

Cults and Cures

James A. BECKFORD

INTRODUCTION

Journalists, churchmen, and academics have responded in three ways to the proliferation in the West of new religious movements originating in the East. Journalists in all branches of the mass media have sought to exploit the sensational and exotic, often by means of harrowing case histories of individual recruits who seemed to suffer at the hands of these movements.¹ Churchmen have complained bitterly about the monistic, un-Christian character of many of the new movements' teachings.² Academics have characteristically wavered in their assessment of the new movements, evincing on the one hand a guarded welcome of their capacity for bringing out new facets of human potential and, on the other, a suspicion that the cult followers may be manipulated for exploitative reasons.³

Underlying the frequently historical responses both in favor of and against the new movements is a recurrent concern with one fundamental question: "Are they harmful?" In academic research this question has been translated into a range of more specific subquestions relating to the physical, spiritual, psychological, educational, and social effects of participation. Not surprisingly, the answers have been heavily qualified and hedged around with methodological caveats. But there is growing acceptance of the notion that new religious movements may

This paper was presented at the 9th World Congress of Sociology held at Uppsala from 13-19 August 1978. It is based on research financed by the Social Science Research Council. I am grateful for this material assistance.

1. See, e.g., Bromley, Schupe, and Ventimiglia (1978).
2. The voluminous publications of the Christian World Liberation Front at Berkeley, California are a good illustration of the deep suspicion with which evangelical Christians regard Oriental cults.
3. See, e.g., Cox (1977).

help many members to overcome a wide range of personal problems and eventually reintegrate them into mainstream ways of thinking, feeling, and associating with others.

Adaptive effects. The notion that minority religious movements may produce adaptive effects has a long and honorable history in sociological studies of religion,⁴ and the present-day version is most clearly illustrated in the work of a group of scholars associated with Tom Robbins and Dick Anthony. Beginning with the contention that participation in the Meher Baba cult helped some young people to recover from drug-addiction and from other conditions that encouraged disaffection from mainstream American social institutions and values, their work has expanded to include the effects of membership in the Unification Church of Moon Sun Myung and the “changing attitudes towards psychotherapy of converts to Eastern mysticism” (Anthony, Robbins, Doucas, and Curtis 1977). But the underlying rationale of their research has remained constant:

... new youth culture religious movements have the consequences of reconciling and adapting alienated young persons to dominant social institutions, and in so doing, they perform latent pattern-maintenance and tension-management for the social system. There are at least four ways in which these movements facilitate the social reintegration of converts—adjustive socialization, combination, compensation, and redirection (Robbins, Anthony, and Curtis 1975, p. 49).

While there may be legitimate reservations about their uncritical reliance on the verbal accounts given by their respondents and about their functionalist assumptions that American society displays systemic properties, there can be no doubt that these authors have progressively refined their main conceptual framework to the point where it has become a sophisticated and in-

4. A representative sample would include Boisen (1939), Holt (1940), and Johnson (1961).

sightful aid to the sociological understanding of some of the latent processes associated with Eastern cults.

Adaptive vs. marginal movements. The most important refinement concerns the analytical distinction between “adaptive” and “marginal” youth religious movements. Adaptive movements “...facilitate the reassimilation of converts into conventional vocational and educational routines” (Robbins, Anthony, and Curtis 1975, p. 56). But marginal movements “...actually *remove* members from conventional pursuits and lock them into social marginality” (Robbins, Anthony, and Curtis 1975, p. 56, emphasis in the original). This distinction in type is based on perceived differences between them in terms of structural-organizational and ideological characteristics. Thus,

marginal movements tend to entail highly regimented, cohesive and economically self-sufficient...communes and/or monastic institutions... [But] adaptive movements, on the other hand, are more likely to have a “cult” structure. “Cults” are characterized by minimal intragroup social control and group pressure on individuals, vague group “boundaries” with multiple gradations of marginal membership, non-exclusivity, and an absence of sharply and rigidly defined credos (Robbins, Anthony, and Curtis 1975, p. 57).

These patterned distinctions are definitely not, however, intended to imply that only the adaptive type of movement produces socially integrative consequences for its members. Robbins et al. emphasize that marginal movements may be

...less integrative than adaptive movements, yet they are still integrative in the sense of assisting converts in the termination of drug abuse and possibly in the sense of “re-directing” people away from political radicalism (Robbins, Anthony, and Curtis 1975, p. 56).

This leads to a distinction between *pattern-maintenance*, which is the systemic requirement served by the adaptive movements, and *tension-management*, which is thereby constituted as a distinct

requirement of social systems and is served by the marginal movements. Integrative consequences for the whole social system are claimed under both heads. In other words, membership in both adaptive and marginal religious movements helps to integrate society but at different system-levels. The former type most directly helps to reassimilate the individual back into conventional roles and routines; the latter type indirectly promotes societal cohesion by diverting potentially disruptive or destructive dispositions into relatively harmless, off-beat pursuits. If an analogy is drawn with a steam engine, then adaptive movements are like superchargers and marginal movements are like safety valves.

Function vs. process. But is the social system like a steam engine? Serious objections may be levelled against the view that it makes sense to talk of such matters as "societal cohesion" or "adaptive consequences" if it is denied that American society has ever been functionally integrated in the way implied in the analogy with a steam engine. A further objection is that the functionalist mode of sociological analysis tends to overlook the passage of time and therefore fails to appreciate the full complexity of attempts to assess the constantly changing effects of interactions among individuals and social groups.

