct, and the accounts of Messer and Pilarzyk are misleading. It is worth noting, however, that the Singer study involves a study sample drawn from ex-converts from *different* groups; this methodology may enhance tendencies to

generalize the properties of the more authoritarian and totalistic groups to more loosely structured groups. Dr. Singer's educational relationship to her subjects and the fact that most of the latter had previously undergone "deprogramming" are also possible sources of distortion and overgeneralization which will be discussed later in this paper. On the other hand, it is conceivable that the less communally encapsulated groups have certain techniques for indoctrination and the production of "altered states of consciousness" in common with the more totalistic groups.

In a recent article in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, the eminent psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton (1979) states that "we need to make careful distinctions about cults." Despite this disclaimer, the balance of Dr. Lifton's article implies that "cults" in general tend to be characterized by (1) a communicative monopoly by cult leaders, (2) manipulation and stimulation of devotees' guilt feelings by cult leaders, and (3) the operation of a "principle of dispensing of existence" whereby it is assumed that "only those who have seen the light and follow the true path to virtue are entitled to exist. The rest have no right" (Lifton, 1979, p. 27). The naive reader of Lifton's article will also be likely to receive the impression that "cults" are generally characterized by charismatic leadership in which an egotistical leader is deified as the personal exemplar or embodiment of transcendent suprapersonal truths, such that a contradiction arises which eventuates in a "deification of idiosyncrasy."

The present authors have been involved in the study of "new religions" for a decade and have recently reviewed the extensive sociological literature on such groups (Robbins et al., 1975, 1978; Robbins & Anthony, 1979a). With respect to Lifton's four basic "cult" properties, we conclude that (1) many nontraditional movements are characterized by two or more of these properties, but that the degree to which these properties are developed varies substantially from group to group; and (2) many groups are characterized by a relative absence of two or more of these properties.<sup>9</sup> In part the problem arises from the usage by Dr. Lifton and others of the undefined label "cult." The application of this term to any group establishes various unexamined and stigmatizing assumptions as implicit premises of the analysis of the group, and affirms an a priori identity between the collectivity being studied and other groups.

### THE ISSUE OF CUTTING POINT OR DEGREE

The problem of cutting point or "drawing the line" can be viewed as a "conceptual problem of differentiating between those forms of mind control that are so extreme and so harmful that we should not tolerate them, and those milder forms that we are prepared to accept" (Delgado, 1977, pp. 62-63). This issue is usually discussed as a way of countering the argument that "brainwashing" is ubiquitous throughout society and can also be discerned in advertising, media programming, respectable monasteries, and graduate schools. "But while other institutions may use some of the techniques of classic thought reform, few apply them in such a variety or with such intensity as do cults. . . . Thus, few, if any, other social institutions use conditioning techniques as pervasively, intensively or deceptively as do religious cults" (Delgado, 1978, p. A23).

In seeking to "draw the line" between "cults" and respectable monastic groups, critics of unconventional groups have made some valid points. Thus, "most religious orders are careful to set out the obligations and vows of priesthood in advance" (Delgado, 1977, p. 65), and do not conceal the ardors of full participation in order not to discourage recruitment. Yet, consider the allegation that respectable denominations do not "concentrate, as do religious cults, on the weak, the depressed, or the psychologically vulnerable" (Delgado, 1977, p. 65). Is this a novel and vicious char-

acteristic of “cults”? Is it not the “lost,” “blind,” and “wretched” who are traditionally pinpointed as the preferred recipients of “amazing grace” and those who most need to be “saved”? The fact that certain “vulnerable” persons and groups are more likely than others to be converted might be interpreted as indicating that “free choice” rather than “brainwashing” is involved in joining “cults.”

The problem of “drawing the line” is a two-sided problem. The careful scholar who applies labels of “coercive persuasion,” “thought reform,” or “brainwashing” to indoctrination processes within religious movements is obligated to consider not only whether the degree of “coercion” in a given religious movement is substantially greater than the degree of coercion in “normal” contexts, but also whether the quality and degree of “coercion” manifested in a “cult” is really equivalent to the quality and degree of coercion in “classic” settings such as POW camps, totalitarian reeducation programs, forced confessions, and so on. It is arguable that whenever terms such as “thought reform,” “coercive persuasion,” or “brainwashing” are applied without qualification to processes within a religious movement, the latter is more or less equated with a government-operated institution in a totalitarian state in which psychological and peer pressures are embedded within a broader context of tangible physical restraint and forcible confinement. Can a Krishna temple be equated with a POW camp or a concentration camp or even a Maoist “revolutionary university”? Comparing their sample of “Moonies” with military captives studied by Robert Lifton, Galanter et al. (1979, p. 169) note that participants in Unification Church workshops

had voluntarily presented themselves. They were more likely to be open to a new perspective than the brainwashed, physically coerced subjects who were unwilling captives at the outset. The brainwashed captives described by Lifton were typically abused and coerced into compliance, something not reported by our subjects.<sup>10</sup>

