



# ICSA

# Today

INTERNATIONAL CULTIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION MAGAZINE

VOLUME 11 | NO. 3 | 2020



## Recovery for My Children and Myself

Gretchen Ward

## Why Do Cults Thrive in Modernity?

Anthony Murphy

## Ostracism

Gill Harvey

## About *ICSA Today*

*ICSA Today* (IT) serves ICSA members by providing information that enhances understanding of all aspects of the cult phenomenon, including how groups function, how they affect members, techniques of influence, dealing with harmful effects, educational and legal implications, and other subjects.

*ICSA Today* issues may include

- practical articles for former members, families, helping professionals, researchers, and others
- opinion essays
- theoretical articles
- reports on research
- summaries of news reports on groups
- information on books, articles, links
- information on ICSA members
- biographical profiles on selected members
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- poetry
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We prefer Microsoft Word or a program compatible with Word. Articles should be no more than 2,500 words. Please include a jpeg photo (no less than 360 dpi) and biographical sketch (less than 150 words) with your submission.

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Dear Readers and Friends,

This issue of *ICSA Today* reminds us of a fundamental task of our field—providing education. Whether we are therapists, counselors, authors, speakers, researchers, former members, reporters, funders, or a combination of these, we play a crucial part in educating others about the dangers of high-demand/high-control groups and coercive relationships. Without education, as this issue highlights, individuals suffering from the traumas sustained from cults would not get the support they need to be free; and families, mental health professionals, and the general public (including the media) would be at a loss to understand and intervene.

In “Ostracism,” Gill Harvey helps us understand the manipulative mechanism of ostracism, also called shunning. Although cults will frame ostracism as “protecting members from evil,” it is important that we reframe this practice correctly and educate others in what it is: Abuse. Using solid research, Ms. Harvey methodically explains the many destructive effects that ostracism has on one’s overall functioning and the risk it poses to victims’ lives.

In his article, “Why Do Cults Thrive in Modernity?,” Anthony Murphy posits that today’s ever-changing anomie—which results in rapid cultural and moral change—reminds us of our innate needs for structure, meaning, belonging, and hope. Mr. Murphy offers that we will see a continued increase in cult involvement as a result of the void that our fact-based world of science and secularism sometimes creates. Further, in today’s polarized political climate, we see cult-like traits that enhanced public education can help us recognize.

Gretchen Ward, in her “Recovery for My Children and Myself,” stresses the importance not only of providing education around what a cult is, but also of educating about the dynamics of cult involvement and its effects on human development. Ms. Ward openly and poignantly shares how cult education helped her realize she was in a dangerous group and empowered her to depart with her children from their cult life. She explains the detrimental effects that her children sustained from their exposure to the cult, and how learning about the cult’s influence on her children’s development helped her and her children heal.

Lois Svoboda, Family Editor of *ICSA Today*, who is profiled in this issue, recalls her first cult-involved client and the efforts she made to educate herself about cult dynamics and influences so that she could provide ethical and meaningful assistance. Too few mental health professionals have the opportunity to learn about cults; however, the need for therapists to have an understanding of our field is crucial.

Joseph Szmihart’s review of Dr. R. J. Lifton’s *Losing Reality: On Cults, Cultism, and the Mindset of Political and Religious Zealotry* reminds us of the importance of language in how we talk about cults. Mr. Szmihart brings us back to Dr. Lifton’s original work (*Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of “Brainwashing” in China*) to give us the context of Dr. Lifton’s offer of more detailed definitions and usage for the terms *cult* and *reality*. A clear understanding of the language we use when talking and educating about cults helps us give individuals tools to understand and talk about their experience and to construct their trauma-recovery narrative.

As a mental health professional myself, as a cult recovery therapist, and as a recovering second-generation former cult member, I can attest personally to the importance of cult education. Educating myself about cults, understanding the cult’s influence on my life and development, and learning the truth about the group in which I was raised empowered me and enabled me to “unindoctrinate” myself and gain freedom for myself and my children. I am honored to remind us all to stay focused on our goal of providing quality and tireless cult education.

Sincerely,  
Jackie Johnson, DSW, LCSW-R



**Jackie Johnson, DSW, LCSW-R**, is a licensed clinical social worker with a certification in forensic social work. She obtained her master’s degree from Columbia University and her doctoral degree from the University of Tennessee. Dr. Johnson was born into Jehovah’s Witnesses and raised there until the age of 43. In her private practice, Dr. Johnson focuses on assisting indoctrinated individuals in finding freedom from cultic and other high-demand groups and processing the trauma they experienced while being involved in systems of control or coercive groups and relationships. She manages the Facebook social-media page *Outside the Ark*, which shares educational information about cult dynamics and coercive control. Her research interests include how cultic, coercive, and misogynistic experiences influence the cognitive development of women.

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**ISSN:** 2154-820X

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# WHY DO CULTS THRIVE IN MODERNITY?



**By Anthony Murphy**

This article is based on the presentation I gave at the 2019 ICSA Annual Conference held in Manchester, United Kingdom. The talk, *Cults in Modernity*, stimulated an interesting exchange of views in the audience about the sociological context of cults. With this piece, I intend to enrich this discussion further.<sup>1</sup>

**S**ociology focuses on human societies and systems. A sociological school arose in the 19th century as a result of the new *type* of human society emerging out of the processes of industrialization and capitalism (Bilton et al., 2002). This new period is commonly referred to as *modernity*. A society emerged that distinguished itself from premodernity by constant and rapid change, with new technologies and market economics as key drivers. Previous historical processes that took hundreds or even thousands of years to unfold now take effect within a matter of years or even months (Giddens, 1990).

Despite the undoubted progress made during modernity—particularly in the areas of science, health, economic prosperity, and the spread of democracy—it also ushered in a series of crises that have been studied in philosophy and sociology (Bilton et al., 2002). These crises revolve around the dilemma of coping with a radically transformed human environment in which the certainties and beliefs of premodernity have basically dissolved. The predicament individuals face in modernity has been described in terms such as *disenchantment* (Weber), *anomie* (Durkheim) or *alienation* (Marx) (Bilton et al., 2002).

Cults have also transformed in modernity. They diversified in terms of types of cults on offer and became a much more widespread phenomenon in modern society. Cults seem to *thrive* in modernity. This was a key premise in my talk—that cults have adapted to modernity, and that they all share a central message for recruits of an alternative or solution to the disenchantment of human beings resulting from the processes of modern industrial society.

I now analyze three forces that have significantly shaped modernity—religion, science, and the economy. In each case, I connect these forces to the cult phenomenon in modernity.

## Religion

We can understand religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (Jary & Jary, 2005, p. 518), and it is almost certainly one of the oldest forms of cultural practice amongst human beings. Until modernity, generations were born into a religious world where belief in a God, gods, or a creator were mostly uncontested, and these beliefs formed an integral part of our social world. Controversies related to religion often led to schisms or religious wars, but there was seldom controversy about the actual existence of a God or gods. This general perspective changed in modernity. Modernity ushered in a secularization process (Bilton et al., 2002), in which religion began to decline in importance and influence in human societies. This process has accelerated into the present day, with some countries in Europe now having a majority of nonbelievers amongst their population (Pigot, 2010).

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche grappled with this issue and famously announced “God is dead” in the late nineteenth century (Nietzsche, 2003, p. 41). Although

this phrase has subsequently been taken out of context, Nietzsche’s provocative message was clear—the rise of science (especially Darwin’s theory of evolution) leaves no place for belief systems reliant on ancient texts and supposed events. Much more importantly for Nietzsche, however, was his deeply held view that humanity *needs* religion and that human beings without a God are *lost*. Nietzsche’s “death” of God was much more the sounding of an alarm than an obituary. What can possibly replace the ocean of certainty that previous human generations possessed through their irrational but sacred belief systems (Prideaux, 2018)?

Ossified traditional religions have been supplanted by a myriad of Bible cults, new-age gurus, and other types of groups offering new truths in an apparently profane and meaningless world.

Nietzsche and other thinkers have noted that this decline in religion leads to a gap in meaning for individuals in modernity (Bilton et al., 2002). Cultic groups filled this vacuum by offering individuals new religions, with new answers and new gods. In a sense, we could suggest that religion did not decline as much as fragment into many different types and flavors, catering for a modern public no longer believing in the old “revealed” truths. Ossified traditional religions have been supplanted by a myriad of Bible cults, new-age gurus, and other types of groups offering new truths in an apparently profane and meaningless world. Cults in modernity take advantage of the fact that, despite the decline in religious beliefs, many people retain a need for religion that secularism is unable to satisfy.

## Science

Parallel to the decline of traditional belief systems in modernity is a notable ascendancy in the role of science and technology, with attendant social consequences (Giddens, 1990). Ernest Gellner, a twentieth-century philosopher, stated that human society had crossed a “great divide” as a direct result of the application of scientific knowledge during industrialization (Gellner, 1992, p. 1). The reliability of scientific knowledge, based on a rational process of uncovering facts and identifying “natural laws,” basically usurped all previous systems of thought and belief as the driving force for human “progress” (Gellner, 1992, p. 2).

Gellner argued that science and technology in modernity has delivered a unique phase in human history in which most of us benefit from basic and sophisticated technologies that would be “inconceivable” for us to now do without. Whether it is communication, health, transport, personal entertainment, weaponry, art and culture, sexual relations, or education, every aspect of human activity has been impacted by the discoveries in, and application of, scientific knowledge. As a result, people in modernity cannot even imagine the premodern world, never mind survive living in it!

The changes brought in modernity have been deep and rapid; but in evolutionary terms, we are still the same meaning-seeking creatures as those who were drawing on cave walls 50,000 years ago.

However, science has no answers to the “...*All Too Human*” (Nietzsche, 2004) predicament of how to derive meaning in a world seemingly bereft of meaning. Note that science is not a belief system; it is a system of knowledge that is more reliable in delivering results than anything comparable (Gellner, 1992). Cultic formations in modernity exploit this fact by offering to “re-enchant” this world of facts devoid of meaning. Cults offer a “way out” from the “heart of the world of hard science” (Giddens, 1990, p. 39) through magical thinking, whereby people are sold a meaningful connection to the cosmos—if you believe the guru, of course.

## The Economy

The economic system of capitalism that emerged in the seventeenth century in Northern Europe spread and became the *global* economic system it is today. Capitalism puts the market system of supply and demand at the center of any given economy. Nineteenth-century thinkers were extremely concerned with the social consequences of the runaway success of this new economic system (Bilton et al., 2002). Max Weber referred to capitalism as “the fate of our time” (Turner, 2000, p. 99), and Marx expended most of his creative energy making an exhaustive analysis of capitalism.

The assertions of these thinkers are that the economy in modernity plays a central role in human affairs—much

more than economies in previous eras. Weber noted that the underlying process that prioritizes economic concerns in modernity is *rationalization* (Turner, 2000). This process is not about rational thought, but what Weber described as “instrumental rationality” (Turner, 2000, p. 24). Here, the dominance of the economic concerns results in society prioritizing efficiency, or “domination by impersonal market forces” above more human concerns such as family relationships, altruism, self-sacrifice, or cooperation (Bilton et al., 2002, p. 606).

An economy that prioritizes the market above more human concerns results in what economists call *externalities* (Jary & Jary, 2005, p. 175). This term refers to the common practice of corporations prioritizing profits for their shareholders as the main purpose of their existence. Doing this comes at the expense of other concerns such as employee working conditions, environmental pollution, fossil-fuel emissions, job losses, and so on. These other, or wider, concerns are externalities. They are deemed external *factors* for which corporations are not responsible. As a result, rather than pay for or deal with the externalities, the corporations who are responsible for them in the first place outsource them to governments and communities.

In a society in which instrumental rationalization and externalities are embedded in the social and economic fabric, people therefore become susceptible to cults, who entice them with their offer of more humane ways of living and working. Weber correctly predicted in the early twentieth century that there would be a proliferation of cult-like groups emerging as a response to the rationalized “iron cage” of modernity in which individuals are trapped (Bilton et al., 2002, p. 606). Numerous so-called new-age and other cults that have emerged in recent decades are indicative of this process. Their premise is invariably to create a more humane or natural world, and they often evoke ancient ritual practices and put them in a modern setting to reflect this premise. In a market-driven economic system, the attraction of these alleged humane systems increases.

## My Experience

I joined a high-control group in 1981 and left 9 years later. This cult was variously billed as a “free-sexuality commune,” an “alternative society,” or an “art commune.” It was a nonreligious group. The two main tenets of its ideology were first to bring art into daily life through group therapy, theatrical self-expression, painting, dancing, and so on. Second, the group aimed to dissolve nuclear family relationships through free sexuality and the implementation of collective child rearing.

In respect to the sociological context I am concerned with here, I was certainly an alienated young man looking for an alternative utopia to what I considered to be the soulless and materialistic generation of my parents. I thought that my idealistic dreams had been answered in the cult I joined! This utopia turned out to be a totalitarian nightmare, following the familiar script of a crazed leader bent on manipulating his

followers and the gratification of his own perverse sexual whims. My rootlessness, ambiguity, and alienation—all typical traits of a disillusioned individual in modernity—primed me as a suitable cult recruit when I joined in 1981.