If the functional perspective is replaced by one that is sensitive to the processual, negotiated nature of social phenomena but insensitive to questions about their bearing on the allegedly unitary phenomenon of society, it may be possible to achieve a more subtle understanding of the complex ramifications of membership in youth culture religious movements. A non-functional perspective would open up questions about the social generation of patterned meanings among people concerned with religious movements, but would eschew any attempt to impose higher-level judgements about the inferred consequences of such meaning-patterns for society as a whole.

In particular, the perspective which informs this paper focuses

attention on the way in which the negotiation of meaning among members of the pseudonymous Unity Cult, ex-members of the same, and their close relatives takes place in the context of sets of social relationships that place major constraints on the range of such meaning.⁵ Judgments about the harmful or beneficial effects of membership in the movement, for example, are sometimes painfully and haltingly made and remade over long periods of time in the process of social interaction with a wide variety of interested parties. In some cases the judgment may never be made with certainty. It follows, then, that attempts by sociologists to “translate” this kind of obstinately elusive and recalcitrant phenomena into categories of “integrative” or “non-integrative” consequences for society as a whole can only do violence to people’s lived experiences.

I do not intend to drop all questions relating to the consequences of membership in the Unity Cult. But I want, rather, to treat as my primary topic the processes whereby judgements about the allegedly harmful or beneficial effects of this group on its members and ex-members are socially negotiated and transmitted. For this purpose the distinction made by Robbins et al. between adaptive and marginal movements will be useful, but I shall select for special emphasis the social relational differences between them. In brief the suggestion is that some movements are characterized by relatively lax controls over members and by vague membership boundaries. Others, by contrast, are characterized by strict membership boundaries and by a regime of extensive control over members. These differences can be reduced for analytical purposes to the structure of authority relationships and to the degree of authoritarianism in their teachings.

AUTHORITY IN SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

I have argued elsewhere for the usefulness of analyzing the effects of sectarian and cultic organizational structures on the

5. This perspective is described more fully in Beckford (1978).

potential of such movements to recruit, socialize, and retain new members (Beckford 1973, 1975a, 1975b, 1976). For analytical purposes it is both feasible and profitable to consider the manner in which different religious movements, having different organizational structures, are (a) capable of, and (b) prevented from, processing new members effectively. But I stress that in practice the effects of purely organizational factors can never be disentangled from the influences of doctrinal and ideological factors. The focus on organization is a purely heuristic device.

Recruitment and initiation. With special reference to the Unity Cult, there is a growing body of information about its organizational structures and its normal ways of "processing" new members.⁶ It is known, for example, that even inexperienced members are expected to take part in the recruitment of new colleagues and that there are sophisticated courses of introduction to the movement's teachings and practical activities. The rationale behind the most ambitious and intensive courses has been expounded in the 120-day Training Manual. It is also known that in the Unity Cult there is an effective, albeit informal, set of practices whereby visitors and neophytes are given intense personal attention and are closely chaperoned by more experienced members. The result of these formal and informal practices is that many people are persuaded to take seriously the Unity Cult's teachings and to express interest in joining it for varying lengths of time. In short, my argument is that the social arrangements made for teaching potential recruits and neophytes about the Unity Cult are no less important than what is actually taught and learned. Content and context cannot be separated. One learns about *Divine principle*, the Unity Cult's fundamental sacred text, in the process of interacting with others in a way deliberately fashioned to accord with the *Divine principle*. The tone and texture of personal relationships

6. See, e.g., Barker (1977), Byong suh-Kim (1977), Sontag (1977), and Taylor (1977).

in the movement are so heavily conditioned by doctrinal considerations that newcomers can hardly fail to be receptive to some of the main teachings and practices of the Unity Cult. One consequence is that the scope for idiosyncratic interpretation of the *Divine principle* is greatly reduced by the implicitly authoritarian nature of the relationship between teacher and taught.

Vertical authority structure. Information has also come to light on the hierarchical structure of authority relationships in the Unity Cult. Even at the level of the day-to-day working party engaged in, for example, selling literature in the streets or peddling goods from house to house, there should always, according to the principles of the movement, be a clearcut distinction between the leader and his/her followers. Though authority is held to reside in the ascribed office rather than in the person, a definite pattern of stable, asymmetrical relationships between members quickly develops at all levels of the organization.

Observers of life in the residential centers of the Unity Cult confirm what ex-members have also described as the disciplined character of interpersonal relationships among the members. Questions of precisely who occupies the "subject" and who the "object" position in every relationship or group are of the utmost importance and are justified by frequent reference to the movement's sacred text. The theology is syncretistic and complex, but there is no doubt that it legitimates the regular and unambiguous exercise of proper authority. Concepts of "love," "give-and-take," and "caring" may figure prominently in the official literature and in members' everyday language, but their distinctive meaning to Unity Cult members is conditioned by the wider theory which holds that these concepts cannot be put into satisfactory operation in unstructured, ill-disciplined relationships.

Discipline. Chastisement is a practice common among Unity Cult members. It is officially legitimated in terms of the above

theory. It may take the form of a formal reprimand for an infraction of common rules, the reprimand coming from a person in a position of leadership. But it may just as commonly occur in a fleeting encounter between members who are not obviously different with respect to the extent of their formal authority. It may occur, finally, in a group-setting when important or trivial aspects of life in the Unity Cult are under discussion. In short, chastisement is a frequent and, at least in the opinion of ex-members, salient feature of social interaction. Eye-witness accounts suggest that it is experienced more commonly by junior rather than senior personnel.

