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DISENGAGEMENT: LESSONS FROM CULTS AND SECTARIAN GROUPS

Violent extremist ideologies, particularly those associated with 'Islamic terrorism', cause the same kind of headline concern in the media that 'cults' did forty years ago. For example, the mass suicide-murder of 918 individuals in Jonestown, Guyana in November 1978, at the behest of a charismatic religious leader, shook public opinion in a similar way to current Islamic State-inspired atrocities.

As we see in some accounts of young people joining Islamic State, the assumption for cults was that the converts were blameless and in some way vulnerable. They were brainwashed into joining those groups. A cottage industry of 'deprogrammers' developed, which at times forcibly kidnapped the 'brainwashed' and implemented an enforced programme of 'thought-reform' through physical control and mental intimidation.

Eileen Barker's seminal study of coverts to the Unification Church (often referred to as the Moonies after their founder-messiah figure Sun Yung Moon) proved that this popular model of understanding conversion to extreme groups was not backed up from evidence. What was needed was a more nuanced explanatory model to understand the factors for sudden turns towards extreme beliefs and behaviour.

Only a small proportion of cults ever engaged in violence, but many of those that didn't might still be seen as extreme and extracting a high personal cost for membership. In this, we can see parallels between these groups and some terrorist movements. So, what we can learn from forty years of research into how people transition out of membership in high-demand religious groups?

WHY DO THEY LEAVE?

People leaving extremist groups voluntarily is both frequent and normal – whilst membership figures often remain constant many high-demand groups have high rates of turn-over.

Sometimes a specific event that 'goes too far' triggers exiting. These kinds of events could relate to witnessing abuse, acknowledging hypocrisy between ideology and behaviour, or being asked to collude with or perpetrate an act that exceeds that person's sense of morality. Sometimes the ideology itself suddenly appears illogical or untenable.

For other individuals there can be a slow drift out of the group. A seeping disillusionment with ideology or behavioural hypocrisy can drive incremental disengagement. Or the converse can happen: behavioural shifts precipitate disengagement and a looser affiliation to the general ideology follows.

Some individuals continue to hold an ambiguous middle-ground of affiliation for years, expressing sympathy with the group but also distancing themselves from certain activities and ideas. Sometimes these 'marginal' individuals can have an important role in criticising and critiquing the group's worldview, influencing positive organisational change through time.

WHY DON'T THEY LEAVE?

Of course, some never leave. This, despite what might appear to be obvious disconfirming evidences of the leader or belief system. What explains this behaviour? For some, exit costs are very high. They may have severed contact with friends and all social support outside the group. They may have given all financial assets to the group. They have been reliant on the group for employment, housing, and all social needs. There may also be a lingering mistrust of organisations which could help, based on years of antagonism towards 'the system'.

In other cases, the main issue is a lack of basic knowledge of what structures and organisations might be able to support them, should they leave.

HELPING PEOPLE LEAVE

The psychological cost of 'losing face' should not be underestimated. It is humiliating to admit you were wrong about major life decisions. This psychological barrier can keep some people affiliated even if they hold serious misgivings. Interventions which enable people to 'opt out' without serious loss of face or humiliation can help in this respect.

For example, many people join religious groups because they are idealistic. They genuinely want to make the world a better place. It can be helpful to redirect the positive motivations for joining the group, linking these ideals with less harmful groups.

Sympathetic friends or family can be a great help. Many find it easier to leave with another person or knowing they have a friend or relative who would welcome them into their home, at least for a time. People leaving groups need physical and psychological space to re-establish their identity and social networks. In the context of cults and sectarian groups, these are most often peer groups of other former members.

Beliefs are messy and complicated. The same individual may present their belief system differently in special social contexts. This is normal. Expressions of belief are both performative and contextual. It is important to take aspects of religious worldviews seriously and literally.

But it is also important to leave room for an individual's interpretations to change. If an individual becomes defined by a specific presentation of the ideology, she may feel pushed to defend it. Commitment to a specific credo may become more rather than less extreme when it is challenged directly.

It is far better to avoid backing people into conceptual corners or defining them by expressed beliefs. While beliefs can certainly justify extreme behaviour, they do not necessarily lead to action. It is important to separate out behaviour from beliefs.

Behavioural indicators, including how ideas are expressed, are likely be more indicative of potential for violence, and danger to society, than the general ideological affiliation in itself.

Dr Suzanne Newcombe is a Lecturer in Religious Studies and a Research Fellow at Inform, based at the London School of Economics. Inform was founded in 1988 to empower decision-making and prevent the harm that can arise from misinformation about minority religions, sects, and related movements. It has 30 years experience in this field, acting as a bridge between academics, current and former members of cults, their friends and family, law enforcement, mainstream churches and government. Its database includes over 5,000 different groups and affiliated organisations.

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