CULTS

Faith, Healing, and Coercion

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In memory of my father

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was written after fifteen years of studying the psychology of contemporary charismatic groups. Although this is an unusual subject for today's psychiatric research, I found it compelling because of the remarkable ability of these groups to exert influence on the thought and behavior of their members, often greater than our most potent treatments. An understanding of the "cult" phenomenon might offer valuable insights in areas as diverse as the treatment of mental illness and the understanding of group violence.

Inspiration for this quest lay in the work of observers who had succeeded in defining the nature of group behavior without being distracted by the particulars of ritual or circumstance. Max Weber, a sociologist, drew a perspective on charismatic leadership that could be employed in the most varied cultures. Wilfred Bion, a psychoanalyst, used the psychodynamic approach to understand small groups, and thereby afforded an understanding that went beyond the specific concerns of individual members to the innate forces governing group process. The contemporary sociobiologic paradigm recently articulated by Edward O. Wilson provided the foundation for the approach I developed in empirical biology, a reassuring opportunity for a physician researcher. Ideally, this approach will do justice to its antecedents.

I was fortunate to have skilled and understanding support in securing agreements with the groups I studied. Richard Erlich, Bonnie Blair, Kathy Lowrie, and Nora Spurgin were extremely helpful in this endeavor. Leaders of the groups themselves must certainly be credited for their willingness to undergo independent evaluation, particularly Neil Salonen and Mose Durst, presidents in their respective terms of the Unification Church in America.

Unfortunately, some members of these groups will question having their movements likened to others mentioned here. Conversely, detractors will likely take issue that criticism or even condemnation were not given. To proponents of both views I can only say that this book's purpose is to convey a psychological understanding of the charismatic group. Early on I realized it was necessary to avoid passing judgment on the merit of the groups' pursuits in order to study their operating principles. Very different groups could

thus be compared with regard to their psychological and organizational processes but not for the inherent worth of their ideologies or tactics.

I am grateful to my colleagues and collaborators for their support and collaboration, both on conceptual issues and statistical analysis, and especially thank Robert Plutchik, Hope Conte, Mark Mizruchi, Peter Buckley, Alexander Deutsch, and Richard and Judith Rabkin. Assistance with data analysis was also given by my research assistants, Mary Tramontin, Denise Cancellare, Charles Flavio, Virginia Privitar, and Luiza Diamond.

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My wife, Wynne, was patient and most helpful in offering valuable advice. She, along with Cathryn and Margit, gave inspiration.

New York M. G.
September 1988

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CULTS

And the Spirit of the Lord will
come upon thee, and thou shalt prophesy with them,
and shalt be turned into another man.

I Samuel 10:6

1

THE CHARISMATIC GROUP

Individuals who become involved in a religious cult or radical political group may do things that puzzle and dismay their friends and family. They may don saffron-colored robes, shave their heads, or give away their family legacies. They may accept strangers 10,000 miles away as prospective mates, dedicate their lives to panhandling, or simply disappear. Their families may ask, "How could this happen? Nothing would have led us to expect it."

Strange as these transformations in attitude and action are, they can be understood in terms of psychological principles. These principles in turn can be explained and illustrated by recent research findings from seemingly diverse groups that share a "charismatic" quality. Charismatic groups are highly cohesive. They impute transcendent powers to the group's leader or its mission, and they strictly control members' behavior by means of a shared system of beliefs. Among these groups are cults and zealous religious sects; some highly cohesive self-improvement groups; and certain political action movements, among them some terrorist groups.

Three examples of individual members' experiences illustrate the impact of such cult-like groups. The first involves a young woman whom I interviewed some time ago.

> After breaking up with her boyfriend, Debbie left home on the East Coast to start summer school at a college in California. She was optimistic, if also a bit apprehensive, about her upcoming adventure. Her parents expected her to do well in the school environment, as she had dealt quite successfully with high school and the first year in a local college. Before summer school began, though, she was befriended by a group of youths who suggested that she get to know members of their informal organiza-

tion, dedicated to promoting "social ecology and world peace." Within a month, she was spending all her spare time with the group. Only at this point was she told by them that the group was associated with a small religious cult with an elaborate and arcane theology. She was soon asked by the group's leader to adopt its idiosyncratic beliefs and leave school. Interestingly, she agreed to all this without hesitation, and began to devote herself full time to raising funds to support the cult. For the next three months her parents could not locate her. In the midst of their anxiety, they could offer no explanation as to why she "threw away" the family's values and her own stake in her future. Five years later Debbie described the period as a difficult but meaningful time, and the friends she made there as among the best she ever had.

In recent years, many such young people have had similar experiences. In most cases, neither a psychiatric disorder nor overriding social pressure explains the profound changes in their lives. Was this young woman's mind "captured" by the group? There was no evidence that physical restraint or even psychological coercion was used. Was she only superficial in her previous relationships? Neither her family nor her friends thought so. There was apparently something extrinsic to her in the group experience that exerted an unusual, overriding influence.