In a less spectacular vein, the lives of Unity Cult members are disciplined by demanding work-schedules. They may be required to work long hours in difficult conditions, and it is rare for them to have much freedom to choose how the work should be done. But lest I create the impression that their lives are sheer drudgery, let me add that many ex-members have reported that they acquiesced willingly in arduous tasks and enjoyed the challenge of trying to surmount difficult obstacles. Great enthusiasm is usually generated in the communal centers where mostly young people are resident, and heroic outputs of energy and inventiveness are frequently achieved. None of this is in doubt, but my point is that this energy and enthusiasm are neither spontaneous nor unfocused. They are cultivated and produced in social relationships among people who do not recognize themselves as equals, and the result is for the most part the achievement of targets and plans provided by superiors. There is little scope for discussion of what to do or how to do it. Disagreements occur, of course, but it is characteristic of the movement's ethos that they are handled as departures from the ideal of smooth, unquestioning implementation of policy, not as healthy, normal facets of intensive group activity.

Elitist structure vs. democratic professions. Decision-making on all but the most trivial subjects is the sole prerogative of various

elites. Ultimately the movement's founder/leader is the source of all initiative and authority, but there is also a body of executives who supervise the implementation of his plans in each of the countries where the Unity Cult operates. Within each country there is also a small core of elite executives who are responsible to him and to whom the leaders of regional and local groups are responsible. But the flow of authoritative communication is predominantly downwards and, though consultation often takes place at all organizational levels, there is no sense in which superiors could be considered representative of people below them.

It is not clear precisely how people are appointed to positions of leadership—or how they are removed, if necessary. But it is unmistakably clear that the Unity Cult has no place for representative democracy in its internal organizational structure. This proves to have been a problem for some ex-members who were disturbed by the discrepancy between the non-democratic internal organization of the movement and the constant profession in its literature and in its leaders' speeches of its commitment to the preservation and promotion of Western-style democratic institutions.

AUTHORITY IN DOCTRINE AND IDEOLOGY

The teachings of the Unity Cult and the ideological formulae through which its group interests are advanced and protected are no less authoritarian and totalizing than its dominant modes of social relationship. In large part this follows from the mildly apocalyptic vision of an imminent upheaval in the current state of the world, a vision conveyed in the movement's sacred text and in its exegetical publications. This, in turn, is complemented by the conviction among rank-and-file members that their leader's role in the eagerly awaited transformation of the world into a more pleasant place is messianic.⁷ Thus, although

7. For a discussion of the complexity and uncertainty with which the millennial and messianic themes are taught and interpreted in the Unity Cult, see Sontag (1977).

it is taught that the radical transformation cannot take place until a significant proportion of individual people's hearts and minds have been spiritually transformed, there is a powerful sense that history's apocalyptic dynamic is somehow independent of individual or aggregate spirituality. It follows that conformity with the revealed injunctions of the movement's founder/leader, the self-styled Lord of the Second Advent, is seen by his devotees as an obligation urgently calling for fulfilment. Obedience is of the essence. This authoritarian feature of the Unity Cult stands in sharp contrast to the more relaxed and optional messages of most Oriental religious movements with Western followings.

Goal of spiritual development. Messianism and millennialism do not encourage spiritual narcissism. Thus, although talk about spiritual development and spiritual sensitivity is prominent in the Unity Cult, there is an important respect in which this talk differs from the language common to most other religious movements with extensive youth memberships. In the Unity Cult it is important to cultivate and refine one's spirituality to the point of so-called perfection. But this is no part of a programme of self-discovery for its own sake. Human potential is deliberately realized for the sake of "Father," that is, the founder/leader. Nearly everything is dedicated to him or done in his name. He is even the object of regular public and private prayers. Consequently, the self is conceived of as an inferior, subordinate entity that can only achieve perfection in and through recognition of its necessary dependence on Father. For one to implement his *Divine principle* without acknowledging dependence on Father would be spiritual arrogance or pride which have no place in the Unity Cult.

Spiritual perfection is a state to be attained by the founder/leader's devotees in the process of subjecting themselves to his authority and to that of his appointed executives. It cannot be attained by an isolated individual outside the ambit of the

Unity Cult. Nor can it be attained through study, meditation, or devotion alone. It is considered to be a natural result of working hard in a practical sense toward goals laid down by the movement's leaders and to be achieved under their surveillance.

Rationale. One of the reasons for the authoritarian character of the Unity Cult's conception of spirituality is that it is based on a set of assumptions about man, nature, and history which imposes on its members a serious obligation to make indemnity for bad actions in the past.

Injustices by man to man must be paid for either in the flesh or in the spirit, either to the one offended or to another in like circumstances. Buddhists and Hindus call this the Law of Karma; and it, too, is inexorable. Those who harm or mistrust their brothers will find themselves in the position of being themselves mistreated if they fail to make amends. If they arrive in the spirit world with unpaid debts, they will have to work to assist perhaps the very ones they hurt in order to pay what they owe. . . . Therefore, it is important to realize that what we think, love, and do now determines our life and character in the eternal spirit world, for we are forming our spirit-self here on earth (Young Oon Kim 1970, pp. 18, 104).

Man is treated as a fallen being who cannot simply expect God to restore him to original value. Man must painfully pay off his debt to God by consciously paying indemnity through a variety of hardships including fasting, sleep deprivation, and extremely hard work. The hope is that God will accept indemnity as a token of sincere desire to restore the lost relationship of love with him and that he will therefore wipe out the remaining debt of sin of his own volition. Again, the Unity Cult considers itself an indispensable agency for encouraging the payment of both individual and collective indemnity. Therefore it claims legitimate authority to demand this indemnity of its members.