It is certainly conceivable that “mind control” processes within authoritarian religious movements are objectionable, and warrant government intervention even when there are substantial divergences between the context of indoctrination in “cults” and in “classical” contexts. Nevertheless, implicit equations between formerly voluntary sectarian organizations and government-operated institutions constitute a serious analytical distortion, which casts doubt on the scientific viability and appropriateness of “brainwashing” or “coercive persuasion” as typifications of social processes within religious groups. Schefflin and Opton (1978, pp. 52–63) have argued that indoctrination within “cults” really represents a “non-instance” of true brainwashing because, although elements of classic coercive-persuasion syndromes are present in these situations, they are usually significantly attenuated. Thus isolation is one factor tying “so-called brainwashing to religious cults; it is a central facet of each. But when one looks closely, any apparent similarity dissolves.” Isolation in religious movements “is of necessity only partial” (Schefflin & Opton, 1978, p. 61). Moonies witnessing on city streets are susceptible to numerous influences which the church cannot really control. True brainwashing, according to Schefflin and Opton, entails “the coercive power inherent in all the classical brainwashing situations: prison walls and prison guards to prevent escape” (Schefflin & Opton, 1978, p. 40).

To reformulate the argument in this section, the key question is not so much whether or not any “coercive persuasion” occurs in the indoctrination pattern of a given movement, but rather *how much*. While the degree of “coercion” manifested in most “cults” may exceed that found in nonstigmatized milieux such as Catholic monasteries, the degree and kind of coercion in authoritarian religious groups may

diverge significantly from "classical" contexts associated with formally involuntary government-operated structures. Of course, where one places the "cutting point" regarding a permissible versus impermissible degree of "coercion" and pressure is essentially arbitrary; nevertheless, it is a serious rhetorical distortion to fail to distinguish between physical and psychological coercion or to fail to qualify comparisons between formally voluntary and formally involuntary contexts for "thought reform."

### THE ISSUE OF "FREE WILL"

Warnings regarding the psychological damage allegedly inflicted on converts by today's "totalistic" religious movements naturally raise the issue of coercion. As Professor Delgado has acknowledged, "a finding that the harms [psychological damage to converts] were voluntarily incurred would greatly weaken the case for intervention" (Delgado, 1978, p. A23). Interestingly, this formulation could be interpreted as implying that a burden of substantiation for establishing the voluntary quality of devotees' commitments to authoritarian sects should be on the impugned devotee or his "cult" (as opposed to placing a burden of proof on the party urging "intervention"). In contrast, it has elsewhere been argued that a strong burden of substantiation should be met by the party proposing forcible confinement or a restriction of freedom of association (Robbins, 1979). However, allegations of mental enslavement to a degree that converts lack personal autonomy and "free will" have provided the essential rationale for justifying physically coercive "deprogramming" (Shupe et al., 1977). As one social worker has commented about converts to authoritarian movements, "their free will has been given up by the isolation, lack of sleep, sexual acts, poor eating and the sophistication of the psychological manipulations of leaders" (Merritt, 1975, p. 3).

"Free will" is not, in our view, a routinely measurable concept. It is really more of a philosophical premise, which underlies "a system of law informed by the imagery that man is in control of his destiny" (Glock, 1972, p. 14). We generally confer an assumptive autonomy on behavior that is not physically coerced or drugged or that does not manifest signs of extreme disorganization qua incoherence, hysteria, inebriation, and so on. In recent years, however, suspicion has been growing that there exists a vast reservoir of persons who are not autonomous and responsible for their actions. This reservoir might include drug addicts and religious cultists and other alleged victims of "brainwashing," as well as the "mentally ill" and "emotionally disturbed," the socioeconomically deprived who are conditioned by their oppressive environment, and possibly persons who eat "junk food" or watch too much television at an early age. The current pressure to multiply "exceptions" to the generalized assumption of personal autonomy has implications for undermining or transforming the American legal system (Glock, 1972; Reich, 1976). Nevertheless, it may still be an innovation if peer pressure (as in "cults") is established as routine grounds for mental incompetence.