## Conclusion

I have argued in this article that the proliferation of cults in modernity can be usefully understood within a systemic context. I set out three forces (religion, science, and the economy) that have significantly affected human society in modernity and created an environment in which the supply of and demand for cults have subsequently flourished. The main causal factor here is that modernity has delivered a world of less certainty and meaning for individuals, both of which we previously derived from religion, customs, community, and rituals. The changes brought in modernity have been deep and rapid; but in evolutionary terms, we are still the same meaning-seeking creatures as those who were drawing on cave walls 50,000 years ago. Modernity has enabled more of us to live longer, prosper, and educate ourselves. It has also bequeathed to us a vulnerability and susceptibility to utopian fantasies and magical solutions peddled by charlatans and gurus. An awareness of this systemic context enriches our understanding of the cult phenomenon. ■

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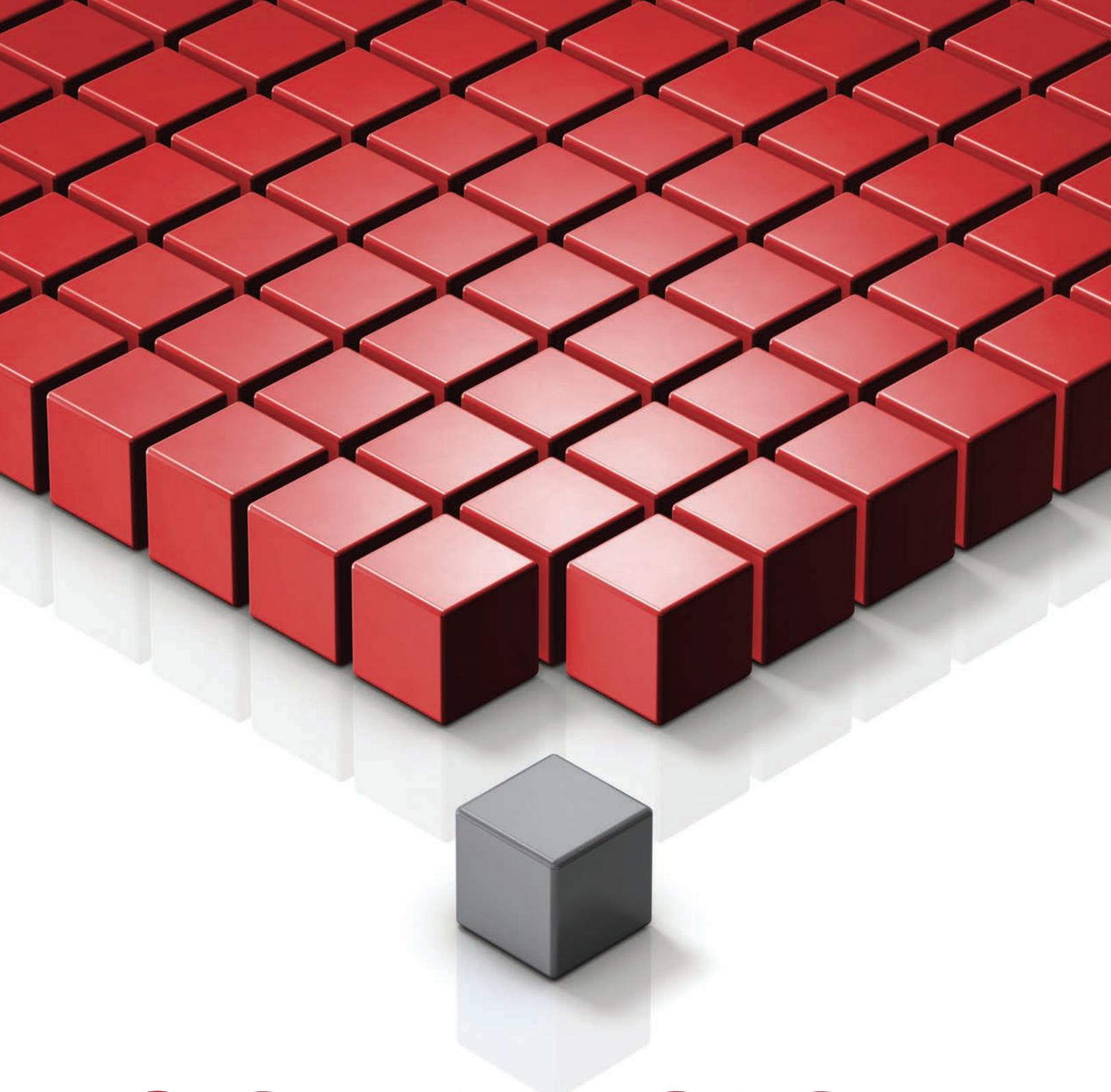
## Note

- [1] I would like to acknowledge here the invaluable help and guidance of Joe Szimhart throughout the process of preparing my talk and writing up this article.

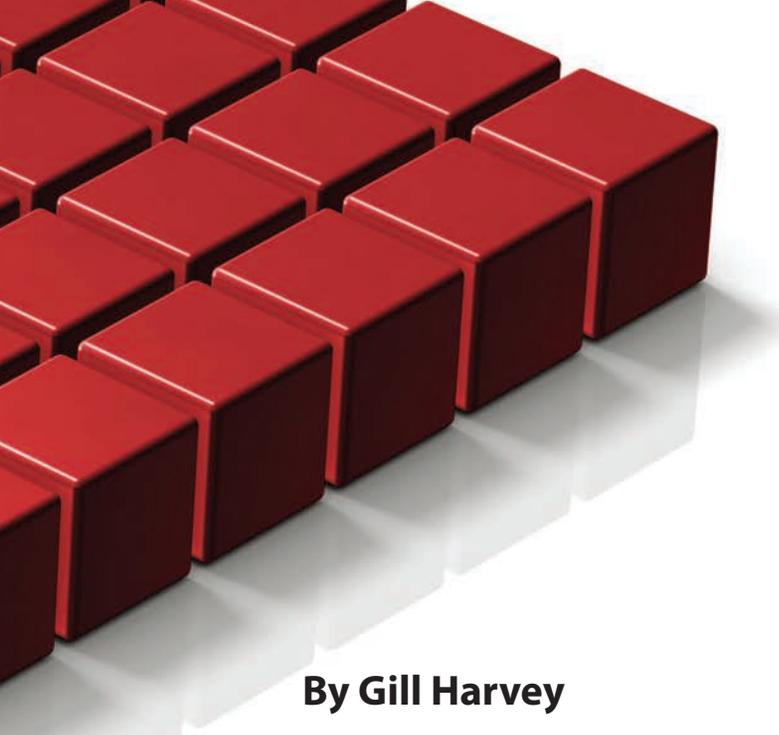
## About the Author



**Anthony Murphy, (MPhil)**, is a Senior Lecturer in Political Economy at Eindhoven University of Applied Sciences in The Netherlands. He had a commercial background in investment banking before becoming a scholar in 1997. His main academic interests concern issues around the contemporary political economy in China, globalization, modernity studies, and philosophy. He is also a dedicated teacher. Since getting to know ICSA in 2016, he has given a few talks at ICSA conferences about his own cultic experiences and has benefitted from ICSA on both a personal and scholarly level. [anthony.murphy@fontys.nl](mailto:anthony.murphy@fontys.nl) ■



# OSTRACISM



By Gill Harvey

**T**he word *ostracism* has evolved from the Greek *ostrakismos*, “a practice that originated in Athens circa 488–487 B.C. to remove those with dictatorial ambitions from the democratic state” (Zippelius, 1986, cited in Williams, 2001, p. 7). The current meaning of the word is to exclude or ignore, and it continues to serve as a social-control mechanism to enforce conformity (Wesselmann, Nairne, & Williams, 2012).<sup>1</sup>

As a word, *ostracism* has largely been dropped from common parlance within contemporary UK society and has been replaced with alternative terms such as *shunning*, *disfellowshipping*, *banishing*, *excommunicating*, *avoiding*, *excluding*, *exiling*, *barring*, *expelling*, *silencing*, and *time-out*. Despite this reduced use of the term itself, ostracism as a practice is prevalent within diverse settings and in different forms—e.g., isolation of whistleblowers in the workplace, solitary confinement of individuals in institutions such as prisons, and time-out in schools, with most religions punishing “noncompliance with ecclesiastical law with some form of excommunication” (Williams, 2001, p. 8), a form of ostracism.

## Cult Ostracism

The statement that “shunning and ostracism are synonymous terms” (Zieman, 2018, p. 3) is persuasive when one considers anecdotal accounts—e.g., 35 years of shunning by the Jehovah’s Witnesses to date (Zieman, 2018). There is a huge variety of different high-demand groups in existence—e.g., religious, political, self-improvement, and lifestyle (Zieman, 2017)—and cults are an important category among these groups. It is important to recognize “that the culture, practices, and beliefs of one cult differ from another” (Jenkinson, 2017, p. 344). Yet, despite this diversity, ostracism appears to be a universal way of punishing noncompliance so that one “judged to be a non-believer, suppressive, infidel or apostate” (Zieman, 2018, p. xii) is shunned, which is a literal form of “dispensing

of existence” (Lifton, 1961). Hence, ostracism is one of the “unethically manipulative or coercive techniques of persuasion and control” (West & Langone, 1986, pp. 119–120, as cited in Langone, 1993, p. 4) required to ensure that the group’s system remains sealed in terms of “the marble edifice” of the Thought Reform model (Jenkinson, 2016, p. 213), and to keep the group free from “contradictory beliefs and immoral behaviours” (Zieman, 2018, p. 5). This approach in turn enables other cultic behaviors described by Lifton, such as milieu control, mystical

## ...ostracism is about what people refuse to do with the person viewed as “unclean”...

manipulation, demand for purity, confession, sacred science, and loaded language (Lifton, 1989) to continue within the cult, reinforcing the leader’s god-like authority to issue a shunning edict that “everyone in the group is required to follow . . . friends—family—even, to a degree, members of one’s own household” (Zieman, 2018, p. xiv).

Practically, ostracism is about what people refuse to do with the person viewed as “unclean” (*The Amish: Shunned*, 2014, 00:04:10)—e.g., avoiding eye contact, not responding, not sitting at the same table. Moreover, this is a permanent punishment unless the person is willing to reintegrate and fully adopt the thoughts, beliefs, and practices of the group again; but even then, the rejoining process “can take many months and sometimes longer” (Freestone, 2018, p. 4). It is therefore not surprising that “the prospect of being shunned is another immense barrier for those considering leaving” (Stein, 2017, p. 175) their cult or high-demand group.

In fact, mandatory shunning manipulates by using techniques that are the opposite of “love-bombing” (Singer, 2003, p. 114), a practice that commonly seduces individuals into a cult in the first place because “they are made to feel special, loved, among newfound friends, and a part of something unique” (Lalich & Tobias, 2006, p. 25). Shunning, in contrast, “affects four fundamental human needs: the need for belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence” (Gutgsell, 2017, p. 6). No wonder Zieman (2018) argues that shunning “is one of the worst things that can happen to a human” (p. xii) and refers to it as “ubiquitous” (p. 4), “a social death, an insidious form of psychological torture” (p. 4), and “a vile practice” (p. 3). Shunning has also been called the New Testament equivalent of “stoning someone to death” (*The Amish: Shunned*, 2014, 00:03:33). Shunning unleashes a variety of physiological, affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses” (Williams & Nida, 2011, p. 71), with identified common consequences being anxiety, panic, anger, guilt, depression, suicidal ideation, and tragically, sometimes suicide completion (Zieman, 2018).

## The Effects of Ostracism on the Individual

Given the seriousness of these outcomes, it is somewhat shocking to realize that historically there has been little interest in researching the effects of ostracism on the individual. In fact, “it wasn’t until the mid-1990s that researchers began a concerted effort to understand the consequences of ostracism” (Williams & Nida, 2011, p. 71). Even now, although some useful information has been obtained from such quantitative research, the findings are limited in that “most research in this field ... has focused on the immediate and short-term impact on ostracised individuals and has been conducted under laboratory conditions” (Gutgsell, 2017, p. 6).

For example, the Cyberball paradigm experiment, which had more than 5,000 participants, found that “enduring approximately 2 to 3 minutes of ostracism ... will produce strongly negative feelings—especially those of sadness and anger” (Williams, 2009, as cited in Williams & Nida, 2011, p. 71).

Another experiment, The Scarlet Letter Study, examined the effects of 5 days of ostracism in the workplace, with the detrimental impact on one human being transparently evident, as shown in the following statement: “I feel like I am a ghost on the floor that everyone hears but no one can talk to. I want to be noticed!” (Mr. Blue, 1996, as cited in Williams, 2001, p. 99).