This contrasts sharply with the views of, for example, Guru

Maharaj-ji's followers. For them, according to Anthony et al., the law of karma is a "spiritual learning process associated with the soul's quest for monistic self-realization and self-insight.... The goal of such learning is the eventual experience of the unity of all existence" (1977, p. 869). This religious movement, therefore, enables its members to "experience their own divinity."

The Unity Cult, however, *obliges* its members to struggle against their fallen nature. What is more, it *judges* them inadequate and keeps this judgment in the forefront of their minds. Not surprisingly, therefore, ex-members tend to make great play, in their account of life in the Unity Cult, of the unremitting pressure under which they felt they had operated. Many report that they felt themselves under constant surveillance and under the threat of being required without warning to justify their actions. This pressure was believed to come from both peers and superiors. The cultivation of deeper spirituality in this movement is inseparable from conformity with strict discipline.

Absolute view of truth. Relativism in the moral codes of the Unity Cult is as unthinkable as it is in its doctrines. The thrust of the movement's propaganda and of its training programmes is toward the inculcation of absolute notions of truth and goodness. No scope is allowed to personal idiosyncrasy or to cultural variation, nor is much attention given to persuading people of the rightness of the Unity Cult's grasp on truth. This is merely assumed and written into every aspect of its organization and practical activities. This in turn lends considerable force to its teachings and raises "teaching" to the status of the prime task.

All of this is more redolent of fundamentalist Christian groups than of syncretistic Oriental movements,⁸ and it may, therefore,

8. This may be why Robbins et al. (1976) have identified the Unity Cult with conservative Christian denominations in the U.S.A.

be significant in this connection that Unity Cult literature in the last years has displayed a greatly increased emphasis on Christian symbols and themes.

To sum up, the Unity Cult encourages its members to live an intensely communal life in close, unremitting proximity to other members, and it expects them to obey the authority of superiors in every respect. Given the nature of Unity Cult members' everyday tasks, this exercise of hierarchical authority extends far beyond the confines of the purely "spiritual" into every aspect of life.

The methodical search for new members and the elaborately orchestrated programmes for socializing them into the officially required ways of thinking, feeling, and acting combine to insure that those who eventually agree to live and work full-time in this movement are strongly committed to its ethos. The ethos itself can justifiably be called "totalizing" insofar as it legitimizes the transfer of responsibility for decision-making from individual, rank-and-file members to people occupying official positions of authority in the movement. The question of whether this transfer of responsibility is genuinely voluntary, voluntary but elicited in some underhanded fashion, or enforced is immaterial to this paper.⁹ But it *is* important for present purposes to underline the contrast between the authoritarian character of the Unity Cult and the nature of authority in the Meher Baba movement—the main source for Robbins and Anthony's theorizing about the integrating effects of such movements (see Anthony and Robbins 1974, and Coty 1971).

THE PROJECT

Problem and hypothesis. The specific question with which I am concerned here is how the experience of life in the Unity Cult, with its totalizing ethos and sharply defined relationships of authority, affects the outlook of those who have formally with-

9. But see Solomon (1977) for a discussion of this important issue.

drawn from it. The guiding hypothesis is that this experience is not conducive to the development of self-reliance and self-discipline and that ex-members may encounter a complex range of associated benefits and problems in the process of trying to lead a life outside the movement.

A hitherto overlooked population. It should be emphasized that I am primarily concerned with a category of people who have so far escaped serious scientific investigation, namely, those who have withdrawn from the Unity Cult. I find it odd that, despite widespread interest in the allegedly therapeutic effects for Western youth of participation in Oriental religious movements, no systematic research has been conducted among *ex*-members.¹⁰ Knowledge is still at the stage of speculating in the manner of J. Stillson Judah on the modern exponents of Krishna Consciousness:

How many will find the discipline too rigorous over a long period of time is yet unknown. That some have already dropped out is also true. For others it will be a permanent fellowship as if found in the Christian religious orders; for still others it will undoubtedly be a rite of passage, through which they will pass to an adult life that will be better for having had this meaningful experience (Judah 1974, p. 478).

What is urgently required, and what this paper tentatively offers, is some reliable information about the more precise meaning to the actors concerned of the "meaningful" experience of participation in *and* withdrawal from the Unity Cult.

Method. The remainder of this paper is a presentation of material bearing on the guiding hypothesis drawn from an ongoing research project. It has been generated almost exclusively through interviews, each lasting several hours, with

10. Some research has, however, been conducted by Professor Byong suh-Kim on those ex-members of the cult who actively support anti-cult movements in the U.S.A.

three categories of people:

- (a) 15 ex-members of the Unity Cult in Great Britain,
- (b) 16 close relatives of ex-members in Great Britain, and
- (c) 9 close relatives of practicing members in Great Britain.

I conducted all the interviews according to a common schedule, mostly in informants' homes. All of the forty interviews so far completed have been tape-recorded and transcribed in toto. It is anticipated that a further sixty people will have been interviewed in this way when the research grant expires in December 1978.

Methodology. In the absence of a suitable sampling frame and without having to face the difficulty of sampling what was already a small population of potential informants in Great Britain, I intend to interview all those who have been contacted by the "snowball" method. For a variety of reasons this probably means that "extreme" cases are over-represented in my sample.

The reasons for interviewing the close relatives of former and practicing members of the Unity Cult have been set out more fully elsewhere (Beckford 1978). For present purposes I shall merely indicate that they derive from my view that sociological and psychological studies of the members of minority religious groups have conventionally focused too narrowly on the dispositions, attitudes, and motives of individuals. A "medical" model, locating the source of religious deviance within individual "diseased" psyches, has largely predominated in this kind of research.¹¹ Little account has been taken of the *social* dimensions of becoming a member of a minority religious movement—and still less interest has been shown in the social processes of withdrawing from, and ceasing to be a member of, such movements.