Consider another example:

After increasingly heavy drinking that began in his teens, Ted became addicted to alcohol in his mid-thirties. His work performance passed from adequate to irregular, and he eventually lost the sales job he had held since college. Within the next year, his wife left him, taking their child with her (he had recently begun to beat her when he was drinking). Within five years he was hospitalized twice for gastrointestinal bleeding caused by his drinking. Despite frequent exposure to medical advice and the exhortation of his extended family, he expressed no interest in sobriety and had refused to attend meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. On one occasion, though, he accompanied a recovering alcoholic friend to an AA meeting and found himself agreeing to stay after the meeting to speak with some other members. When I talked with him two years later, he remarked that by this point no one seemed to care whether he lived or died, but he couldn't admit that it might be within his power to change this. He could give no clear reason for agreeing to attend the AA meetings at this point, but he continued to do so. Within two months of regular meetings, he had acquired the resolve to remain abstinent, although he himself still wondered how he had fended off for even sixty days the alcohol that had controlled his life for over two decades. Later contacts would reveal that AA helped him maintain abstinence thereafter.

We have come to view alcoholism as a disease, one reflecting both compulsive behavior and physical incapacity. How can social influence, through a self-help fellowship, so dramatically change this syndrome? How can it achieve such impressive results when family, friends, and professionals have

been so limited in their ability to aid alcoholics alter their behavior, even when their illness seems likely to be fatal? As we will see, the mutual support by members of Alcoholics Anonymous serves to engage alcoholics and promote their acceptance of the group's values. The combination of intense social cohesiveness and strongly held, shared belief (in abstinence, in this case) allows for such striking behavioral change.

Consider a different issue. Here is a case of group influence in the political arena.

> In March 1978 a group of youths abducted Aldo Moro, a leading figure in Italian politics, a former Prime Minister and then a potential candidate for the Presidency. While the entire country waited in suspense, they held him hostage and then murdered him. The group who carried out the kidnapping consisted mostly of individuals from stable middle-class backgrounds. They were generally articulate, thoughtful, and strongly committed to the welfare of their fellow man, as they saw it, but nonetheless sought opportunities to injure or kill representatives of the country's establishment—ironically, the very persons their families and friends revered. They belonged to a national network of like-minded individuals who regularly committed murder, while roundly condemned by all segments of Italian society. Their pursuit of terror was fired by the society's dread of their acts.

How does such a network emerge and what keeps it together in the face of widespread condemnation? How does it instill highly deviant norms of behavior in its members, for whom the act of murder was unspeakable before they joined? In psychology, social background, and education, these youths are no different from their school classmates, who moved on to conventional lives in terms of family, work, and politics. How does an all-encompassing philosophy compel political activists to give up their most deeply rooted standards of behavior, sacrifice the lives of others, and risk their own? Are there common mechanisms of group influence at work in these various examples, different as their personal, social, and political aims and outcomes may be?

What Is a Charismatic Group?

A charismatic group consists of a dozen or more members, even hundreds or thousands. It is characterized by the following psychological elements: members (1) have a *shared belief system,* (2) sustain a high level of *social cohesiveness,* (3) are strongly influenced by the group's *behavioral norms,* and (4) impute *charismatic (or sometimes divine) power* to the group or its leadership.

In a charismatic group, commitments can be elicited by relative strangers in a way rarely seen in other groups. Even Freud, who championed the

compelling nature of individual motives, addressed this impressive capacity at length in his book, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego.*[1] He discussed these forces in terms of the "primitive sympathetic response of the group," and said that, "Something is unmistakably at work in the nature of a compulsion to do the same as others, to remain in harmony with the many."

We will see that the cognitive basis for this conformity is a *shared belief system.* When these groups are religious in nature, their beliefs are often codified, but some groups have no more than an ill-defined ideologic orientation. In some religious cults, as shown in Debbie's experience, converts are introduced to the group's ideology only after they have affiliated. Once they have identified with the group's general orientation, though, they accept the particulars of belief quite readily when these are spelled out.

Members of these groups tend to be intensely concerned about each other's well-being, and are deeply committed to joint activities. Their *social cohesiveness,* essential to the group's integrity, is reflected in the close intertwining of the individual's life circumstances with those of all group members. Meetings are frequent; they serve as a focus for group functions and articulate their cohesiveness. Members often express their need to associate regularly with each other by developing joint activities such as minor group tasks and rituals, which in turn justify such meetings. Both cult and self-help group members are always well aware of when their next group meetings will be held, and look to them as a means of instilling commitment and a sense of purpose. A member's emotional state may be highly vulnerable to disruptions of this routine, and a group gathering missed can become a source of distress. As one long-time AA member noted while describing his despair over everyday problems, "It always feels good to go to a meeting."

The *norms for behavior* in a charismatic group play an inordinate role in determining how its members conduct themselves. Marital practices, for example, may be changed profoundly when the group itself adopts a certain style of betrothal. This emerged strikingly among the American-born members of the Unification Church (the "Moonies"). Although coming mainly from ordinary backgrounds, they agreed to get engaged in mass ceremonies to marriage partners whom they had never met before, selected for them on the spot by Reverend Moon.