In one way, it is astonishing that such a brief experience of ostracism by strangers, with whom there will be no ongoing contact, can detrimentally affect someone in such a way “despite the absence of verbal derogation and physical assault” (Williams & Nida, 2011, p. 71). Yet, there is very little extant research on the long-term effects, with most studies focusing on those who have left the Jehovah’s Witnesses through dissociation (an individual who has left voluntarily) or by being disfellowshipped (someone who has been excommunicated). One qualitative study however, “explored individuals’ experiences of religious ostracism in the form of case studies” (Gutgsell, 2017, p. 8), and unsurprisingly, shunning was an emergent theme, in that “participants experienced a decrease in their psychological well-being and some developed psychological disorders during or following the disfellowshipping. Several participants spoke about a lifelong lasting effect” (Gutgsell, 2017, p. 70).

This outcome is surely not surprising, given that shunning “severs existing social ties and leads to social isolation” (Gutgsell, 2017, p. 18). Further, one can begin to comprehend the enormity of the effects through the lens of the “dimensions of existence” hierarchy (Van Durzen, 2009, p. 84), which makes it immediately clear that ostracism pervades all four dimensions of existence—the physical, social, personal, and spiritual. Additionally, polyvagal theory (Porges, 2017) illustrates that someone who has exited a cult and is being ostracized is likely to oscillate between the fight/flight (hyperarousal) and freeze (hypoarousal) zones. It is useful to appreciate that operating in these zones is a primal short-term survival mechanism; however, when doing so becomes a more permanent *modus operandi*, then being in these zones is likely to be detrimental to health and well-being. The cruel irony is that while being in the green zone facilitates social engagement, lack of it (a common consequence of

ostracism) can result in it becoming impossible for one to be in the green zone<sup>2</sup> at all. Research suggests that one experiences very different emotions when functioning within the different zones (Spring, 2019).

## Survival and Recovery

“More often than not, leaving a cult environment requires an adjustment period, not only to reintegrate into ‘normal’ society, but also to put the pieces of yourself back together in a way that makes sense to you” (Tobias, 1994, as cited in Zieman, 2017, pp. 112–113). This quotation succinctly describes the challenges of leaving a cult and transitioning back into society while the cult “pseudo-personality” (Jenkinson, 2008, p. 214), which enabled survival while in the group, is “shaken to the core” by being “out in the world” (Jenkinson, 2019, p. 23). The additional cruelty of ostracism often carried out by those once thought to be nearest and dearest can “disrupt our sense of ourselves as members of an interconnected human community” (Bastian & Haslam, 2010, p. 107). As described by one former member, “in the Amish, at least you’re someone ... in the English-speaking world, you’re a number” (*The Amish: Shunned*, 2014, 01:45:47). No wonder one person described her experience as “I was a stranger to myself” (Jenny, cited in Jenkinson, 2008, p. 204).

One can argue, therefore, that survival and recovery is much more complex than “the real self” emerging from behind “the false self” (Winnicott, 1965), where it has hidden in order to get needs met, given that the cult has been “...like a relentless machine, like a steam roller on hot tarmac with hooked spikes in it...” until “...the pseudo-personality over[lays] the pre-cult personality like tarmac on a road...” (Jenkinson, 2008, p. 215). Indeed, it is suggested that survival and recovery will involve the creation of a new postcult identity once the introjected cult pseudopersonality has been chewed and digested (Jenkinson, 2008, p. 217). But ostracism surely adds an additional level of complexity to this process, given that, in itself, ostracism can be a very challenging emotional and psychological experience.

Indeed, Zieman identifies what she calls “the predictable phases of experience when shunned” (2018, p. 12), these being “shock/disbelief, hurt/loneliness, fear/desperation, struggle, choice points A & B (key crossroads), re-engagement/re-connection, coming to terms with new reality, [and] embracing life” (Zieman, 2018, pp. 12–14). Hauntingly, these phases resonate with well-known stages and phases of grief models—e.g., Kubler-Ross (1969) and Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005). An alternative, but similar, model, proposed by Judith Lewis-Herman, suggests that there are three stages to the recovery process: Stage 1, safety; Stage 2, remembrance and mourning; and Stage 3, reconnecting and meaning (Herman, 2015, as cited in Zieman, 2017, pp. 15–17).

Although these models might be helpful for some, a key critique is the innate suggestion that the stages and phases are experienced in a linear and set order and are therefore time limited. However, as Kubler Ross and Kessler state about grief, “stages are responses to feelings that can last for minutes or hours

as we flip in and out of one and then another” (2005, p. 18); and it is plausible that someone being ostracized may go through a similar process as a result of the enormous losses involved.

Moreover, Jenkinson developed a four-phase approach to recovery that developed from her research findings with cult survivors (Jenkinson, 2019, p. 24). She states that, in terms of recovery, the needs of first-generation adults (FGAs) and second-generation adults (SGAs)<sup>3</sup> will be different: “the FGA will be regaining their sense of self; the SGA may be finding theirs for the first time” (Jenkinson, 2019, p. 24). However, Jenkinson’s model is more robust in that she clearly states that “it is important to emphasise that the phases may need revisiting and are not necessarily linear” (2019, p. 26).

Despite these critiques of her phases model, Zieman (2018) has developed a priceless resource for those being ostracized in her survival guide to shunning, which seeks to fill a gap in the extant literature. In addition to providing valuable psychoeducational information about shunning itself, Zieman also lists a plethora of techniques and survival strategies for those affected—e.g., tips on downregulating the circuit of the nervous system, including reactivation of the ventral vagus nerve (Porges, 2017). Other helpful strategies include meditation, visualization, coping techniques, and ways to manage unhelpful and racing thoughts.

## The Personal Relevance of This Topic

My own story is that I am an SGA, having been raised in a small, evangelical, fundamentalist Christian group known as The Armadale Christian Service (ACS), following my mother’s decision to join the group when I was 3 years old. I left the ACS when I was 18 years old and moved away from home. The group no longer exists, yet the ramifications of it continue to this day in the evolution of enmeshed relationships (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981, as cited in Aguada, 2018, p. 4) within my family of origin, and the ostracism meted out to me in the past two and a half years. What I realize now is that my family of origin still operate as if they are in a cult, albeit no longer religious; and although I am generally much more resilient these days, my robustness has been tested like never before by the shunning I’ve been subjected to. The events around my mother’s death in February 2019, when my father decreed that I was not to be told of her condition or informed directly of her death because he hated me, have been devastating. In fact, there are no words to describe the desolation and loneliness of not belonging in your own family. However, I know that, to be accepted back into the family fold, I would need to become an echoist<sup>4</sup> again, something which I am not prepared to do because the cost is too high. Nevertheless, I also acknowledge that, for some, the cost of remaining out in the world is too much, as with the young girl in the 2014 film *The Amish: Shunned*, who returned to the Amish group some months after leaving despite being well supported by another former member (*The Amish: Shunned*, 2014). The depiction of her return to the group was incredibly moving because it demonstrated both the effectiveness of ostracism and also the intolerable nature of it.

...as long as high-demand groups continue to issue edicts that cannot be questioned, it is essential that more rigorous and robust research into the effects of long-term ostracism is carried out.

## Conclusion

Sadly, ostracism continues to thrive within contemporary society, especially within cultic and high-demand groups. Indeed, it is unquestionably an extremely effective manipulative tool, which keeps members obedient and devoted to the cause but also discourages followers from leaving. For those who do exit on either a voluntary or an involuntary basis, being ostracized while also seeking to adjust to the alien environment of the outside world is clearly extremely challenging. However, as long as high-demand groups continue to issue edicts that cannot be questioned, it is essential that more rigorous and robust research into the effects of long-term ostracism is carried out. This research is essential to professionals being educated about how to work ethically with former cult members who are experiencing ostracism so that the number of those “who seek help from counsellors [and] do not achieve a happy outcome” (Jenkinson, 2019, p. 23) can be significantly reduced. ■

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## Notes

[1] This paper evolved from an assignment submitted on Dr. Gillie Jenkinson's Certificate in Post-Cult Counselling course, which is cofacilitated by Sue Parker-Hall.

[2] Being "in the green zone" refers to being in a calm state of alertness. It is the zone in which optimal learning occurs (see Spring, C., 2019; see also [www.zonesofregulation.com/learn-more-about-the-zones.html](http://www.zonesofregulation.com/learn-more-about-the-zones.html)).

[3] First-generation adults (FGAs) are those who made the choice to join a cultic group; second-generation adults (SGAs) refers to those who were born or raised in a cultic group.

[4] Based on the Greek myth of Narcissus and Echo, an echoist "struggles to have a voice of their own. They are afraid of special attention or of seeming narcissistic in any way. Echoists tend to fall into relationships with extremely narcissistic people" (from C. Malkin, n.d., "Are You an Echoist?" [YouTube video, online at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHFqthA7EU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHFqthA7EU)]. Also see Malkin, 2015, p. 11.)

## About the Author



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# Recovery for My Children and Myself

By Gretchen Ward



In 2003, I was shocked to find out that the movement I had been immersed in for 25 years was a cult. Margaret Irons published a story on [geftakysassembly.com](http://geftakysassembly.com) written by the granddaughter of the leader, Geftakys, in which she detailed the abuse her family suffered from her father, his family, and the assembly where they lived. Nebraska assembly leaders warned members not to go on this website because it was full of lies. I was inspired to investigate more when a friend stated that she had given many years of her life to this group, and she wanted to find out what the truth was.

One night after a prayer meeting, my husband and older children were alarmed to find me reading the granddaughter's story. I explained why I was reading her story and also shared it with them. After reading this, I had so many more questions, which I discussed with my husband, an assembly leader, and with wives of the other leaders. I went to one more meeting, where I was shunned by my "friends" and followed by a leader until I left.

The truth is, I had been perplexed for years by the fact that life for our family did not work, and I continually looked for answers to the turmoil we faced. We were taught that full salvation awaited those who implicitly obeyed God by blindly obeying those in authority (church leaders, husbands, parents). This teaching kept me from trusting my own instincts. I now understood that we were involved in a cult, and I wanted to leave. My husband's response was to continue praying about

whether we should leave the assembly. I finally told him I was leaving with our children—with or without him. He agreed to come with us and look for a healthy church.

After leaving the assembly, I began talking with Margaret Irons, the moderator of the [geftakysassembly.com](http://geftakysassembly.com) website. She recommended the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) and Wellspring Christian Recovery Center as excellent recovery resources. We also found a wholesome evangelical church, where we met supportive friends. I confided in a friend that if only I would change, my husband (who was such a nice, kind person) would be different. I will never forget her words, stating that what he was doing to my children and me was not nice. The assembly taught that the way to a full salvation in heaven was obedience. If the wife obeyed her husband correctly, the children would be obedient, and the husband would be wise; any problems in a family were attributed to the wife's disobedience, the husband's lack of leadership, or a combination of the two. Once we left the closed world of the assembly, I began to trust my own God-given intuition and instincts.

We saw an evangelical counselor, who made things harder for our family because of his ignorance regarding power and control as it relates to trauma. Later, I found a Christian couple (who worked out of their church) who were able to identify ways in which the cultic trauma was impacting my husband and my present situations and relationships.

As my older children became involved with the youth group in our new church, they were ready to leave the cultic world and transition into modern society. This transition was harder for me, and my husband did not want to change. He physically left the assembly, but he never let go of the assembly mindset. Together, my children and I left the closed world of the assembly. We worked through our differences under the guidance of an evolving, healthy support system. My feelings at that time were best expressed by Gladys Knight in "Midnight Train to Georgia": "I'd rather live in [their] world than live without [them] in mine" (Midnight Train, 1973).

## In 2003, I was shocked to find out that the movement I had been immersed in for 25 years was a cult.

Quite a while before we went to Wellspring, my oldest, kind-hearted daughter began acting out a lot. I knew if she was struggling in this manner, then something was terribly wrong at our house. One day, she looked at me and asked, "How long are you going to put up with this guy because I would really like to have a normal dad"? I knew my husband was not good for me, but I felt he was good for my children. Now, for the first time, I realized he was not good for them either. The more I realized how assembly life had hurt my children, the more desperate I was to find a way for them to have the life they deserved. At that time, my daughter and I tried to find her a suitable counselor, but we did not find anyone in the evangelical world sufficient for her level of trauma.

Many months later, I contacted ICSA and asked whether they had a counselor near us. They gave me Dr. Lois Svoboda's contact information. She and I talked on the phone, and soon I went to meet with her. She offered to see me and my husband (if he wanted to come), pro bono, if we were able to come to her town to meet. Every week through all kinds of weather, I drove my old car to see her (my husband rarely went). My discussions with Lois were invaluable. She recommended we go to Wellspring in Ohio, but the idea seemed out of reach to me because of the cost. She brought it up a couple more times and mentioned they had scholarships, so I began looking into the possibility of going there. Donors from ICSA and some of my family members helped us raise the funds for seven of my children and me to go to this program.

As my older daughter's life continued its downward spiral, I became frantic to help her and the rest of my children. Although I worked hard to bring my daughter help, I was not able to protect her from what was happening. One of our counselors, who took time to talk with her, said my daughter remembered things at a time when she was most vulnerable. It was devastating to watch her path unfold, and my heart broke for the pain I knew she was experiencing. The worse life became for her, the more I threw my energy into finding recovery for her and all my other children. I was inspired by

Stephen Curtis Chapman's words, "so sink or swim, I'm diving in" (Chapman, 1999). I worked tirelessly with no clear agenda except to help them find the life God had for them.