It is the view of the authors that the issue of "free will" of converts to "cults" cannot be definitively resolved on a "scientific" basis, in part because of the metaphysical qualities of the "free will" concept. It is possible, however, to identify implications of various criteria that have been suggested to resolve the analytical issues involved in "assessing voluntariness." Thus, without reaching a definitive resolution of the general question of "autonomy," we will advance a number of pertinent considerations.

First, evidence of radical personality or identity transformation is not *ipso facto* evidence of brainwashing and "coercion." Although few might quarrel with this



statement in the abstract, it does appear to the authors that in some formulations the existence of a substantial transformation of attitudes and self-orientation creates a presumption of coercive change (Anthony et al., 1980; Shupe et al., 1977). But it is arguable that substantial transformation of identity is an essential and traditional aspect of true "conversion." Is the born-again Christian supposed to remain his same old sinful self? Much

of the behavior associated with so-called religious movements will seem bizarre and mystifying only to those largely innocent of any knowledge of church history. . . . What we are seeing in these groups today is not something new, but something old; a phenomenon sometimes labeled conversion, (Kelley, 1977, p. 28)

Second, related to the assumption that radical discontinuity in personality or attitudes is necessarily artificially (coercively) induced is an assumption that total submission to a leader, uncritical adherence to a doctrine or system, or surrender of intellectual freedom simply *cannot be voluntary*. A noted theologian has typified this proposition as "the myth of the evil eye," whereby "it is thought that no sane person could possibly belong to a movement 'like this,' and therefore the participant must be there involuntarily" (Cox, 1978, p. 127). Yet a frustrated need for meaning in an aseptically secular and rationalist culture can drive persons to seek a sense of identity in frenzied asceticism, stringent self-denial, and seemingly bizarre systems of thought (Barrett, 1976; Roszak, 1979). A participant observer in a weekend workshop run by the Unification Church, who was personally hostile to Moonism, nevertheless concluded that for persons to become converts, "the desire to abandon reason for emotion had to be present before the person came the workshop. . . . The new experience was an assertion of self that became submission: submission to emotion, to the group, to a commitment to a new set of ideals. It was a willful submission" (Rasmussen, 1977, p. 15).<sup>11</sup> Similarly, a classical scholar has commented that Christianity appealed to persons in the latter Roman Empire in part because "it lifted the burden of freedom from the shoulders of the individual: one choice, one irrevocable choice, and the road to salvation was clear . . . in an age of anxiety any 'totalistic' creed exerts a powerful attraction" (Dodds, 1965, 133–34).

Third, the fact that certain devotees have been subjected to techniques of "behavior modification," "conditioning," "mind control," "coercive persuasion," or "thought reform" *does not in and of itself imply that their behavior and attitudes are enacted or held "involuntarily."* Indeed this assumption is not made by all coercive persuasion models, nor do all such models necessarily treat the "persuaded" subject as merely a passive and victimized participant in the persuasive process (Solomon, 1980). In polemical discourse the notion of coercive persuasion is reified and ceases to be merely a heuristic construct. The "coercive" nature of intragroup experience is given an absolute ontological status that by implication excludes qualities of spontaneity and authenticity.

Fourth, the "brainwashing" notion implies that converts to "cults" become permanent mental slaves. Forced detention and deprogramming have indeed been justified by arguments to the effect that "since cult members have surrendered their critical reasoning powers to others, there is little hope that they will drop out of their own conscious volition" (Shupe et al., 1977, p. 946). "Yet this view contrasts with evidence that such cults do in fact witness defections of conscious, disgruntled members" (Shupe et al., 1977, p. 954). Statistics are hard to come by, but several scholarly and journalistic reports have indicated a substantial voluntary turnover in the Unification Church (Welles, 1978; Judah, 1977; Skonoved, 1979; Beckford, 1977; Stoner & Parke, 1977). Even Synanon, which may have occasionally used physical constraint as a

method of inhibiting defection, has apparently suffered sizable defections (Anson, 1978). The possibility that even relatively authoritarian movements experience high rates of turnover has a negative implication for the applicability of "coercive persuasion" concepts.