Members also look to group norms for ways to behave in new situations. They may respond in a similar fashion to strangers perceived as threatening—in some groups, with a blunted and distant stare. Often they are implicitly aware of their style of behavior in an unexpected situation since it is based on previous instruction to the group. At other times it emerges without conscious appreciation of how they act. I found it intriguing to visit the headquarters of cult members overseas where even the style of socializing, the way food is served, and the response to strangers are the same as in countries several thousand miles away.

Behavioral change may also extend to mimicking the symptoms of mental

illness. In these groups, transcendental experiences, often hallucinatory, are quite common. A deceased comrade "literally" stands by a member or a historical figure brings divinely inspired advice. Intense emotional experiences are reported, such as profound euphoria or malaise. Such phenomena, which are often seen among the mentally ill, occur among individuals who give no other evidence of psychiatric disorder.

Charismatic powers are typically imputed to leaders but can also be ascribed to the group or its mission. Some contemporary terrorist groups, for example, are viewed by their members as heralding an inevitable new world order—a remarkable belief, since the general acceptance of their peculiar philosophy is so unlikely.

These traits of charismatic groups are often best illustrated by the way they bring about changes in the thinking and behavior of individual members in single episodes. One example comes from my own research experience with the Divine Light Mission, a Hindu-oriented new religious movement. Janice, an eighteen-year-old American-born high-school senior, had described her problems to a counselor from this group at one of the group's religious festivals. I was studying the group while visiting the festival site, and was able to interview members at the counseling center.

The atmosphere at that center was highly cohesive; strong feelings of camaraderie and a sense of shared belief were evident as members arrived to discuss a variety of psychological problems. Janice came to the unit looking quite distressed. The counselor she encountered was not a health professional, but was contributing her time for Service, as religiously motivated good deeds were called. She allowed me to sit in as she spoke with the girl.

As the counselor approached her, Janice immediately burst into tears, explaining her misery and feelings of helplessness. She concentrated on her difficulty in meditating properly, saying of their Guru, "Maharaj Ji has given me Knowledge but I cannot see his light." This was very important to her, she said, because she could not be a premie, or a member of the sect, without this transcendental experience, achieved through proper meditation. She was further troubled because she felt obliged to do more Service for the Guru to compensate for her inability to meditate properly. This was best done by engaging new converts, but, she reported tearfully, she was too frightened to approach potential members.

The counselor listened to these expressions of distress, implicitly conveying support by her presence and demeanor. Her actions were in keeping with the atmosphere of the counseling center; she was empathic, even affectionate, and alluded to similar problems with meditation other members might experience from time to time. She expressed her perspective from the vantage point of the group's transcendent beliefs, and did not minimize the need for proper meditation or Service. She did, however, give Janice some examples of how problems like hers may be overcome in time with full devotion to the Guru, and reassured her that it was not necessary to perform

an undue amount of Service at present. She said that the resolution of this distress might come through a ritual called *darshan,* meeting with the Guru in person, where such difficulties are often remitted. The following exchange ensued.

> COUNSELOR: Now tell me how you feel toward the premies you meditate with.
>
> JANICE: Of course, I am very close to them. They mean so much to me, like brothers and sisters.
>
> COUNSELOR: So you know now that when you are with them you confirm Maharaj Ji's Knowledge. You attend *satsang* [religious sermons] with them, and you will be going to *darshan,* too. You know that Maharaj Ji will see that you are faithful, and this will soon lead to your relief.
>
> JANICE: Yes I do. You *are* right.

By now the girl, like many others healed by faith, was composed and visibly reassured, even serene. I asked her counselor how she understood the girl's distress. She tried to explain, searching for a simple response, as a professional would speak to a layperson. "She had somehow lost the Knowledge. This happens often. She did not know how to rejoin Maharaj Ji's path." This was stated more as literal fact than metaphor, an expression of the charismatic role of their leader.

I was then able to speak with Janice. She had been having an affair with an older married man around the time she became affiliated with the group. When he ended their relationship two months before her arrival for counseling, she became acutely depressed, withdrew from social relations, and was unable to concentrate on her school work. At this point she also began having difficulty meditating, clearly due to the anxiety associated with her depressed state. This only compounded her sense of guilt and probably prolonged the depressive reaction that might otherwise have abated. She began to feel the need to do more Service for the group, in part to atone for the sexual liaison and also because she saw herself as an inadequate sect member. She had not discussed these matters with anyone. She felt her conduct had run contrary to the group's principles and she was ashamed.

The genesis of Janice's difficulties in meditating seemed fairly clear to me, but she had not really put the pieces together herself. Significantly this issue of her disrupted affair did not have to be broached with her Divine Light counselor because the cohesiveness of the group and the explanatory nature of its dogma (Maharaj Ji's Knowledge) were implicitly available without fuller exploration. These group forces were mobilized to relieve her feelings of guilt.

I spoke with Janice the next day after a protracted KNOWLEDGE session, a religious experience conducted for a large group of members by a principle of the Guru, and asked her how she was feeling. She said that the counselor