



RECOVERY FROM CULTS: HELP FOR VICTIMS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL ABUSE. Edited by Michael D. Langone. New York: W. W. Norton, 1993. xix + 410 pp. \$37.00 cloth.

There is no doubt that the new religious movements have created a number of problems for some of their ex-members and their families. This book claims to address those problems by providing general principles necessary to understand the cult phenomenon and by proposing practical guidelines to enable counselors to address the issues in counseling and therapy.

In a short preface, Margaret Thaler Singer clearly sets the tone of the volume. She takes the Peoples Temple, the Branch Davidians, and the Indiana Faith Assembly as paradigms of the new religious movements and lumps all together as evil organizations that use mind control to attract and influence prospective members when these are vulnerable, needy, and lonely.

After a lengthy introduction in which the editor provides a historical background, the 19 essays included

in the volume are grouped into four sections. The first deals with mind control (or brainwashing) and attempts to demonstrate how new religions gain control over and manipulate their recruits. The techniques of a now-defunct political cult and of the Unification Church in its weekend training sessions are discussed. An essay by Philip Zimbardo and Susan Andersen focuses on ways to resist mind control. The three essays in this section repeat the arguments that have long been adduced to support the brainwashing theory of conversion to the new religions. Practically no new insights are added to the controversy, and no effort is made to consider other psychological theories that account for involvement in new religions. The underlying assumption is that all members of new religions are more or less coerced to join and are the victims of some kind of mental and psychological manipulation and enslavement.

The second section describes the difficulties faced by ex-members when they abandon their commitments, and explains the technique of exit counseling as distinguished from deprogramming. Two personal accounts relate the exit processes from Transcendental Meditation and a Christian fundamentalist group, the New York City Church of Christ. The rest of the articles deal with the mechanics of exit counseling, which, while it differs from deprogramming in that members are not forcibly removed from their environments, still relies on attacking the new religions' beliefs and practices and on convincing their members or ex-members that their minds are, or have been, under the control of cult leaders.

The third section addresses the process of recovery. Here, some genuine contribution is made in dealing with the problems that membership in the new religions often creates. Truly enough, the essays still rely on the brainwashing theory on which most of the authors' advice and proposed therapy are based. One finds occasionally good advice that does not fit in comfortably with the negative assessment of new religions that pervades the whole volume. Richard Dowhover, for example, admits that there are some "more beneficial aspects of the cult experience" (262). Similarly, Lorne Goldberg, even though she dwells on the destructive features of the new religions, states that "integral to recovery process is developing an attitude that there are some positives to be gained from the cult experience" (247). It is a pity, however, that the authors do not examine these aspects in any detail, nor do they use them to lay the ground for a more positive framework for counseling. Arnold Markowitz gives some excellent advice to parents. He suggests that counselors should create "an environment that is low in tension, conflict, and overstimulation. Intense affect and tension in the family can precipitate internal stress for the former cult member. . . . Decrease stress by reducing the emotionality and intensity of family life" (294-95). Anticult conferences and counseling sessions, more often than not, accomplish just the opposite. When they provide parents with anticult literature, they do nothing else but increase their fears and concerns and heighten the intellectual and emotional barriers that already exist between themselves and their offspring.

Sometimes one wonders whether common counseling principles, like the adoption of a neutral and empathic posture by counselors, have been forgotten or discarded by the authors of this volume. Most counseling sessions seem to degenerate into violent attacks

against cult leaders and their teachings and activities. Further, encouraging ex-members of new religious movements to participate in anticult activities is hardly the best way to help them readapt to the mainstream culture. Nor will the heightening of anticult feelings contribute to a well-integrated personality. When Madeleine Tobias, for example, tells ex-members to "Fantasize revenge — it's okay to imagine it" (313), one wonders where she received her degree in counseling?

It would certainly be much more psychologically healthy if ex-members reflected on the good experiences of membership, learned from their mistakes, and then moved on with their lives without becoming fanatical anticult crusaders. Ex-members should be directed to more productive careers than attacking their previous commitments and running deprogramming sessions. Although initially expressing anger (an emotion that should arise spontaneously from the ex-member rather than be prompted by the counselor) is a legitimate step to recovery, continued involvement in anticult activities, encouraged in this volume by several contributors, is a sign of weakness, not strength.

The final section tackles special issues, including children in new religions, ritualistic abuse, and teen satanism. Unfortunately, the essays published in this volume present one-sided pictures of several debates that have raged in professional literature. Little effort is made to offer balanced perspectives.

Because the contributors of this volume appear committed to the theory of brainwashing, they make practically no attempt to consider other psychological issues that membership in the new religions has brought about. Thus, for example, nothing is said about the problem of religious pluralism that might be the basis of some conflicts between parents and their offspring who have joined new religions. Similarly, no serious attempt is made to discuss the psychology of religious conversion. One is consequently left wondering whether this volume is based on the assumptions that the so-called cults are not religious at all and that any conversions (including those to the major religions) that involve deep commitment and intense personal experience and create conflicts with one's parents are to be treated as cases of psychological manipulation and mind control.

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