Fifth, it is ultimately problematic whether personality can be routinely altered by "brainwashing" *even when physical constraint is applied*. Out of over 3,500 American Korean War POWs, only about 25 refused repatriation, and about twice that number made procommunist statements (Schefflin & Opton, 1978, p. 89).

These numbers do not add up to a persuasive case that the communists developed a method to control the mind. . . . In the civil war . . . about two percent of the Union soldiers captured by the South enlisted in the Confederation. (Schefflin & Opton, 1978, p. 89)

These facts cast further doubt on the premises underlying many applications of "mind control" notions to religious movements and on the assumption that an all-powerful irresistible and quasi-magical method exists for controlling the human mind. Noting this image of "brainwashing," Robert Lifton comments that "brainwashing" is really "none of these things, and this loose usage makes the word a rallying point for fear, resentment, urges toward submission, justification for failure, irresponsible accusation, and for a wide gamut of emotional extremism" (Lifton, 1961, p. 4).<sup>12</sup>

Finally, analyses of religious movements in terms of "coercive persuasion" may manifest what might be termed an "atomistic bias" whereby it is assumed that authentic spiritual experience or ideological commitment is exclusively personal and not mediated by social reinforcement. The dependence of belief upon social support may, on this premise, be taken as *prima facie* evidence of inauthenticity. Proposals for separating devotees from movements, for deprogramming or "cooling off" (Delgado, 1977), can be interpreted in these terms: The convert must establish the authenticity of his commitment by upholding it in nonreinforcing circumstances. Against this orientation it is arguable that, in general, beliefs and attitudes are grounded in social processes and dependent upon social support structures. As one sociologist of religion has noted, religious affirmations "are, by their very nature, incapable of being supported by our own sense experience and therefore heavily dependent upon social support" (Berger, 1970, p. 36). What is particularly important, however, is that adherence to a stigmatized "deviant" belief system requires a more spatially concentrated and intense "plausibility structure" than a respectable faith that is broadly institutionalized within the wider society (Roof, 1978). It is harder to be a Moonist than a Methodist in the United States, and the former devotees—who exemplify a "cognitive minority"—naturally find it difficult to maintain their faith without clinging together and obeying the biblical injunction to "go ye out and be ye separate."<sup>13</sup> It is perhaps because of the problem of deviant faith maintenance in a hostile or indifferent society that dissident religious sects throughout history have sought to retreat into insulated enclaves. The existence of such enclaves may pose a problem for a politically centralized but culturally pluralistic society, even one which was partly built by such enclave seekers (for example, the Pilgrims). If, however, it is assumed that only beliefs which do not depend upon immediate intense social reinforcement are authentic and worthy of respect, then *a systematic bias in favor of culturally dominant and conventional orientations is invited*. In other words, because "deviant" beliefs commonly require stronger immediate social reinforcement than conventional beliefs, an assumption that dependence upon social support is evidence of inauthenticity is likely to produce a line of reasoning leading to the conclusion that only orthodox beliefs are authentic.

In our view it is not possible to assess definitively whether a convert to a relatively

“totalistic” religious sect (who is not demonstrably hysterical or incoherent) has true “free will.” The relevant policy question thus becomes one of identifying *what the legal presumption should be and where the burden of substantiation should be placed*. This is properly a philosophical rather than a “scientific” question.

### METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Some studies that have applied “coercive persuasion” or related frameworks to sects and that have imputed pathological states to converts have tended to draw largely upon the accounts of ex-converts (for example, Singer, 1979; Conway & Siegelman, 1979; Enroth, 1977). Most of the subjects of these studies have been “deprogrammed.” Particular methodological problems arise from these circumstances.

Ex-converts who have been “deprogrammed” tend to have more hostile attitudes toward the “cults” in which they once participated, and moreover, are more likely to state that they have been “brainwashed” and subjected to “mind control,” than are ex-converts who left their movements spontaneously (Solomon, 1980). Inasmuch as these views are generally urged upon devotees by deprogrammers (Kim, 1979), one possible interpretation of these findings is that the anticult orientations of deprogrammed ex-devotees reflect indoctrination by deprogrammers, although it is also possible to infer that deprogrammed ex-devotees have achieved a superior understanding of their prior involvements. Interestingly, English ex-Moonists, who are less likely than their American counterparts to have been deprogrammed, tend to reject “brainwashing” interpretations of their experience (Beckford, 1977).