The fall before we went to Wellspring, two of my sons moved from homeschooling to neighborhood public schools. My older son went to a nearby inner-city high school and my younger son to a rural school. I was in close contact with their counselors, teachers, and other related people as they made this transition. They both did well. Later, as life evolved, each of the younger children moved into different school situations, while I went back to school.

In our previous life, my husband would set the family dynamics in motion and then blame me for any problems. As my children and I became more independent, he became angry and more aggressive. Our counselors encouraged us to live separately for a bit so we could each work on ourselves. The longer he was gone, the more peaceful our home and lives became. He kept wanting to come back, but by postponing his return, we stayed safe.

Eventually he threatened that, within a week, I must sign a contract with him and our pastor. In the contract, I must agree to live with and submit to him, as previously, or he would file for legal separation. A legal separation meant he would have half of our children. I knew he would not take care of them, so I went to a lawyer and filed for divorce. I knew how he would react to receiving divorce papers, so I went to the courthouse and filed for a protection order. Some friends put my children and me up in a hotel, so we were safe. My husband reacted as expected by going to our home (which our neighbors were watching) and by continually calling us. It was a scary and unsettling time for all of us.

The court hearing did not go well. I went into the hearing with a protection order, and I came out with new orders for coparenting and mediation, and no protection order. My intuition told me something was very wrong. That same week, three different acquaintances recommended a certain lawyer to me. I called this lawyer, discussed our situation, and hired him, paying him as I could. When I met with him and explained our story, he stated we should all get counseling and focus on our recovery. He prepared me for the fact that my husband would try to manipulate my children and me through the divorce process. Our support system grew to include YWCA, specialized lawyers, and counselors.

Our main income for a few years was a large, daily paper route my children and I did together in a rough area of town. When I filed for divorce, my father stepped down from being a deacon at his church, stating that charity begins at home. He came to our house at 4 a.m. on weekends to help us deliver more than 500 papers. I looked for community assistance to make ends meet. I printed out the list of available services and their contact information and worked through each one.

For most of their lives, my children had received excellent physical care from physicians and specialists at Boys Town National Research Hospital. Since I trusted them, I signed up for their parenting classes. My family had been a continual

support, and during this time my parents became even more of a lifeline. After filing for divorce, my children and I started going to church with them. I also began meeting with my YWCA advocate and went to the organization's domestic-violence and safety classes. In these classes I learned the difference between relationships governed by power and control and those forged through equality and respect. I posted The Power Control Wheel and The Equality Wheel in our home to reinforce these principles (The Power Control Wheel, 2013). We continued to build on a solid foundation with family, grandparents, pets, church, counseling, and healthcare providers.

## **My anger and pain energized my recovery quest. I felt like a blind woman walking into a new world, trusting my own intuition, my children's input, and professionals with an understanding of trauma to guide us.**

Our next step was going to Wellspring's Recovery Center for 2 weeks. My older three children went first. My oldest daughter benefited from going to Wellspring, but her counselors felt her situation had gotten to a point at which she could not grasp what they had to offer. Dr. Martin invited her to come back when she was able. Little did I know it would be many years before she would be able to do this, and in the interim Dr. Martin passed away.

Later, while Dr. Martin was still there, my four younger children and I went. Education became the tool we used to move forward, because I believed that understanding the truth (not propaganda) does bring freedom. Wellspring used Robert Lifton's eight criteria of mind control in its education program (Lifton, 1991). We learned how cult leaders use mind control to trap talented, idealistic young people to work for the group's mission. As we understood what had happened to us, we were more able to let go of the past and move forward in present-day society.

After my oldest children's time at Wellspring, their counselors had helped me understand what each child needed. After talking with Dr. Martin, I became more aware of what my oldest daughter's struggles were as they related to the cult and her father. This awareness gave me insight into the behaviors of my oldest, special-needs son. In light of my new insight, I called my son's service coordinator to discuss his situation. She recommended a certain in-home counselor, skilled in understanding trauma and abuse. This man began seeing my son and eventually saw most of my children. He met with us individually, in small groups, or larger groups. It was a time of growth and change. It was also a painful time. The professional

input from our support system (including more special-needs support and services) worked synergistically, and our understanding of the past trauma deepened. As I faced the hard truth of what had happened, God poured new life into us.

I talked with counselors to understand the dynamics involved with my daughter's struggles and made sure my family did not "blame the victim." I stayed in close contact with her, attempting to be there for her and keep her as safe as possible. My anger and pain energized my recovery quest. I felt like a blind woman walking into a new world, trusting my own intuition, my children's input, and professionals with an understanding of trauma to guide us. I asked a wise mentor how to prevent my other children from such problems. He encouraged me, when I saw my other children struggling and I was unable to help them, to make sure I found them the resources they needed to succeed. This became my path. After many years, my daughter was able to reach out to a sobriety program, where she received excellent help. Step by step, her life transformed into what she had always wanted it to be.

Robert Lifton's eight criteria explain the calculated, physiological process of mind control and how trusting individuals can easily become trapped in an alter world:

- Milieu Control filters information flow and social interaction (Lifton, 1991).
- Mystical Manipulation attributes supernatural influence where there is none (Lifton, 1991).
- Demand for Purity sets unreachable standards and unreasonable rules limiting successful experiences (Lifton, 1991).
- Cult of Confession requires confession for undesirable thoughts and feelings and minor infractions, propagating false guilt and shame (Lifton, 1991).
- Sacred Science attributes unquestionable truth to closed 'group-think,' blocking alternative ideas as irreverent or unscientific (Lifton, 1991).
- Loaded Language is 'thought-blocking' group language, meant to quickly shut down critical thinking (Lifton, 1991).
- Doctrine over Person decrees each individual value according to the leaders' perception of their conformity to the group and its mission (Lifton, 1991).
- Dispensing of Existence occurs as the group decides who is saved, enlightened, worthwhile, or accepted (Lifton, 1991).

An essential part of mind control is repressing the individual's true self. The assembly labeled natural human development as sinful or rebellious and equated obedience with holiness. When individuals of any age are not allowed to express their own wants and needs, they will not be able to create their own ideas. People of any age living in these closed systems grow up with major disadvantages that often continue well into adulthood.

“...Erikson’s eight stages of healthy human development begin at birth and progress sequentially with age” (Erikson’s Stages of Development, n.d.). The related developmental stages,

potential outcomes of healthy development at each stage, and potential outcomes of unhealthy development at each stage are summarized in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**Erikson’s Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development: Healthy and Unhealthy Outcomes**

Stage	Typical Age for This Developmental Level	Healthy Outcome: Individuals learn	Unhealthy Outcome: Individuals learn
Stage 1	Infant	trust from meaningful response to their needs	mistrust from unmet needs
Stage 2	Toddler/young child	autonomy from healthy separation/individuation	shame/doubt from inability to separate/individuate
Stage 3	Preschool	initiative from positive interaction with environment	guilt from lack of positive interactions with environment
Stage 4	Early elementary	industry from positive communication with family/peers, resulting in competence and competence	inferiority from lack of positive communication resulting in feelings of incompetence and inferiority
Stage 5	Adolescent	identity from development of a strong sense of self	role confusion from a poor view of self
Stage 6	Young adult	intimacy because their strong sense of self is ready to share their life with others	loneliness/isolation because their poor self-perception is reluctant to share their life with others
Stage 7	Middle-aged adult	generativity from finding meaningful life’s work and service bringing feelings of usefulness and accomplishment	stagnation from inability to work productively causing lack of motivation and feelings of hopelessness
Stage 8	Older adult	integrity from life reflection resulting in acceptance of their past	despair from inability to meaningfully reconcile their past

Note: Contents derived from <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/teachereducationx92x1/chapter/eriksons-stages-of-psychosocial-development/>

If healthy development does not occur in a timely manner, that development still needs to take place before the individual can progress through sequential stages. This happens in an honest, accepting, and encouraging environment. The poem “Children Learn What They Live,” by Dorothy Law Nolte, describes the power of positive, healthy interactions, which can occur at any age.

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.

If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.

If children live with ridicule, they learn to be shy.

If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.

If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

If children live with tolerance, they learn to be patient.

If children live with praise, they learn to appreciate.

If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.

If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.

If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.

If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and others.

If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live. (Law, 1954, p. 1)

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Gradually, each of my children entered the school system. We tried public and parochial schools and found our family's best fit was the inner-city public schools (equipped to teach many intelligences). My children needed to be able to access good opportunities to discover their passions and aptitudes. Over time, they became active in their schools with sports, activities, and friends. Our support system expanded to include public school teachers, counselors, coaches, mentors, and other supportive individuals. One of my children's teachers once asked me how I was able to have so many amazing children, while some parents struggled with only one child. My answer was that, at one time, each of my eight children was that one struggling child; and until they found what they needed, I never gave up on them or stopped believing in them.

## My children watched me pursue a better life for all of us, and in doing so I paved the way for them to rise above what I was able to achieve.

Twenty-five years in a cult left us facing seemingly insurmountable challenges. Neither my children nor I chose to live in a cult, but it was my duty (as the functioning parent) to provide them with tools they needed to integrate successfully into present-day society. As a displaced homemaker, beginning a nursing career later in life was a difficult task for me. I spent many years working constantly to provide for my children while pursuing my own degrees and nursing career. I am thankful I put my children's needs first (a fact commended by our counselors). My children watched me pursue a better life for all of us, and in doing so, I paved the way for them to rise above what I was able to achieve.

My children understood the difficulties we were facing. They knew I could not pay for their college. We discussed how it takes focused energy to rise out of the culture of poverty. As a low-income, single mother and eight children, we had good health care and educational programs available to us. I believed using these programs would help my children recover well and enable them to become strong citizens able to give back significantly to society. They pursued scholarship opportunities, and the seven who went to college earned full scholarships. They each worked hard, and at this time five have graduated from college, two have their master's degrees, one has her doctorate, and two more will graduate from college in the next 2 years.

Throughout these many years of hard work, I often felt inadequate for the task at hand and did not realize the significant impact of this recovery on my family. As has been said before, "Life happens while we are doing other things," and during this busy time of recovery, our lives blossomed beautifully. ■

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## About the Author



**Gretchen Ward** lives in Omaha, Nebraska. She is a single mother of eight grown children, passionate about supporting them in their individual endeavors. When her children were younger, she volunteered extensively, helping other families find excellent educational resources for their children (which also helped her children). Currently she volunteers with her church health ministry. She is an **RN** with an **MSN** (nurse educator), and board certification in wound, ostomy, continence, and foot care. Her commitment to her children has translated to her nursing career as she gives evidence-based functional care. She enjoys educating her students about the importance of basic wholistic care and how it positively impacts patients' quality of life. ■

# Losing Reality: On Cults, Cultism, and the Mindset of Political and Religious Zealotry

By Robert Jay Lifton

The New Press, 2019. ISBN-13: 978-1-62097-499-5; \$17.00 (hardcover). 240 pages.

Reviewed by Joe Szimhart

By 1982, a few years before I entered the ranks of cult interventionists commonly known as *deprogrammers*, Lifton's Chapter 22 had become a required guide in most anticult circles for determining what was or was not a destructive cult. In fact, I noted that some interventionists were treating Chapter 22 with cult-like reverence, as if it were scripture!

Chapter 22 is included in *Losing Reality...*, which is a compendium of the work of this remarkable psychiatrist whose ideas have helped many thousands, if not millions, in their understanding of and recovery from constricting cultic experiences and totalist organizations. Lifton's ideas about brainwashing and thought reform have also met with criticism as not being scientific enough or not endorsed widely by the social-science community. Chapter 22 contains what Lifton calls "the eight deadly sins" (Lifton 2019, Ch. 3) of totalism. The chapter appeared in 1961 in Lifton's first major publication, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China*. The enduring eight themes in Chapter 22 are featured as the social-psychological matrix for both *Brainwashing: The Science of Thought Control*, by neuroscientist Kathleen Taylor (2004), and in one of the first popular manuals published by a cult interventionist, *Combating Cult Mind Control*, by Steve Hassan (1988).

Lifton agrees that his use of *cult* and *reality* defy easy definition because both terms remain flexible for good reason: The subjective self with its intimate experience needs to be considered along with testable reality. *Cult* as a pejorative term must be limited when used to indicate destructive, deceptive, or bizarre human social activity. Lifton defines the term, therefore, in its use for misplaced devotional behavior and spurious groups, with

three criteria: first, a shift in worship from broad spiritual ideas to the person of a charismatic guru; second, the active pursuit of a thought reform-like process that frequently stresses some kind of merger with the guru; and third, extensive exploitation from above (by guru and leading disciples)—whether economic, sexual, or psychological—of the idealism of ordinary followers from below. (Lifton, 2019, pp. 4–5)

...