In particular, the research reported here was designed to generate insights into the processes whereby the subjective meanings of being, and ceasing to be, a member of the Unity

11. See Anthony et al. (1977) for a critique of the medical model.

Cult are negotiated in social interactions among members, ex-members, and relatives closely associated with them. Questions as to *why* people join and/or leave this movement have been set aside in favor of questions as to *how* they managed to accomplish joining and/or leaving. This necessarily involves reliance on the verbal accounts given of these processes, but the reliance is not uncritical: it is based on the assumption that these accounts are social constructions which constitute in important respects an integral aspect of belonging to, and withdrawing from, the Unity Cult. Such accounts are not taken as objective reports on past events. They are treated as partly constitutive of the very possibility that those events could have taken place in the manner described.¹² Integral to these accounts are four elements concerning post-withdrawal states of mind and courses of action: material problems, uncertainty, fear, and personal relationships. These elements serve as the foci of the following section.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

An important point which must be clearly established at the outset is that the ex-members of the Unity Cult whom I interviewed had all been full-time residents in the movement's Family Centers for periods of time varying from two months to two years. They all felt that at some time they had really belonged to the Unity Cult and been entirely committed to it as a way of living their lives for as far as they could see into the future. They had all accepted the distribution of authority in the movement and had all accepted that its doctrines enjoyed the authority of truth. In short, they were not peripheral members: they had been exposed to the full effects of prolonged participation in the full round of the Unity Cult's various activities, including learning Principle, teaching Principle, selling in public, recruiting in public, communal living in different Family Centers, participation in communal worship, private devotions, and ascetic

12. See Beckford (1977) for a fuller exposition of these views.

exercises. The other side of the coin is that they had also made a conscious and deliberate attempt to reduce the influence of their close relatives in what they saw as their "new" lives, and they had all given up either jobs or places in educational institutions in order to devote themselves fully to the Unity Cult.

My informants said that they had been totally dominated by the Unity Cult for varying lengths of time. They had submitted to the authority of its leaders and had given their minds over very largely to ways of thinking and feeling that were felt to accord with Divine Principle. To live a "Principled" life had been their main aim. One of the signs that their commitment had been total was their readiness to "follow Principle" even if it entailed anxiety, anger, or pain for close relatives. This is not to say that the feelings of others had been irrelevant, but only that my informants had been consciously prepared to sacrifice everything for the Unity Cult. Some of them reported feelings of distress at the thought of hurting people close to them, for example, parents, but they had all come to terms, at least temporarily, with the conflict or tension between family obligations and religious calling.

The question of what happened when these formerly strongly committed participants in this authoritarian religious movement eventually withdrew from it will be tackled under four headings. It should be stressed, however, that withdrawal is not so much a discrete event as an open-ended process—still going on for my informants and still being simultaneously constructed and evaluated by them. Rather than to talk about consequences (thus implying a temporal sequence that distinguishes between withdrawal and its effects), it will therefore be more accurate to talk about the concomitants and ramifications of withdrawal. It goes without saying that they are all closely interrelated.

Material problems. One of the most obvious, yet usually overlooked, concomitants of withdrawal from a totalizing religious movement such as the Unity Cult is that there is no comparable

alternative for an ex-member to turn to. The number of comparable, communal-based movements in Great Britain is very small, and the process of locating them and seeking admission is lengthy. In any case none of my informants reported any desire to find an alternative movement, though their most cherished memories of the Unity Cult were normally related to its communal organization and to the warm companionship among members—or at least some groups of members. The reasons for this apparent paradox will be explored elsewhere, but the point of immediate relevance is that all my informants returned to live with their parents as soon as they had left a Unity Cult Family Center. This often generated friction and problems for all concerned, as I shall make clear later, but my informants uniformly described their condition on withdrawal as one of “exhaustion,” both mental and physical. Consequently, they claimed that they were not in a fit condition to look for accommodations outside the family home and lacked the necessary resources for setting up an independent household. The prospects for sharing accommodations with others were remote because relations with former friends had been severed, and it had been impossible to keep in touch with former colleagues who had earlier withdrawn from the Unity Cult. Isolation from all but close relatives rarely proved to be painful during the period immediately following removal from a Unity Cult residence, but it did impose serious constraints on the availability of alternative living accommodations.

Most of my informants left the Unity Cult with little in the way of money or property. But in view of their experiences in the movement where personal property (even clothing) had been shared and cash had been required only for the performance of official duties, they were not unduly bothered by the prospect of trying to live on meager resources. They had learned how to depend on others for the basics of life, and they had learned how to dispense with luxuries. They found, moreover, that their families were willing to give them material support, though it

was painful for some informants to accept help from people whose interests they had previously seemed to neglect. Even those few informants who had remained in close touch with their parents during the time spent living in the Unity Cult reported feelings of guilt and embarrassment when they had to ask for money and shelter.

From one point of view these circumstances might appear to have helped repair the damage done to personal relationships by participation in the Unity Cult, but from a different point view the material dependence of ex-members on their parents merely aggravated difficulties. In some cases these personal difficulties had been important in originally disposing my informants to join the Unity Cult; in other cases the difficulties had begun only as a result of participation in the movement. But the accounts given by both ex-members and by their parents show that the ex-members' lack of material resources was a hindrance to the development of relatively unproblematic personal relationships within the family. Most parents felt confirmed in the view that their child had been foolish in disregarding their advice not to join the Unity Cult, and most ex-members felt guilty about depending so heavily on people whose advice they had deliberately disregarded.