The course of events that constitute one’s life can be subjected to alternate interpretations. . . . We ourselves go on interpreting and reinterpreting our own life. As Henri Bergson has shown, memory itself is a reiterated act of interpretation. As we remember the past, we *reconstruct it in accordance with our present ideas* of what is important and what is not. . . . This means that common sense is quite wrong in thinking that the past is fixed, immutable, invariable, as against the ever-changing flux of the present. On the contrary, at least within our own consciousness, the past is malleable and flexible, constantly changing as our recollection re-interprets and re-explains what has happened. Thus we have as many lives as we have points of view. (Berger, 1963, p. 57; italics added)

Of course, this argument works both ways with regard to “cults.” A convert to a religious sect may, without intending to deceive, exaggerate the degree to which he was “down and out,” despairing and disoriented, before he was “saved.” Similarly, a deprogrammed ex-sectarian may, conceivably, honestly exaggerate the degree to which he was “brainwashed,” regimented, or involved in spectacularly bizarre and depraved scenes prior to being once again “saved” by deprogramming.

Frequently, individuals are assisted in the reconstruction of their past by therapists who provide them with new coding categories and even suggest new interpretations; indeed, the process of psychotherapy can be conceptualized as a persuasive conversion experience for the patient (Scheff, 1966; Frank, 1963). Because many of the studies that have applied brainwashing models to “cults” seem to be based largely on the accounts of deprogrammed apostates, the possibility arises that the allegations of deprogrammed ex-converts as to how they were “brainwashed” or how “something snapped” when they meditated reflects in part the influence of deprogrammers and therapists who have guided the subjects in the reconstruction of their biographies. Solomon (1980) has shown that deprogrammed ex-sectarians have different attitudes than other ex-sectarians; moreover, her study also indicates that therapy of some sort is fairly ubiquitous among former “cultists” in part because offers of therapeutic assistance are so readily forthcoming. The scholar who studies “cults” through the

accounts of ex-converts must realize that (1) these accounts have been filtered through persuasive “therapeutic” processes, and (2) these accounts will be affected by the attitude and orientation of the investigator.

Another way of stating this problem is to say that the accounts of ex-converts, like the accounts of converts, are never purely descriptive. Not only have these accounts been negotiated through interaction with significant others (for example, family, friends, therapists, deprogrammers, other ex-converts), but in part as a consequence of such negotiations, putatively descriptive accounts actually contain significant qualitative and evaluative elements, which are related to the respondent’s search for meaning and self-definition in a context of disenchantment with a prior commitment that may have involved substantial investments of time and energy. Thus, an ex-convert may find it convenient and psychologically rewarding to embrace a deterministic “brainwashing” conceptualization of his or her prior involvement, which has the virtue of defining the convert as a passive victim of manipulation who has no responsibility for his or her prior actions and statements. Indeed, such conceptualizations may facilitate reintegration with relatives and former friends, who may now attribute past conflicts with the ex-convert to ego-alien mind-controlling forces. Ex-converts may also develop an understandable strong hostility to “the god that failed” and may find that theories of mind control provide an effective basis for recrimination. Finally, persons who “defect” from a communal movement may recriminate against the “cult” as a means of coping with the guilt involved in “betraying” their close spiritual comrades. “After a person has doubly defected—once from parental values and then from the religious group—strong pressures for self-justification and the expiation of guilt are set in motion. These often take the form of insisting, ‘I was fooled, I was victimized’” (Kelley, 1977, p. 31). Recrimination against alleged cultic brainwashing, and an associated quasi-career as a deprogrammer, may provide the ex-convert with a new identity and a new sense of meaning and purpose. Thus, “some young former cult members who travel around the country trying to get other young people to leave the cults” may be primarily seeking “vindication for their own deception by the cults” and consequently may be “ill-prepared to interfere with the lives and dabble in the sanity of other young people” (Stoner & Parke, 1977, p. 240).

None of the above considerations are really adequate to “explain away” the negative accounts of apostates from authoritarian sects; indeed, much of what is said about the deception, manipulation, and regimentation in “cults” is probably true. What is disconcerting, however, is that so few of the pejorative analyses of “cults” that depend largely upon apostates’ accounts have expressed an awareness of these methodological problems (for example, Singer, 1979; Enroth, 1977; Conway & Siegelman, 1979).

### ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

A number of sociologists have developed analyses that have sought to relate the present spiritual ferment and growth of unconventional movements to a cultural context of increasing moral ambiguity and value dissensus. Charles Glock has argued that the growth of social-scientific determinism has eroded traditional assumptions of personal autonomy and fate control, and undermined the derivative ethic of personal responsibility. “The diffuse socio-cultural protest and experimentation of the sixties reflects this crisis of meaning and legitimation” and has given rise to a continuing post-sixties “search for new forms and structures of meaning” (Glock, 1976, pp. 311–12). Allan Eister (1972, 1974) has linked the proliferation of new religious movements to a “cultural crisis” involving “dislocations in the communicational and

orientational institutions of advanced societies—dislocations which open the way for cults to flourish” (Eister, 1974, p. 614). Robert Bellah sees today’s new religions and therapeutic movements as “successor movements” of the countercultural upsurge of the sixties, which demonstrated “the inability of utilitarian individualism to provide a meaningful pattern of personal and social existence” (Bellah, 1976, p. 339). Finally, Petersen and Mauss (1973) have noted their “Jesus people” subjects’ sustained “search for closure and simplicity,” which is intensified in a cultural and educational context in which available “knowledge” raises rather than answers questions.

A related sociological perspective on the rise of “cults” has stressed the problem of community in the context of an urbanized “mass society” dominated by impersonal bureaucratic structures, in which there is an absence of institutionalized “mediating collectivities” between central formal structures and structurally isolated (“atomized”) individuals and nuclear familial units. New “social inventions” such as communes, “cults,” and encounter groups operate as extended-family surrogates that wean the individual away from exclusive dependence upon the isolated nuclear family and mitigate communal deprivation (Coleman, 1970; Marx & Ellison, 1975; Anthony & Robbins, 1974). An implication of these sociological perspectives is that “cults” meet genuine needs for meaning and community and may have various “adaptive” consequences for individuals. By providing compensatory expressive rewards that mitigate the oppressive aspects of involvement in impersonal formal structures, the new movements may facilitate adjustment to dominant bureaucratic structures (Anthony & Robbins, 1974). The new movements may also operate as “safety valves” for social protest and thus perform “integrative functions” with respect to the social system (Robbins et al., 1975). Although some of the new movements encapsulate participants, others have the consequence of resocializing and “rehabilitating” social drop-outs (Marx & Ellison, 1975; Adams & Fox, 1972; Robbins, 1979; Balswick, 1974), and, moreover, perform various therapeutic and problem-solving services for devotees (Zaretsky & Leone, 1974; Petersen & Mauss, 1973; Snelling & Whiteley, 1974; Anthony et al., 1977).<sup>14</sup>

Analyses of today’s “new religions” in terms of normative and structural discontinuities in sociocultural patterns to which “cults” are responding are not necessarily incompatible with analyses in terms of “brainwashing.” It can even be argued that a climate of deepening moral ambiguity and social atomization facilitates the seduction and manipulation of idealistic victims. Yet, in practice, “brainwashing” analyses tend to develop propositions that either conflict with or render superfluous sociological analyses. Thus, if one places extreme stress on the role of deception (Delgado, 1978), the predispositions of the potential convert become irrelevant. In general, depiction of “cultists” as passive and helpless victims deflects attention from the “predisposing” orientations of the potential convert and the needs which nontraditional movements may serve or promise to serve. The tendency for different “types” of religious movements with different moral ideologies and structural properties to recruit persons with different backgrounds and proclivities (Wuthnow, 1976a, 1978; Robbins et al., 1978; Judah, 1977) fits well with theories stressing normative strains and socially constructed spiritual responses, but less well with theories stressing “coercion.” The same might be said regarding the fact of “conversion careers,” whereby many converts appear to have been “experimenting” with various spiritual mystiques and “alternate life-styles” prior to becoming assimilated to any given movement (Richardson, 1980).

It is indisputable that some “cults” utilize techniques of indoctrination and recruitment that are heavy-handed, manipulative, deceptive, and unduly stressful.

Conceivably some current "abuses" of religious freedom are or should be legally actionable. It is misleading, however, to conclude that persons subject to such manipulation are necessarily mentally incompetent or lack "free will."<sup>15</sup> Further distortions arise when converts to manipulative sects are equated with the inmates of physically coercive "total institutions" or when overgeneralized stereotypes of "cults" are purveyed. Some "brainwashing" analyses also appear to presuppose that no uncoerced individual in his or her right mind could possibly accept a given life-style or ideology, and this assumption embodies an intellectual closure that evades an inquiry into other roots of unconventional social movements. Although "mind control" formulations are useful as conceptual weapons and rhetorical devices to hammer home a moral indictment, the scholarly value of such analyses is highly problematic, unless substantial qualifications are introduced.