Reality always contains ... two contracting dimensions—the changeable/constructed reality that strongly influences our worldview, and the immediate/factual reality on which so much of our everyday lives depend. (Lifton, 2019, p. 8)

*Losing Reality...* covers far more than Chapter 22; but as I read through it (twice since I purchased the book last year), I found aspects of the eight themes in every part and chapter. In three parts, the book represents Lifton's writings on "Thought Reform and Cultism," "World-Ending Threats," and "Regaining Reality," with new essays in italics introducing excerpts from already-published works. Part One reflects on the development and use of thought reform in Communist China. Insights into Mao Zedong's early heroism, ascent to power, and characterological decay into "psychism, into one-sided focus upon intra-psychic purity at the expense of extra-psychic reality" (Lifton, 2019, p. 58) brought home to me why so many cult leaders become moral monsters in the end. The idealized, ascetic Mao presented to his devotees was in reality one of the richest men in China, had attractive women brought to him for sexual pleasure every night, spread venereal diseases to them, "and was frequently depressed and addicted to sleeping pills" (Lifton, 2019, p. 38).

Part Two concentrates on Aum Shinrikyō, the apocalyptic cult surrounding Japanese mystic Shōkō Asahara from 1984 to 1995; an excerpt from *The Nazi Doctors* by Lifton (1986); an analysis of Trumpism, with excerpts from several articles including "The Assault on Reality" that appeared in *Dissent* in 2018, and "Nuclear and Climate Threats" excerpted from *The Climate Swerve* by Lifton, released in 2017. Aum Shinrikyō gained notoriety in 1995 when members released sarin nerve gas on five subway trains in Tokyo. Eleven passengers were killed, and thousands injured. Their motivation was to save humanity by starting an Armageddon that would purge the planet while leaving the cult to rule. (Charles Manson had a similar, clumsy, apocalyptic plan that included murder, but decades earlier, in America.) With *The Nazi Doctors*, Lifton developed his psychological concept of "doubling" that occurs in people who carefully rationalize their vicious behaviors as good for a higher cause into which they have been indoctrinated. Earlier in *Losing Reality...*, in another form of doubling, we find the Communist Red Guard asserting, "So long as it is revolutionary, no action is a crime" (Lifton, 2019, p. 35).

Next in Part Two, we come to "Donald Trump... a special kind of cultist" who is "in no way totalistic—his beliefs can be remarkably fluid—nor is he the leader of a sealed-off cultic community" (Lifton, 2019, p. 152). Lifton's basic insight here has more to do with Trump's "solipsistic reality" than with his purported MAGA (*Make American Great Again*) cult following. By *solipsistic*, Lifton refers to Trump's tendency to believe or appear to believe his every utterance, while being incapable of authentic apology for mistakes. His solipsism makes him "the most bizarre and persistent would-be owner of reality" (Lifton, 2019, p. 153). And last in Part Two, Dr. Lifton examines "The Apocalyptic Twins:

Nuclear and Climate Threats,” wherein both can act as ominous if real metaphors that can end life as we know it on our planet. Both threats have transcendent themes defined by what Lifton calls “high priests” in both science and religion. In this scheme, the definition owns the reality whether or not the definition is fact and evidence-based. As a result, insecure people can be motivated by any number of clever and inspired but paranoid Chicken Littles who announce with certainty that the sky is falling.

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**Losing Reality... is a small book—a quick read for anyone familiar with Lifton—yet packed with a large agenda: Be aware that our psychological and social freedoms are under constant assault, but be comforted when our democratic systems and pragmatic application of reason are yet available.**

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Part Three is more hopeful and contains a remedy for cultism and naïve or dangerous certainties that can lead to psychological and social closure. Lifton favors what he calls a protean ability and approach to maneuver beyond the constricting values and behaviors that we find in cultism. Proteus as the Greek god of the sea symbolized the fluid adaptability of the human organism, that same adaptability that cult leaders readily exploit. He acknowledges that life experience can be mystifying and confusing; thus, people tend to project or find plausible realities in religion, philosophy, and politics to lessen uncertainty. This coping mechanism limits reality, as in a religion, and has social benefits up to a point. The protean self remains to whatever degree in the human capacity to recover from behavior that devolves into suffocating cultism.

*Losing Reality...* is a small book—a quick read for anyone familiar with Lifton—yet packed with a large agenda: Be aware that our psychological and social freedoms are under constant assault, but be comforted when our democratic systems and pragmatic application of reason are yet available. It is up to us in our protean natures to make needed changes while retaining what is good. That is never an easy task. Much blood and ink have been spilled over what people call reality and how to define it. In the end, Lifton mentions historian Richard Hofstadter, who wrote about “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” in 1967. Hofstadter has become one of my favorite authors lately with his keen insights into the American political soul and why that soul continues to fall into deep divisions while at the same time finds ways to overcome its schisms, even if it takes bloodshed. Lifton naturally, as an intellectual, falls into what Hofstadter calls “the liberal” side of this debate; thus his distaste and urgent

deconstruction of Donald Trump’s selfish style and effect on the American psyche. Trump is both savior and demon as a cult icon who has no cult, per se, but has certainly generated cults of devotion to either loving or hating him. When the gray areas relent in the American psyche, the struggle for a clearer solution rises. Therein lies the hope for our “capacity for openness and truth-telling” (Lifton, 2019, p. 192) to mend the present and pave the way for a better future.

I am reminded of another, once-favorite author of mine, Mircea Eliade, a Romanian scholar who headed the new history department of religious studies at the University of Chicago for many years before he died in 1986. Eliade was in the Traditionalist camp and right wing in personal values, but he was nevertheless a font of reliable information about world religions and their histories. In Eliade’s collection of essays, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions* (1976), he asserts presciently that “Many of these cults and sects will undergo radical transformations or will decline or disappear, probably to be replaced by other groups” (p. 63). Most new cults, Eliade says, thrive on a “hope for *renovatio*,” or renewal, by typically revolting against the established traditions with members who are “almost completely ignorant” of the traditions they are revolted by (Eliade, p. 63). This insight may explain to some degree the swelling of support for someone such as Trump, whose more devoted followers tend to stereotype the liberal while ignoring America’s valuable progressive spirit. Lifton urges us to use our collective and private reason to not be ignorant, to not accept solipsism, and to support “truth-telling” movements in media and politics to sustain a healthier reality. Again, Lifton’s book reminds us that this is no easy task. As T. S. Eliot once quipped in his poem *Burnt Norton*, “human kind cannot bear very much reality.” ■

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#### About the Reviewer



**Joseph Szimhart** began research into cultic influence in 1980, after ending his 2-year devotion to a New Age sect. He worked professionally as an intervention specialist from 1986 through 1998. He continues to assist people with cult-related problems including consultations via phone and Internet. In 2016 he received an ICSA Lifetime Achievement Award at the Annual Conference in Dallas, Texas. Since 1998, he has worked for an emergency psychiatric hospital as a crisis caseworker. He maintains an art studio and exhibits professionally. His novel, *Mushroom Satori: The cult diary* was published in 2013. ■



### Lois Svoboda

When someone tells you that among the things they find most wondrous are elephant empathy, elephant socialization, and honeybee communication, you know you are in for something really, really good.

I believe, perhaps superstitiously, that the attitude you hold on New Year's Eve, what you actually do, and with whom you spend your time has an impact on the entire following year. On New Year's Eve, 2019, after a bit of schedule juggling, I had the good fortune to speak with Lois Svoboda, MD, MFT. Dr. Svoboda had flown to Minneapolis to take care of her adult daughter, who had come down with a mysterious illness (she recovered shortly after).

Lois ["Yes, of course you can call me Lois. I answer to many names and titles!"] offers, early on in the conversation, that she is 80 years old. But her voice tells a different tale: It is strong, vital. There is no thinness, no strain. It glides through the air powerfully, like a swimmer through water. Later, she reveals, "I swim a mile a week. It keeps me sane."

Lois Svoboda is Family Editor of *ICSA Today* magazine. She is a longtime and very active member of ICSA. She has contributed to articles, reviewed books, set up conferences. She worked at Wellspring retreat center (now closed) for a time, in addition to seeing former cult members individually. Semiretired now, she still sees former members. Lois is one of those precious ICSA early members of whom we can say, "Because *they* were, *we* are."

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Lois grew up in Elizabeth, New Jersey, the child of Norwegian immigrants who had come to the United States in the 1920s: "I grew up bicultural and bilingual."

**...when she was 21 years old, Lois entered medical school at the University of Chicago. In a class of 72, she was one of only 12 women...**

She relates that she was bitten by the travel bug early: "I was introduced to world travel at age 8 when my mom took my brother and me to Norway to care for her mother for 3 months. I attended her 1-room schoolhouse." Travel became a lifelong passion: El Salvador (three times), Mexico, Africa, Norway, China, India, Bermuda, the Galapagos, several European countries, and many, though not all, states in the United States of America are among the places she's visited.

In 1961, when she was 21 years old, Lois entered medical school at the University of Chicago. In a class of 72, she was one of only 12 women—"...an exceptional number for that time and for that school." She tells this remarkable story:

We women immediately formed a mutual support group. I met Bill [her husband] my very first week of med school. He was the first boy I ever dated seriously. We married Christmas my second year and had Karen my third year, 15 months later.

The Dean didn't know what to do with me, saying that they'd never had a med student who got pregnant, and he didn't know how much time to give me, so why didn't I decide. I took 8 months, which I've never regretted.

I returned to finish my junior year with the class behind mine, which had four women plus me. Around Karen's first birthday, I got pregnant with Heather, and this time the Dean was seriously disappointed. But he was basically a kind man, and he worked out a schedule that enabled me to complete my studies (by sacrificing all my holidays and most weekends) one week before Heather was due, in November of 1965. And, that's what happened.

The following spring, when I got my MD, it had a special significance unique to me: To me, MD stood for Mother Doctor!

In 1982, Dr. Svoboda, who by then had 2 years' training as a family therapist and had obtained an MFT certificate (later qualified as a Licensed Marriage, Family Therapist), a therapy field that works with people in the context and sometimes in the presence of family members, was approached by

someone who was suicidal. The young woman told her, "I think I've been in a cult." Lois disclosed to the young woman that she had no familiarity with cults but would help her in any way she could. The woman and her mother, desperate, came into the office and told their story.

The patient was admitted to the psychiatric unit, whereupon Dr. Svoboda "beelined it to the hospital library." She found about 12 books and some articles on the subject. She called a number she found and discovered a huge network of people all across the country who were open and willing to share information and resources.

Her research revealed that, at that time, the therapeutic success rate of mental health professionals working with cult-involved people was about 10% to 20%, while the success rate for nonpsychiatric exit counselors was from 60% to 90%. Together, Dr. Svoboda, the client, and her mother made the decision to reach out to an exit counselor. Several people had mentioned the name of David Clark and recommended him. After the women contacted him, he came the very next day from Pennsylvania to Wichita, Kansas.

Lois arranged for David to stay in a hotel next to the hospital so that he could easily visit with the patient. He carried with him from Pennsylvania four suitcases full of material to help with the process. As Lois tells it, by the end of the first day, it was very clear that David Clark knew what he was doing. Lois analyzed his method and found it to consist of

- (a) Listening carefully and respectfully to the young woman's story for however long it took.
- (b) Providing education to the patient regarding cults.
- (c) Letting her know that she had, in fact, been manipulated.
- (d) Exposing her to stories (via various media—videos, etc.) of other former cult members, including members of groups other than her own, so that she could compare her own experience to theirs.

By the second day, there was a noticeable improvement in the patient. By the fourth day, other patients in the unit, not hospitalized for cult involvement, were nevertheless approaching Lois to ask if they, too, might have sessions with David Clark!

This was Dr. Svoboda's introduction to the phenomenon of mind control and harmful groups.

Eighteen months later, one of Lois's own daughters, Heather, fell in love and followed her boyfriend into a cult. Lois and her husband noticed changes in their daughter's behavior right away but did not act immediately on what they observed. Once they became aware of what was going on, they staged a 10-day intervention in which Lois, her

## ...one of Lois's own daughters, Heather, fell in love and followed her boyfriend into a cult.

husband, Heather's two sisters (her brother was unable to attend, to his regret), and David Clark participated. Heather made the decision herself to leave the cult.

Following this experience, Heather spent 3 weeks at Unbound, a cult rehabilitation center in Iowa (no longer extant). She then returned to college, but before graduating she spent a winter term interning at Unbound. She also spent a summer volunteering there. She graduated from college with a BA with honors, later taking her MA in Psychology.

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Dr. Svoboda and her husband have been married for 57 years. She names this benchmark one of her sources of pride, calling the marriage

"worn and tattered, but still vibrant and real... Bill and I have four wonderful kids: Heather, Rose, Karen, and David. Rose is adopted from Laos and married a boy from Amman, Jordan."

Those children and "my remarkable grandchildren" are other sources of pride. Lois, Mother Doctor, is happy to talk about her children, sharing that both Heather and Karen work, like herself, in the healing profession: Heather is a psychologist, and Karen is a social worker doing therapy.

She goes on to share a story "I always tell" about David. David, visually impaired, was nevertheless a physically active and vivacious child. One day, when he was only about 7 years old, David called her attention to an extremely long spider web. Assuming he was pointing out the unusual length of the web, she agreed that it was indeed, very long. "No, Mommy," he said. "Listen," pulling her ear down. Then, with his pinky finger, he ever so gently plucked the web as if it were a violin string, and, with that, Lois recounts, "For the first and only time, I *heard* a spider web."