Difficulties in finding employment or educational opportunities were experienced by all informants. The major difficulty for some was in overcoming problems of self-identity and motivation to the point where they actually *wanted* to find an occupation outside the house. The trauma of withdrawing from the cult and of trying to construct an adequate version for themselves of the meaning of joining and leaving it was simply too great for some. They spent months in inactivity, sometimes finding solace in alcohol or in short bursts of enthusiasm for ephemeral projects, but more often brooding over their experiences.

It also proved difficult to conceal from a prospective employer, or to explain away, a period of absence from paid employment or

an interruption of studies. Most of my informants preferred to conceal the fact of their participation in the Unity Cult by saying that they had been traveling abroad or doing voluntary charitable work. This was usually the kind of façade they then chose to maintain among fellow-workers when they did get jobs. Only one informant made no secret of his involvement with the cult, and he made it clear that it suited his extroverted personality to be able to attract attention by it in the factory where he worked as a semiskilled laborer. But for the other informants, the desire to conceal their past added to their already considerable difficulties in establishing stable relationships with friends, workmates, and relatives. One young man who had traveled abroad with the Unity Cult for eighteen months returned home without explaining to his family what he had been doing and, at the time of the interview one year later, had still managed to keep the secret of his involvement from his parents.

Some parents of former and practicing members of the Unity Cult have tried to bring pressure on the movement's leaders in Great Britain to accept responsibility for paying National Insurance contributions on the member's behalf. But the response of the Department of Health and Social Security and of the leaders has been that there is no obligation on voluntary workers for a charitable organization to pay such contributions. When people leave the movement, therefore, they have gaps in their contribution record and are consequently prevented from drawing maximum benefits. In times of high unemployment rates this may be a serious disadvantage to those who had been members for a long time, and it often increases the material dependency of ex-members on their parents. Several of my informants also pointed out that their life had been made even more difficult after withdrawal by the felt need to replace the missing contributions by voluntarily doubling or trebling the rate at which they purchased national insurance stamps.

Uncertainty. A common theme running through all my inform-

ants' accounts of their withdrawal from the Unity Cult is the difficulty of describing the process of deciding to withdraw. It is as if they had left the movement without being able to articulate (or even grasp) good reasons for doing so. Most of them eventually managed to produce justifications and/or excuses for their actions, but the dominant characteristic of the accounts is still uncertainty about what had happened and was in some respects still happening to them. In fact, the uncertainty was so acute in a few cases that it is impossible to judge whether withdrawal had really taken place or whether commitment to the cult was merely being expressed outside the formal confines of the movement. An equally pervasive sense of uncertainty about the meaning of withdrawal was also characteristic of the accounts given by some ex-members' close relatives. Not surprisingly, some informants looked to me either explicitly or implicitly for guidance and seemed to hope that the precise meaning of events would become clear in the process of talking about them.

One of the reasons for this high degree of uncertainty is that members of the Unity Cult are typically subjected (or subject themselves) to such an intensive process of indoctrination and to such an intensively communal existence in the Family Centers that it becomes almost impossible for ex-members to stand back and evaluate the experience objectively. Yet the very act of withdrawal forces them to do precisely that. In their own minds they may be willing to suspend judgment indefinitely, but pressures from friends and close relatives, on whom they are necessarily dependent, constrains them to explain their past actions. "Why did you do it?" or "How could you have put up with it?" are questions that occur naturally to concerned people, but the ex-member is rarely in a position to offer a coherent answer and is consequently forced into giving either a conveniently conventional reply or a more honest admission of uncertainty. The former tactic may aggravate personal guilt for "betraying" former co-religionists; the latter tactic only

intensifies the air of suspicion surrounding the Unity Cult among outsiders and perhaps reinforces the feeling that the ex-member had lost control of his or her mind.

The root of most uncertainty lies not so much in the individual ex-member's doubts about the meaning of personal actions as in a genuine incapacity to decide on an evaluation of the cult and of the founder/leader's role in it. None of my informants felt confident enough, for example, to offer an unqualified judgment on the authenticity of his allegedly messianic status. Moreover, this had apparently not been a major source of anxiety for them at any stage in their involvement with his movement. They were prepared to suspend judgment on this question because in their opinion it had little or no connection with the status or fortunes of the Unity Cult. Most of them said, however, that they had agonized over the question of whether the Unity Cult was essentially authentic and beneficent. A common, partial resolution of the difficulty was to admit that there were some questionable features in its organizational structure and practical activities, but that, on the other hand, *Divine principle* was probably an important expression of ultimate truth. In every case it was emphasized that the rank-and-file members were sympathetic and honest workers for what they genuinely believed to be a better world order.

Some informants were explicitly trying to live outside the Unity Cult in accordance with the *Divine principle*, and others had managed to renew acquaintance with practicing members. (Only one informant, three of whose close relatives were still in the movement, felt no desire to live a "Principled" life or to revisit former colleagues.) Three young male informants had made repeated efforts to revisit Unity Cult installations and assure themselves that they had, or had not, been wise to withdraw. One in particular had been expelled for failing to work hard enough, but he had subsequently traveled to Germany to join again for several months before being detected and expelled for a second time. He then joined a French branch of the

movement and finally withdrew only when he was certain that he was on the point of being detected again. He was in tears when he admitted that he "would join again tomorrow" if only he were allowed to. The element of uncertainty in this case is, therefore, slight, for he had no doubts about the sacred nature of the Unity Cult founder's revelation and mission. But he did express reservations about the moral character of those leaders who had expelled him.