## NOTES

1. Delgado (1977) has argued that the preoccupation of Szasz and Reich with criminal responsibility diminishes the relevance of their views to the present topic. Yet the psychiatrists' statements regarding the general marginality of brainwashing as a viable psychiatric concept are fairly straightforward, and have clear implications for the stigmatization of "cults." See Anthony et al., 1980 for a discussion of psychiatric attitudes toward "brainwashing."
2. According to Shupe et al. (1977, p. 946) cult devotees are viewed by anticultists as literally "possessed, i.e., under the control of a separate personality or force that suppresses their own individual dispositions and uses them for purposes that they would normally not accept. Irrespective of the particular theory of demonology that may derive from a given theology, this phenomenology of attributed possession is not radically different from similar instances gleaned from the history of Christianity and other religions."
3. Rabbi Maurice Davis, quoted in *Washington Post*, Feb. 6, p. A14.
4. On the Hare Krishna sect see Judah (1974) and Daner (1976).
5. Consider, for example, "Jesus" sects that accost one on the street asking "Do you know the Lord?" or wearing buttons that state "GET SMART. GET SAVED!"
6. Consider the comments of Dr. Louis J. West, quoted in *Human Behavior*, March 1979: "Cult recruitment relies on deception. . . . A straightforward approach to recruitment would be highly unsuccessful. For example, 'Hi, I'm John Doe from The Unification Church, and I'm going to talk to you right now because we need more members. We want you to join us and turn over all your earnings to our leader, Reverend Moon'" (Thomas, 1979, p. 58).
7. The Krishna sect has some "lay" or "householder" devotees who do not live or work in the movement. Some residential members are involved in tasks entailing a high skill level (e.g., studying Sanskrit, operating a computerized commercial enterprise). Many "Moonies" attend classes in colleges and are sometimes urged by church leaders not to leave school for full-time movement work. Other church members work on various publications (of variable quality) sponsored by the church, including the *New York Newsworld*.
8. Ms. Messer is a devotee of Guru Maharaj-Ji, although her account was written under scholarly auspices (Glock and Bellah, 1976).
9. Bird (1974, p. 7) notes that confessional rituals and rites of atonement are often not present in the oriental mystical groups studied by his research team in Montreal because "these movements place very little emphasis on any kind of established moral code or covenant with which adherents identify even while they acknowledge their inability to fulfill these standards perfectly."
10. Robert Lifton describes the entry of western civilians into the Maoist thought-reform process: "The Westerner is usually arrested in a sudden and dramatic fashion. A squad of five to 10 plain-clothes policemen enters his house, often at midnight or in the early morning hours, brandishing pistols and other weapons" (Lifton, 1956, p. 176).
11. In studies of English followers of Rev. Moon, Dr. Eileen Barker (1977, 1978) has rejected the "coercive persuasion" model on the grounds that the movement does not base its indoctrination efforts in an initial deconditioning or extinguishing of the convert's prior beliefs, but rather almost immediately attempts to present distinctive ideas in the hope that these will displace competing preconceptions. Barker concludes that, given certain predisposing factors, "one would not necessarily have to be brainwashed to accept The Divine Principle or to be a member of The Unification Church" (Barker, 1978, p. 93).
12. One study (Segal, 1957) indicates that collaborators among Korean War POWs tended to be motivated by relatively mundane considerations, such as better food and material conditions.
13. The dependence of deviant ideologies on concentrated immediate reinforcement may explain why it seems relatively easy to "deprogram" devotees of "cults" effectively by forcibly removing them from a reinforcing milieu.

14. According to Robbins et al. (1975), "marginal" youth-culture religious movements, which encapsulate devotees, exhibit some tendency to evolve over time into "adaptive" movements, which are accommodative in their orientation toward dominant economic and educational institutions, and in which devotees can easily participate. See also Mauss and Petersen (1974) for a relevant study of the institutionalization and social accommodation of youth culture "Jesus movement" groups in Seattle and Spokane in the early seventies.
15. Our opinion is also applicable to persons who have been "deprogrammed." Such persons may have been subjected to coercive treatment which ought to be prohibited; nevertheless, their present opinions need not, on that ground, be defined as inauthentic.

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