Lois and Bill moved to Fremont, Nebraska, Bill's hometown, in 2004, "at the invitation of our eldest child, to be near our grandkids," and they have been enjoying life there tremendously. Lois confides that she is so happy to be able to savor living at this stage. "My life has been incredibly unexpected in so many ways. Yet, it is a *good* life. I have a decent marriage and good health," adding that she feels



Heather Svoboda

grateful for these things. Her life is filled to the brim with family; some patients; serving as Family Editor of *ICSA Today*; traveling; swimming; gardening; after-school volunteering; helping immigrants learn English; and spending time with her 2-year-old puppy, a little brown Pomeranian named PoohBear.

One gets a sense of the liveliness of the Svoboda household as Lois talks about a recent home-improvement project. Unaware, of course, of the coming pandemic, Lois and her husband had made the decision to make a major change to their home. The change would involve sanding and polishing all the floors. As a result, they spent the first 4 weeks of the pandemic moving every book and all the furniture in the house into two rooms.

Their grandson, John, and his friends, frequent visitors who had spent overnights at least once a month during their high-school years crashing in the basement family room, helped. (Lois's granddaughter, Levi, involved in singing, dancing, and drama, had often had her friends over as well, although at different times.)

While the floors dried, Lois and Bill had to live in their guestroom in the basement, from where they spent time

climbing up and down the stairs at least eight times a day. Every 2 days we had to draw a new map of our house: where we could go and where we had to avoid. Fortunately, it's spring, so we didn't mind going from the kitchen through the garage out to the yard to get to the porch, where the dog was then living. At least we couldn't complain about inactivity during the quarantine. We alternated between hyperactivity and exhaustion!

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I've noticed that, at least in ICSA, incredibly accomplished people somehow make it look easy. Dr. Svoboda is like that: seamless.

And FUN! After speaking with her, I felt as if I'd been to the best. New Year's Eve party. ever. I can't imagine a more auspicious entry into the new year.

## And even now, perhaps especially now, in this dark, uncertain time in the world, I feel that meeting Lois Svoboda, Mother Doctor, was a most auspicious experience.

And even now, perhaps *especially* now, in this dark, uncertain time in the world, I feel that meeting Lois Svoboda, Mother Doctor, was a most auspicious experience.

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Following, a little more about Dr. Svoboda:

**MO:** What books are on your nightstand?

**LS:** The Bible; anything by Picoult, Follett, LaMott, L'Engle, C.S. Lewis, Gladwell, many things written by non-Western writers.

**MO:** What are some of your favorite quotes?

**LS:** "Always make new mistakes. Always find the lessons in them."

"Take the road less travelled. It's not as crowded."

"Do something every week that you've never done before." (Lois adds that this has been her motto for the past 18 years since she has started working part time.)

"If you're going to follow God, wear comfortable shoes."

"Nobody can help everybody, but everyone can help someone."

**MO:** What motivates you?

**LS:** Curiosity, love of adventure, novelty, the joy of seeing and helping people heal, faith, gratitude to God for His unending love for us all, the challenges and curiosities of aging, wonder and awe at the complexities of the human brain.

**MO:** What gives you comfort?

**LS:** Swimming; music; reading (fiction, nonfiction, some poetry); friendship, especially with our adult kids.

**MO:** What is the most beautiful thing you've ever seen?

**LS:** Five and a half years ago, I began making jewelry and housewares using real, preserved flowers. Flowers are so beautiful. Also, anything composed by Franz Schubert; babies' laughter; choral music, especially cantatas by Bach; the singing in a good choir; our amazingly beautiful children and grandchildren; the scenery in Norway; the wonders and mysteries in the world around us, large and small, from snowflakes to spiderwebs to birdsong... What an incredible imagination our creator has. ■

**Dear Bill,**

***I left the cult I was born into a little more than a year ago. I've had emotional ups and downs since then; but, for the most part, I've been doing all right. I'm writing to ask your opinion because lately I've been contending with an uncomfortable issue. When I think about my years in the cult, I find myself dwelling on how unfair the whole situation was, and I become consumed by rage at the cult leaders. Some of them were kind to me, but others were unnecessarily mean and cruel. I keep thinking of what I would say to them if I ever met them now, and I'm surprised at how vicious I can be in my thoughts. That's not like me.***

***Even more disturbing are my memories about how I sometimes acted in the cult. I was never cruel, but I think about the times that I wanted to be understanding to someone who was having doubts, but I had been taught that I was supposed to be strong and to condemn those thoughts and to blame the person I was talking to for being impure. I made some of the other members feel awful. I'm guilty for the way I behaved.***

Dear Reader,

Perhaps it can be helpful to recognize that anger is a universal emotion that we human beings experience from the beginning of our lives. Picture a baby who has a need that's not being met; the world is a frustrating place, and frustration can lead to anger. As we grow, we learn that the unbridled expression of anger is not acceptable, and we try to take the edge off our anger by reacting to it in a more acceptable manner. Freud said that civilization began when someone somewhere hurled an expletive instead of a rock.

Obviously, it isn't healthy to feel continual anger, but when people are continually suppressing their angry feelings, those feelings can reemerge in different forms. Cult members are subjected to many more frustrations than most people experience. Their individual needs, if they are considered at all, are always secondary to the needs of the cult leader(s). The members are taught that the only acceptable desires they have are those that are sanctioned or encouraged by the doctrine. Their individuality is quashed.

This obstruction of individual needs induces tremendous feelings of unconscious anger in the cult members. That anger can't be directly expressed toward its source (the cult leader), so it's turned against the self as well as others. The anger that's redirected against the self can lead to depression and feelings of guilt, and also a range of somatic difficulties. The anger that's redirected toward others leads to the acts of meanness and cruelty that you mention.

You were acting out the aggression you felt toward the cult leader by being hard on other cult members under the guise of helping them, an action that you learned from the teachings of the cult. You also may have been reenacting the reactions that adults in the cult, perhaps including your parents, displayed toward you.

**...I'm surprised at how vicious I can be in my thoughts. That's not like me.**

When someone leaves a cult, it's common for them to experience a period of emotional numbness as a defense against their unconscious fears. This numbness might have been a coping mechanism that they adopted while they were in the cult. It's also common for this period of numbness to be followed by intense feelings of anger, as the anger that the former cultist had suppressed is able to come to consciousness. In most cases, as time goes on, those powerful emotions become mitigated. If these feelings continue to have a disturbing effect on your present relationships or activities, it would be a good idea to consult a therapist. ■

**Send questions for Bill or for other guest columnists to [mail@icsamail.com](mailto:mail@icsamail.com)**



## SPECIAL REPORTS

### Note:

References for specific sources cited in Special Reports but not included at the end of the News Desk are available at [icshome.com/icsa-publications/icsatoday/references](https://icshome.com/icsa-publications/icsatoday/references)

### Report From Poland

#### Poitr T. Nowakowski

How do cults work? This was the theme of the *Strefa Prywatna* (Private Zone) broadcast, aired on Monday, July 20, 2020 by Polskie Radio Program Four, known also as PR4, which is a youth-oriented radio channel of the Polish public broadcaster, Polskie (Polish) Radio. The broadcast was conducted by Weronika Puszkarska. Her guests were theologian Andrzej Wronka, known in Poland from his cult-awareness activities, and Sylwia Wojtyśiak, the chairperson of Polskie Towarzystwo Psychoterapii Integratywnej (The Polish Association for Integrative Psychotherapy, or PTPI).

Each of us has a need to belong to a group, which is sometimes abused by various manipulators. How do cults work? How do they recruit their members? Can anyone fall into their trap? How can we recognize that someone wants to involve us in a cult? How can we help our loved ones involved in a cult? Authors of the *Strefa Prywatna* broadcast attempt to answer these and other questions. The broadcast was started by mentioning the cases of celebrities involved in cults, such as Tom Cruise and John Travolta.

### Report From Spain and Latin America

#### Luis Santamaría

Translated by Erika Toren and J. Paul Lennon

#### Groups of Christian Origin

In Panama, a pregnant woman and her five children between the ages of 1 and 11, and a 17-year-old girl, were killed and buried in a common grave by members of a group called The New Light of God. The bodies were found in a pit in a secluded area in the region of Ngäbe Buglé, where 15 people, wounded and beaten, were rescued; they had been held captive by members of this cult who had also subjected them to exorcism rites.<sup>1</sup>

In Peru on January 26, special parliamentary elections were held in which the Agricultural People's Front (FREPA) did very well. This political party was created by the Evangelical

Association of the Israelite Mission of the New Universal Covenant, a national cult founded in 1955 by Ezequiel Ataucusi Gamonal, who claims to be God's chosen one.<sup>2</sup>

This past February, Felipe González, President of Spain from 1982 to 1996, participated in the Universal Peace Federation (UPF) World Summit 2020, celebrated in South Korea on the centennial of the birth of Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Moonies sect. However, the media barely mentioned this event.<sup>3</sup>

In Santa Cruz, Bolivia, a January court ordered a blood transfusion for a 9-month-old whose life was in danger. The child's parents, Jehovah's Witnesses, had refused the treatment, but the judge declared that "the child must receive treatment regardless of the parents' opposition."<sup>4</sup>

In February, in Santiago, Chile, the Court of Appeals accepted an order of protection presented by San José Hospital in favor of one of its patients so the hospital could proceed with a blood transfusion. The patient, a man, was a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses and was in a life-threatening condition, but he had refused to submit himself to the transfusion.<sup>5</sup>

Last March, The Palmarian Catholic Church (a Spanish Catholic splinter group) did not celebrate its Easter Week ceremonies because of the situation around Covid-19. Nonetheless, the church's leader, self-proclaimed "Pope Pedro III," had written an "apostolic letter" in which he affirmed that "we are in our Final Days... we are in Apocalyptic Times ... the last trumpets are sounding... the last seals are close and the Cups of Divine Wrath are full."<sup>6</sup>

During the early moments of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD) decided to open its temples with complete normalcy, bringing together at times thousands of followers in some of its larger buildings for Sunday services. Besides this, controversy arose around a published video of the cult leader, magnate Edir Macedo, in which he stated, "My friends, do not worry about the coronavirus because this is a tactic of Satan." A few days later, he took down the YouTube video.<sup>7</sup>

Other news that has strongly impacted the IURD is the schism affecting Angola, a country alleged to have a half-million followers. On June 22, a group of bishops and pastors of the cult rebelled against the Brazilian central control and took over its 85 temples, accusing the leaders of discrimination against the Angolan group members. As of now, the separated branch is called the Universal Church of Angola.<sup>8</sup>

In July, the First Vice President of Spain, Carmen Calvo, met with the country's main religious confessions. On the 23rd she met with representatives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses regarding "honorary

roots." During the meeting, the issue of religious confessions with honorary roots that lacked the Agreement of Cooperation arose. This privilege had originally been granted only to Catholics, Evangelicals, Jews, and Muslims. The need to work toward more equality for other religious entities with honorary roots was discussed.<sup>9</sup>

## Afro-American Cults

In May, the Chilean police found an abandoned cabin in the province of Valparaíso where a group held rites in honor of Saint Death (*San la Muerte*), an esoteric personalization of death, different from the Mexican Saint Death (*la Santa Muerte*). According to the Coronel Lincoyán Valenzuela, "they found objects there which are used to create satanic rituals: human skulls, a ram's skull, a chalice, ouija boards, and other elements typically employed in satanic rituals."<sup>10</sup>

On July 6 in Corrientes, Argentina, there was an assassination that the family members of the victim attributed to an Umbanda ritual (an African-American syncretist cult, widely spread throughout the country). "According to what we know, that night they had to offer up the life of a human to have their request answered," the niece of the victim, a 34-year-old man, explained. The investigating prosecutor affirmed that those arrested for the crime practice Umbanda; he believed, however, that this factor would not affect the homicide investigation, which took place within the context of a family feud.<sup>11</sup>

## Shamanism

In January and February, the Spanish TV channel *Telecinco* broadcast two reports on Inner Mastery, a company that operates mainly between Spain and Latin America, which organizes spiritual retreats during which ayahuasca is consumed. According to an ex-follower, "Inner Mastery is, without doubt, a coercive cult." The former member, who once held a leadership position within the group, affirms that the members "consume ayahuasca and other substances which contribute to a serious process of depersonalization."<sup>12</sup>

In Spain on May 28, the popular porn star Nacho Vidal and two other people were arrested and accused of the death of photographer José Luis Abad in July of 2019. According to the investigation, the death was a consequence of Abad's inhaling the venom of the toad *bufo alvarius* in a typical shamanic ceremony directed by Vidal.<sup>13</sup>

The Ministry of the Treasury in Spain and the Civil Guard detained a Spanish citizen arriving from Peru with 37.5 kilos of ayahuasca on July 4 at Barajas Airport, Madrid. After searching his luggage, the Civil Guard detained him on an alleged crime against public health. Since 2011 there have been 70 arrests associated with 114 seizures, all of which happened at Spanish airports. This hallucinogenic substance is imported by shamanic groups for rituals and for personal gain.<sup>14</sup>