Uncertainty about the status of the Unity Cult among ex-members may militate against their active participation in FAIR, an organization set up by a member of Parliament to combat the cult's influence and help families and individuals affected by it.¹³ Only two of the ex-members whom I interviewed have supported FAIR (although there are several others who have done so but not yet been interviewed). Why is this so? Lingering suspicions that the founder/leader's revelations contained sacred truth, or more positive fears that something dreadful will happen to his opponents, are powerful inhibitors of anti-Unity Cult behavior. But even when commitment to *Divine principle*, the founder/leader, and the Unity Cult in general is weak among ex-members, they still find it difficult to attack the movement. Consideration for former friends and colleagues in the communal centers probably makes them reluctant to support FAIR. A further reason is that FAIR had previously received active support from the parents of some of my informants, who have, therefore, avoided a course of action that could only emphasize their earlier indiscretions and confirm the usually adverse opinions of their parents. (In the U.S.A., ex-members have been prominent in various anti-cult activities, but I am unable to discuss here the possible reasons for this apparent difference between Great Britain and the U.S.A.)

I have discussed elsewhere a general cultural source of uncertainty facing both ex-members and their close relatives, namely, the non-availability of a common scenario in terms of

13. See Beckford (1977).

which withdrawal from a religious cult could be understood (Beckford 1978). It is not a situation that has been treated in any medium of popular culture, nor are there any readily analogous themes in high culture. This leaves people grasping for clues as to its possible meaning. Recourse to the imagery of brainwashing has probably been the most common way of trying to resolve the problem, but this itself is problematic and, particularly for the ex-member, merely opens up even more uncertainties. A close analysis of the accounts given by ex-members and their close relatives of the processes of joining and leaving the Unity Cult is expected to throw light on common strategies for constructing meanings.

Fear. It was common for the ex-members of the Unity Cult whom I interviewed to claim that the most enduring and serious consequence of participation in the movement was a heightened sensitivity to spiritual phenomena. In their own accounts they typically deny that they had ever given much attention to questions of spirituality before contacting the Unity Cult. But its teachings and devotional practices are credited with inducing beliefs and emotions that have taken deep root in their everyday lives. Coupled with the common respect that ex-members display for *Divine principle*, their enduring awareness of spiritual phenomena makes it even more difficult to say confidently whether they had "withdrawn" from the Unity Cult.

One manifestation of their commitment to an outlook learned in the cult is the disposition of ex-members to profess admiration and awe for those prominent members famous for their "spiritual openness." They clearly had special respect for people whose capacity to make contact with spirits or to detect spiritual atmospheres had been unquestioned. Yet this respect was also tinged with fear. They were frightened of the power of spirits to mislead or harm innocent people, and they all recounted stories of the harm that had come to "spiritually open" but inexperienced members who had been unable to control the spirits

which had tried to speak through them. There was no shortage of anecdotes about the visions, the horrifying dreams, and the poltergeists experienced both during and after involvement in the movement.

Fear of the dark and fear of being alone at night were allegedly common experiences for ex-members and were directly attributed by them to disturbing events that had occurred during membership. An unforgettable example was provided by a young man in his early twenties who described in the interview how he had spent a night in the company of one of the English branch's most spiritually sensitive leaders at a large, isolated country house. He was awaked in the early hours by anguished howling and furious banging in a distant wing of the building. This kept him awake and in terror until dawn. When he mentioned it at breakfast, his companion briefly admitted that an extraordinary spiritual phenomenon had occurred but refused to discuss it with him.

My informants frequently associated their fear of spiritual phenomena with the Unity Cult doctrine on indemnity discussed above. They were taught to believe that evil spirits deliberately attack people who actively strive toward spiritual perfection in their earthly existence. One of the self-professed functions of the Unity Cult as a collectivity is, therefore, to protect such people and give them moral strength to resist evil spirits. They also learned, whether through official teaching or through informal discussion, that those who left the movement in full knowledge of spiritual matters would be subject to especially harsh conditions. They would lack collective protection and would have to pay an exceptionally heavy indemnity for the sin of disregarding what were considered God's plans for the restitution of the world to a state of perfection. These ideas seemed to weigh heavily on ex-members, especially on those who did not wish to repudiate any of the main tenets of *Divine principle*. Given their general uncertainty about the precise status of the Unity Cult in God's plans, they were understandably worried

about the spiritual implications of withdrawal from it. Some had apparently lost the initial fear of spirit-attacks, but others were still having nightmares and eerie experiences even years after withdrawal.

A hazy belief in the reality of spirits in combination with a vague sense that in withdrawing from the Unity Cult they may have incurred a painful penalty made some of my informants generally uneasy and anxious about the future. Only one felt that she had successfully freed herself from the movement's teachings and had convinced herself that it enjoyed no divine status or mission. She was no longer bothered by fear that something terrible would happen to her or her family as a result of her withdrawal. She had married, set up a home, and entered a new career after overcoming the initial problems of uncertainty and material insecurity. All the others were still in some respects "in transition" from the Unity Cult to something else. They were all unsure of their aims and ambitions and preferred not to think about the long-term future. When they did pause and wonder what they wanted to do and to become, they admitted that anxieties flooded in. For example, none of them had settled in a career they could regard as a permanent commitment, and some were still treating their jobs as temporary interludes while waiting for a more attractive and absorbing interest to become available. Most regretted that they had failed to complete courses of education or training.