## NEWS SUMMARIES

### Yoga guru's firm ordered to stop claiming product cures COVID-19

"The Indian government has ordered **Patanjali Ayurved Ltd.**, the traditional medicine company controlled by celebrity yoga guru **Baba Ramdev**, to stop claiming a new product can cure **Covid-19** as the country battles a burgeoning epidemic. The government has asked Patanjali to submit details about the product and the studies backing up its claims for it, and to stop making them in the meantime, according to a press release. Earlier in the day in a press conference and a media blitz, Ramdev touted a 'Corona Kit' of three herbal medicines, which the company claimed was 'evidence based ayurvedic medicine for Covid-19,' the disease caused by the novel coronavirus." (*Bloomberg*, 06/23/20)

### The unravelling of a dancer

"...Willoughby Britton, a professor of psychiatry at Brown University, believes that the popular representations of **meditation** as a 'warm bath,' a universally salutary activity, don't encompass the broad range of reactions to meditation. For the past decade, as part of a research project called the **Varieties of Contemplative Experience**, Britton and her husband, Jared Lindahl, also a professor at Brown, have been cataloguing the challenges that people experience in the process. In a recent paper in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, they document the ways meditation can lead to changes in sense of self, including the 'dissolution of the personality structures that support the "story of me"'—an experience that many found distressing and even disabling. ... But Robert Sharf, a professor of Buddhist studies at the University of California, Berkeley, told me, 'The depersonalization to which Buddhists aspire is not supposed to result in dysfunctional alienation. The dissolution of the ego is meant to occur within an institutional and ideological framework that helps one make sense of the experience. Nowadays, people who become depressed or depersonalized through secularized meditation practices don't have access to the conceptual resources and social structures to help them handle what is happening to them.'" (*The New Yorker*, 03/30/20)

### Church of Almighty God members tortured in Xinjiang's camps

"...**Gao Jie** started the story of her time in the **internment camp** in northern **Xinjiang** by remembering how she was beaten for telling her indoctrination instructor that his remarks about her faith were blasphemous. 'Guards instructed two other inmates to beat me, who knocked my head against the wall until my face became swollen,' the woman said. 'They also threatened to blind me if I refused to write the "four statements: repentance, break-up, guarantee, and criticism.'" The guards also told her not to tell anyone about what happened in the 'study class.' ...The

camp where Gao Jie was detained is in a remote location, and it is surrounded by tall walls with barbed wire. 'When we were taken there, we were stripped-searched, guards telling us to do three squats; they then checked our hair,' Gao Jie remembered. 'Four armed guards escorted us into the cell block. There were three buildings for the detained, one for women and two for men. Out of the about 400 detainees, most were Uyghur Muslims, Christians, and Falun Gong practitioners.'" (*Bitter Winter*, 03/18/20)

### ISIS tells terrorists not to travel to Europe for jihad because of coronavirus

"After years of urging its terrorists to attack major European cities, **ISIS** is now telling them to steer clear due to the coronavirus. Any sick **jihadists** already in Europe, however, should stay there—presumably to sicken infidels, according to a 'sharia' directive printed in the group's *al-Naba* newsletter, the *Sunday Times of London* reported. The 'healthy should not enter the land of the epidemic and the afflicted should not exit from it,' the newsletter advised. The newsletter instructs jihadists that the 'plague' is a 'torment sent by God on whomsoever He wills.'" (*New York Post*, 03/15/20)

### Court in Crimea jails second Jehovah's Witness for 6 years

"A court in Russian-controlled Crimea jailed a **Jehovah's Witness** for six years on Thursday after finding him guilty of belonging to an organization banned in Russia since 2017, according to a local human rights group. ... **Crimean Human Rights Group** said in a statement that **Artem Gerasimov** had become the second Jehovah's Witness to be convicted for practicing his religion in Crimea, following the decision by the Crimean Supreme Court, and was one of dozens to be prosecuted in similar cases by Russian authorities. ... The court did not immediately respond to a request to comment. ... In a similar case in March, **Sergei Filatov** was found guilty of knowingly ignoring a 2017 ruling by Russia's Supreme Court that the Christian denomination was an extremist organization and should disband." (*National Post*, 06/04/20)

### The secret database of Jehovah's Witnesses child abusers

"On April 1, 2014, a high-ranking member of the **Jehovah's Witnesses** named **Richard Ashe** was answering deposition questions about cases of child sexual abuse when he made a rare, perhaps unintentional, admission: somewhere in their organization, a group comprising nearly 11,000 congregations in the U.S. alone, exists an archive of documents detailing the names and locations of every known child abuser within their American membership. ... The deposition, footage of which appears in *The Witnesses*, a two-part Oxygen documentary compiling five years of reporting from the **Center for Investigative Reporting's Trey Bundy** and which debut[ed] Feb. 7 and 8, marked the first public evidence that such a database existed. But it was not the last. Over

the following year, internal documents obtained by Bundy would show that since 1997, the **Watchtower Bible and Tract Society**, the faith's nonprofit oversight arm, had been collecting extremely precise data from its American congregations about child sexual abuse with a form that amounted to something like a 12-question survey. Elders, or overseers who report to the faith's governing body, were asked to detail the type and frequency of abuse, the personal information of the perpetrator, how both victim and accused were perceived within the congregation, if either had 'lived down any notoriety in the community,' and how many people knew about what took place. They were told not to report the incidents to law enforcement or their congregations, but rather to mail a copy to the Watchtower in a 'Special Blue envelope' and keep another in their files. The reports were marked 'Do Not Destroy.'" (*Daily Beast*, 02/09/20)

### Jim Bakker's Prepper Village having the worst apocalypse ever

"...**Morningside** is the name of [**Jim**] **Bakker's** Christian broadcasting empire, as well as the Missouri residential community from which he broadcasts. But it's mostly made news in recent weeks because of its founder's legal woes: various government agencies have accused Bakker of promoting a fake COVID-19 miracle cure. So what does the coronavirus pandemic look like in this temple of survival? According to interviews with people who have recently lived, worked, and spent time there, pretty much the same waking nightmare as everywhere else: mixed efforts at social distancing, layoffs, and reported shortages of everyday supplies as COVID-19 ravages the country. A former Morningside employee who spoke on the condition of anonymity because she hoped to return to her job as the pandemic eased said she was among a wave of layoffs as the community entered lockdown in late March. 'They were running out of supplies they had stocked up on when I was leaving there,' said the former employee, who argued Bakker was being vilified in the media. Neither Morningside nor a Bakker representative returned requests for comment for this story. The story of Morningside's development involves two failed historical theme parks and two dozen criminal charges. Bakker, now 80, was a star of the 1980s televangelist scene and even expanded into a biblical theme park until feds convicted him of an elaborate scheme to illegally skim millions off the amusement park. A former church secretary also accused him of sexually assaulting her and buying her silence, although he claimed to have only had consensual extramarital sex with her, and was never charged. Twenty-four convictions on fraud and conspiracy charges in the amusement park scandal and four years in prison later, Bakker was released from lockup in 1994. By 2003, he'd returned to broadcast ministry, this time with an eye on the end-times. He preached the apocalypse and used a loophole in non-profit law to hawk survivalist gear like supposed health supplements and giant buckets of shelf-stable food. 'Imagine,' one of Bakker's emergency food ads said, 'the world is dying and you're having a breakfast for kings.'

(Because his ministry is technically a nonprofit, Bakker does not 'sell' his goods; he offers them as 'love gifts' to people who make specific donations, like \$4,500 for a 'Peace of Mind Final Countdown' bundle that contained 31,000 servings of food in a variety of buckets.) In 2008, he opened Morningside, a church complex/Christian broadcast studio/evangelical utopia on the former site of a follower's Renaissance faire-themed amusement park. It was the ultimate survivalist sales pitch: Bakker claimed it could withstand an imminent apocalypse, and offered a variety of dwellings onsite. Higher-end homes included condos overlooking a shopping mall-like central meeting area, which also featured a chapel, a General Store, a cafe, and a 15-foot statue of Jesus." (*Daily Beast*, 05/09/20)

### Lev Tahor cult school principal indicted for child abuse

"On Tuesday [5/26/20], in the Jerusalem District Court, an indictment was filed against **Elazar Rompler** for child abuse. Rompler served as a school principal in Canada for the **Lev Tahor** cult and is charged with mentally and physically abusing at least two children, ages 8 and 9 respectively, between the years of 2009–2011. Rompler, 46, held his position before the group fled from Canada to Guatemala in 2014. The children in question were children who belonged to the cult and were under his tutelage. In one case Rompler allegedly had a child stripped, tied up, and beaten with a stick for several hours over suspicions that the child stole money from a tzedaka box.

He is also accused of instructing other teachers to hold a child down and beat the child repeatedly for allegedly lying." (*The Yeshiva World*, 05/26/20)

### La Luz Del Mundo's "Apostle" leads church from inside a jail cell

"The invitation to pray together went out last week to millions of members of **La Luz Del Mundo**. A California court of appeal had dismissed criminal charges against their leader **Naason Joaquin Garcia**, and the Mexico-based religious group was cautiously optimistic. 'Let us be prudent,' the invitation advised, 'and wait on legal proceedings, trusting that the awaited day will come, because the Church is confident in the honorability of the **Apostle of Jesus Christ**.' Garcia, 50, has led the organization, also known as the **Light of the World Church**, since late 2014. The charismatic preacher was born and raised in the Guadalajara neighborhood where his grandfather started this religious group, and where his father served as its leader for 50 years. Today, the neighborhood is something like the Vatican for members of La Luz Del Mundo, which makes Garcia something like their Pope. The charismatic preacher was arrested last summer at LAX, after three girls and one woman in L.A. County reported abuse to the **California Department of Justice's** clergy abuse tip line. The California attorney general's office, which is prosecuting the case, says Garcia used his authority within the church to coerce young girls into sex acts. Garcia denies these allegations. In June,

Garcia was charged with lewd acts upon a child, conspiracy to commit human trafficking and forcible rape. At his arraignment, Garcia pleaded not guilty and waived his right to a speedy preliminary hearing. In July, Garcia was arraigned on an amended complaint that also included new charges for the possession of child pornography. At that arraignment, he also pleaded not guilty. In September, Garcia's attorneys filed a motion to dismiss the case, arguing that he had not waived his right to a speedy trial on the second set of charges and that he was being held unfairly. The trial court denied his motion, and Garcia's attorneys appealed to the California Court of Appeal. The court of appeal reversed the trial court, dismissing the case on a procedural basis. The court did not weigh in on the merits of the criminal case against the pastor. The court of appeal dismissal isn't final for 30 days, and Garcia will continue to be held in jail until then. State prosecutors say they have the option to re-file the multiple felony charges against him. Throughout the ordeal, Naason Joaquin Garcia and his supporters have denied the charges. Garcia's criminal trial is in limbo, but for now, he'll keep running La Luz Del Mundo from behind bars, as he has for the past 10 months." (*LAist*, 04/14/20)

### Federal court bans Bradenton "church" from selling bleach as miracle COVID-19 cure

"A Bradenton [FL] organization that peddles drinking industrial-grade bleach as a cure for 95 percent of the world's known illnesses, including HIV/AIDS, autism, Alzheimer's, leukemia, and most recently, COVID-19, was openly defiant after a federal court issued a temporary restraining order on the sale of its products. 'We are doing good, so we have no fear of you AND you still have NO authority in our Church or its practices,' wrote **Mark Grenon**, leader of **Genesis II Church of Health and Healing**, in an email addressed to **U.S. District Judge Kathleen M. Williams** on April 24. Grenon, who said he has written **President Donald Trump** about his product, also told the judge to cancel all orders against the organization. ... Now the federal judge has issued a preliminary injunction that extends a ban on the organization from distributing its **MMS** product, also known as '**Master**' or '**Miracle Mineral Solution**.' 'The Court finds that the United States has shown a cognizable danger that Defendants will continue to violate the FDCA in the future unless a preliminary injunction is issued,' Judge Williams stated in her May 1 order. The court filings name Genesis II and its leader Mark Grenon, as well as **Joseph Grenon**, **Jordan Grenon** and **Jonathan Grenon** as defendants. All four individuals have been identified as 'bishops' of Genesis II on the organization's website, with Mark Grenon sometimes referred to as 'archbishop.' Mark Grenon claims to have founded Genesis II in 2010 with **Jim Humble**, a former **Scientologist** who began promoting the supposed health benefits of MMS as early as 2006 in self-published works. A website operated in Humble's name says that he discovered the uses of the active ingredient in MMS 'while on a gold mining expedition in South America.' Another post on the site claims that Humble 'retired' from Genesis II in 2017 and left

the organization 'in the hands of Mark Grenon.' 'It is important to note that MMS does not cure disease,' the website also says." (Bradenton, 05/05/20)

### FTC warning issued to multilevel and network marketing companies

"...The FTC is going after **multi-level marketers** that use the coronavirus pandemic in their pitches to sell products or recruit new people. 'Two concerns that you have to be aware of when you're a MLM participant,' said FTC Regional Director **Chuck Harwood**. 'First, you want to make sure that you're passing on reliable information.' Recent warning letters to 10 **MLM** companies point to unsubstantiated health claims related to COVID that have no scientific verification and violate the **FTC Act**, which prohibits misleading and deceptive practices. 'There's simply no substantiation that the kinds of products that are being marketed and sold through these MLM schemes will prevent someone from contracting **COVID-19** or help you recover from COVID-19 any faster than you would otherwise,' Harwood said. Another big problem is inflated claims about the money you can make with a network marketing business. 'You have to be very careful if you're investing in one, be sure that the promises of how much money you're going to make, are actually truthful. a lot of times they're inflated,' Harwood said. 'A lot of times, what we find is that people who get into these kind of schemes—whether it's related to COVID-19 or anything else—find that they lose far more money than they ever make.' The FTC website dedicates an entire section to multi-level marketing businesses and **pyramid schemes** and how to tell the difference. You can also learn what to look for and how to research a company before you get involved." (KomoNews, 05/12/20)

### Defectors tell of torture and forced sterilization in militant Iranian cult

"...The **Mojahedin-e Khalq** started as a militant revolutionary movement, committed in principle to bringing human rights and democracy to **Iran**. But over the last four decades, it has devolved into a secretive, cult-like group that resembles a militant, Islamist version of the **Church of Scientology**. The **MEK** has carried out bombings, sabotage missions, and murders. Since its founding in 1963, it is believed to have killed hundreds or even thousands of Iranians, as well as a handful of Americans. ...From 1997 to 2012, the United States designated the MEK a foreign terrorist organization. But the group, which once opposed U.S. intervention in Iran, has effectively switched sides, becoming a convenient proxy force for Tehran's enemies, particularly American neoconservatives, the Gulf Arab states, and Israel. The current MEK leadership maintains close ties with several prominent American politicians, including **Donald Trump's** former national security adviser **John Bolton** and the president's personal attorney **Rudy Giuliani**, both of whom have been paid speakers at MEK

events. ...Yet despite the harm it has caused to Iranians and others, the MEK's most numerous victims may have been its own members. Interviews with six defectors in Europe reveal that the MEK has isolated, disappeared, and tortured many of its cadres into submission, including forcing dozens of female members to have sex with [its leader] **Rajavi** and undergo medical sterilization so they could devote themselves more fully to the leader and his cause." (The Intercept, 03/22/20)

### German police raid neo-Nazi Reichsbürger movement nationwide

"Neo-Nazi propaganda and firearms were seized in ... raids, in 10 of Germany's 16 states. The targeted group, '**United German Peoples and Tribes**,' is part of **Reichsbürger**, whose members reject the German state as a legal entity. The interior ministry said racism 'even in times of crisis' would be combated. The statement from ministry spokesman **Steve Alter** was a reference to the coronavirus pandemic, which has triggered the closure of German schools, businesses and public events. The Reichsbürger movement is estimated to have 19,000 members in Germany. Those targeted are suspected of spreading racist threats and propaganda. It is the first time the interior minister has banned a group associated with the Reichsbürger movement." (BBC News, 03/19/20)

### Banned Neo-Nazi group Sonnenkrieg Division launches Telegram channel

"The British neo-Nazi group the **Sonnenkrieg Division (SKD)** allegedly created a *Telegram* channel on March 25, stating that the government cannot ban an idea. Membership in the SKD was made illegal by the British government in February 2020. The channel claims that SKD has not disbanded and that the group has no connection to any other organization or network, with the exception of the **Atomwaffen Division**, which has claimed to have dissolved. The group allegedly stated on the channel that they will maintain a covert presence for recruiting purposes in order to invite pre-screened individuals to join. The channel also condemned groups that do public actions such as posting flyers. The channel contains SKD propaganda, a link to a group involved with the 3D printing of firearms, and encouraged individuals to wear masks while out in public, insinuating that they could commit crimes within the context of the UK COVID-19 lockdown." (Counter Extremism Project, 03/30/20)

### Baby QAnon was just arrested

"In the bizarre world of **QAnon** conspiracy theorists, 29-year-old **Austin Steinbart** was a rising star. A segment of the pro-Trump conspiracy theory group believed he was the mysterious '**Q**,' the anonymous internet figure whose clues have convinced a portion of the president's base that **Donald Trump** is engaged in a shadowy war against pedophile-cannibals in the **Democratic Party**. Steinbart—dubbed '**Baby**

**Q'** by his fans—claimed he could get away with anything because he was a super-spy for Trump. In online arguments, Steinbart insisted he should have been arrested '100 times over' for his actions. And the fact that he hadn't been arrested for, say, threatening to kill the Queen of Denmark was proof that Trump had given him immunity from prosecution. ... Steinbart now faces an extortion charge over his online antics, all apparently committed in an attempt to convince gullible online conspiracy theorists that he's an all-powerful intelligence agent. As part of his attempts at self-promotion, Steinbart allegedly posted the confidential brain scans and medical files of former professional football players online—images he was able to obtain while allegedly getting a scan of his own. Steinbart's arrest marks just the latest time a QAnon believer has been charged with a crime. Two others have been charged with murder, including one accused of murdering the head of the Gambino crime family. The conspiracy theory has also surfaced in two child kidnapping plots, and a 2018 terrorist incident near the Hoover Dam. ... prosecutors and the FBI paint another picture of Steinbart in court documents, describing a young man with 'unaddressed behavior or mental health issues' willing to commit crimes to build up his profile in the online conspiracy theory world." (*The Daily Beast*, 04/07/20)

#### Clearwater official critical of Scientology will serve on downtown board

"**Mark Bunker** says his goal is to discuss Scientology's influence. Parishioners on the downtown development board [of Clearwater, FL] call him a bigot. In his first official effort to address the **Church of Scientology's** influence downtown, newly elected City Council member Mark Bunker will serve as a non-voting member on the Downtown Development Board, a mostly advisory body with a modest budget for marketing to attract businesses and residents. But the dynamic is unprecedented. Four of the seven development board members are Scientology parishioners, putting Bunker, a longtime Scientology critic, directly in conversation with a board that has never fully grappled with the church's role in downtown's struggles. The council voted unanimously on Thursday to approve Bunker's appointment despite passionate appeals made by the four development board members who are parishioners and three other prominent businessmen who are Scientologists. The church members painted Bunker's two decades of speaking against what he calls fraud and abuse in Scientology as bigoted and anti-religious. Bunker countered, saying his advocacy is not about hating Scientologists, but exposing policies church leaders use to 'split apart' families, place staff in work camps and financially exploit members." (*Tampa Bay Times*, 04/17/20)

#### Former Boulder Shambhala member sentenced to 20 years in prison on child sex-assault case

"...Prosecutors allege [**Michael**] **Smith** sexually abused a girl multiple times starting in 1997. According to an arrest

affidavit, the girl lived in **Boulder [CO, USA]** and her family was heavily involved in the **Shambhala** community. Her parents took her to a Shambhala retreat in Vermont every year, which is where she said she first met Smith when she was 9 or 10 years old. Police said the girl's family often rented out rooms in their house to other Shambhala members, and Smith lived at the house for two to three years. During that time, the woman told police Smith sexually abused her numerous times, performing oral sex on her, forcing her to touch his privates, and kissing her breasts.

The girl first told a family friend about the abuse in 1998 and then told her parents, according to a police report. According to the report, a **Buddhist** teacher told the girl's family to have Smith enter a 'restorative justice' program rather than go to police. Smith entered treatment and also paid for the girl to go to therapy. The family told police in 1998 they did not want to pursue charges. Langer said that while it is not unusual for sex assault allegations to come out after the actual incident, he did say this case was unusual in that Smith already admitted to some of the conduct and went through treatment without a criminal case. [Attorney **Steven**] **Louth** has repeatedly said he wished the case had been prosecuted in 1998 and that Smith would have been sentenced differently back then, but [District Judge **Bruce**] **Langer** said he was not sure that would be the case. 'We don't know what the real effect is on the passage of time,' Langer said. But the victim, who listened in on the June 5 hearing but on Tuesday chose to address the court, said it was not her fault that a case was not filed 25 years ago. She said it was disappointing to hear members of the public speaking on Smith's behalf, many of whom said they knew about the incident at the time and some of whom made comments about the victim's looks and behavior." (*Daily Camera*, 06/23/20)

#### More than 1,500 Shincheonji cult members who tested positive refusing treatment for Coronavirus

"At least 1,777 **Shincheonji** members have been tested positive for coronavirus. But claiming that getting treatment is against their belief, these members are refusing to undergo any treatment. In addition, more than 1,000 members of Shincheonji cult, with symptoms of COVID-19 have even refused to undergo tests." (*International Business Times*, 03/07/20)

#### Daegu files damage suit against religious sect of Shincheonji for mass coronavirus infections

"**Daegu**, once the epicenter of **South Korea's** new coronavirus outbreak, filed a civil damage suit against a fringe religious sect for allegedly causing mass infections by hindering the city's quarantine efforts, the city said Tuesday. The city, the country's fourth-largest with 24.3 million people, filed the suit with the Daegu District Court on Thursday [June 18, 2020] against the **Shincheonji Church of Jesus** and its chairman, **Lee Man-hee**. It demanded Shincheonji provide financial

compensation of 100 billion won (\$82.3 million), more than two-thirds of the city's total virus-related spending of 146 billion won. The city said it was planning to increase the amount as it secures more evidence of financial damage down the road. The city believed mass infections among the religion's practitioners led to a spike in the city's COVID-19 caseload, putting huge financial strain on the city and stretching health care facilities there. The city spent a huge sum of money on quarantine and health-related work to stop the rapid spread of the virus." (*The Korea Herald*, 06/23/20)

### **Pope defrocks founder of another Latin America-based order**

"...Pope Francis defrocked the Argentine priest, **Roberto Juan Yannuzzi**, after a four-year investigation determined he had sex with adults under his authority, absolved them of the sin during confession and otherwise abused his power. The pope's decision was made public this week in a statement by the archbishop of **La Plata, Argentina**, where Yannuzzi in 1994 founded the **Miles Christi** community. The name is Latin for '**Soldier of Christ**.' The movement is a religious order of priests, religious brothers, consecrated women and laity with a presence in Argentina, Italy, Mexico and in the U.S. dioceses of Detroit and San Diego, according to its website. In a statement, Miles Christi said its members had denounced Yannuzzi's abuse and 'irregularities' starting in 2016. 'All the religious and authorities of Miles Christi deeply regret the acts committed by their former superior general and from the outset have accompanied and continue to accompany those who were affected, providing them with all the material and spiritual assistance necessary to cope with this painful situation,' the group said in a statement. **Defrocking**, or dismissal from the clerical state, is the most severe sanction the **Vatican** can impose on a priest. It is usually reserved for priests who sexually abuse minors. The fact that Yannuzzi was defrocked for having sex with adults, absolving them of the sin and abusing his other powers suggests his misconduct was particularly grave. Yannuzzi is the latest in a string of founders of new religious orders or **Catholic** lay movements who abused those in his care while the Vatican and church hierarchy turned a blind eye." (*AP News*, 02/05/20)

### **In pictures: South Korea mass wedding defies coronavirus fears**

"Thousands of couples have attended a mass wedding held by the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification**, also known as the **Unification Church**, in South Korea. The ceremony was held at the Cheongshim Peace World Centre in Gapyeongin near the capital Seoul despite fears the event could help spread the coronavirus outbreak that originated in Wuhan in China. South Korea has confirmed 24 cases of the coronavirus—the latest a South Korean airlifted from Wuhan last week." (*BBC*, 02/07/20)

### **Soldier charged with providing information to white supremacist occult group to "ambush" his own unit**

"...According to the [US] Justice Department, [**Ethan**] **Melzer** deployed abroad in October 2019. Prior to planning the attack [on his own Army unit], he allegedly consumed propaganda from multiple extremist groups, including **O9A** and **ISIS**. In April 2020, Melzer was informed of another deployment by his unit, and then allegedly sought to 'facilitate a deadly attack on his fellow service members,' the Justice Department said. After he was notified of his deployment, he allegedly used encrypted communications to share with O9A and a related group called '**RapeWaffen Division**' his unit's planned location, movements and security. Melzer and his co-conspirators allegedly planned what they called a 'jihadi attack' with the objective of creating a 'mass casualty' event. Around May 17, Melzer allegedly exchanged electronic communications about passing along information to a person he believed was a member of **al Qaeda**. Between May 24 and 25, he allegedly shared information about his unit's planned deployment and promised to share more. **The Order of the Nine Angles** is based in the United Kingdom, where anti-racism campaigners and lawmaker **Yvette Clark** have sought to have it outlawed as a terrorist organization, *BBC News* reported. 'The combination of **Nazi-Satanism**, extreme violence and sexual abuse makes it particularly troubling and action needs to be taken to prevent them grooming and radicalizing other people,' Clark said in March." (*CBS News*, 06/23/20) ■





# UPCOMING EVENTS

**ICSA International Conference**  
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**A Virtual Event**



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