Personal relationships. All my informants agreed that as a result of involvement in the Unity Cult they had acquired several useful benefits. The capacity to dispense with long hours of sleep, the ability to tolerate hard living and working conditions, the resilience to accept stoically severe personal criticism or abuse, and the self-confidence to talk to strangers were frequently attributed to their experience in the movement. Some regarded this experience as a valuable period of training for a more independent and self-assertive way of life. In these respects,

then, there is some confirmation of the general hypothesis associating Unity Cult participation and subsequent withdrawal with an apparently higher degree of integration into mainstream social life and culture. In other words, ex-members may be better able to cope with some aspects of day-to-day life as a result of the experience gained in the cult. In particular, they are enabled to handle instrumental, transitory relationships with strangers with increased confidence.

On the other hand, my informants all drew attention to some other features of their post-withdrawal experiences that indicated a corresponding inability to initiate or sustain deep, personal relationships. It was frequently reported, for example, that they felt emotionally drained or exhausted when they left the movement and they were unable to enter into any kind of social relationship which might have placed demands on their emotions. It was not the case that they were afraid of becoming too emotionally involved with another person or group; the problem was that they had no desire to be closely tied to anybody or anything. This was sometimes described as a period of greyness or numbness, a period when a gulf seemed to separate them from other people. Within families this was often an aggravation to already strained relationships. Close relatives tended to be offended by the ex-members' apparent indifference to them, and the fact that ex-members were usually dependent on them for material support only made things worse. It is rare for the Prodigal Son scenario to be enacted in British households when a child withdraws from the Unity Cult.

Outside the family circle ex-members manifested a similar reluctance to initiate or reactivate close personal relationships with friends or former work-mates. This reluctance stemmed partly from a sense of foolishness or shame, partly from fear of being stigmatized as odd. But a more deep-seated reason seems apparent: unwillingness to expose their inner selves to a potentially intimate companion. Some informants explained this response as a defensive measure against yet more encroachments

in their private lives. For one of the most overwhelming experiences of life in the Unity Cult had, in their opinion, been the constant exposure to surveillance and criticism by others. They never felt that they could be entirely alone for long or that they could avoid giving an account of their actions to others. Significantly, most of my informants interpreted their first steps toward withdrawal as nothing more serious than an attempt to regain a sense of privacy and personal integrity away from the gaze of others. In no single case did the individual make a clear-cut, unconditional decision to leave the movement. But withdrawal came about in most cases as a result of the difficulties encountered in seeking permission in advance, or forgiveness after the event, for trying to regain a feeling of individuality through solitude.

None of the above applies, of course, to the cases of more or less forcible removal from the Unity Cult. Two of my informants had been taken away by their parents, and both admitted that they would probably have stayed in the movement if their parents had not acted decisively. Neither had felt the need to seek solitude or privacy, but what is interesting is that, nonetheless, they too felt emotionally exhausted after leaving the movement and were extremely reluctant to enter into close personal relationships with other people. It is impossible to assess how much this was due to their experience in the Unity Cult and how much to the trauma of being removed from what they had considered at the time to be a divinely sanctioned organization. And in spite of having apparently become reconciled to life outside the movement, they too admitted to occasional feelings of uncertainty about the meaning of their actions and fear about the consequences. Involuntary withdrawal may not entail the same kind of material problems, but other associated problems are no less acute than for those who withdraw voluntarily.

A further point about the capacity to form personal relationships outside the Unity Cult applies equally to voluntary and involuntary withdrawers. Perhaps as a strategy for countering

the influence of intense indoctrination and for winning an area of relative privacy, each of my informants had enjoyed a deep friendship with one or two fellow members. Special relationships of this kind were officially frowned on, but they usually survived over quite long periods of time and were regarded at the time and in hindsight as highly valuable experiences. But in a curious way they actually made life outside the movement more difficult. The memory of close friendships aggravated each ex-member's doubts and uncertainties about the advisability of withdrawal. Especially during the first few months after leaving the Unity Cult, my informants felt strongly tempted to return for the sake of renewing these friendships. The fact that former friends were still active in the movement was occasionally taken as evidence that it could not possibly be the kind of fraudulent or malevolent operation it was depicted to be in the mass media and in the literature of anti-cult organizations. Moreover, it was difficult outside the movement to begin to develop anything even approaching the intensity of personal feelings toward another person that had been characteristic of the small community of Unity Cult members. Even when reluctance to become involved in any fresh personal relationships had begun to weaken, it was still difficult for ex-members to overcome the obstacle of comparison with earlier, deeper friendships within the cult, friendships grounded in shared, intense commitments to certain beliefs, values, spiritual experiences, practical activities, living conditions, and hopes for the future.

CONCLUSION

It is unfortunately impossible within the confines of this paper to supply detailed evidence from the interview transcripts to support my interpretation of the experiences of ex-members of the Unity Cult in Great Britain. But I believe that enough has already been said to suggest that the so-called integration hypothesis is not borne out in any straightforward sense in the

material reported above. Nor do I feel that a significantly different conclusion would follow from the recognition that the Unity Cult is a marginal, rather than an adaptive, religious movement. For there is no evidence in my findings that ex-members of the Unity Cult have, as a result of their involvement in and withdrawal from it, contributed toward the management of tension in the British social system. They did not constitute a potentially disruptive or seriously alienated section of society before joining the cult, and their experience in it cannot be considered a "cooling down" period.

The integrative hypothesis has served as a convenient focus for this paper, but in adducing evidence to disconfirm it with regard to one particular youth religious movement, I have tried to suggest that withdrawal can more profitably be considered as an open-ended, multi-stranded, and multi-directional process of negotiating appropriate views of reality with significant others. The ramifications of withdrawal are too complex, wide-ranging, and thoroughgoing to be easily accommodated within a single explanatory category.

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