
New Religious Movements

What is a “cult”?

- Definitions:
 - A religiously-oriented group often with a charismatic leader that is marked by excessive regulation, separation, control of resources, and control of information.
 - Any group that has beliefs or practices that differ from the majority religious group(s). Term often used pejoratively.
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What is a “cult”?

- **Religious Typology** (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987)
 - “Church”: Conventional religious organization
 - “Sect”: Nontraditional organization, traditional beliefs
 - “Cult”: Nontrad organization, nontrad beliefs
 - Study by Tadeusz Doktór (2003) supporting this typology.
- “Cult” versus “New Religious Movement”
- Examples of NRM.

Conversion to a NRM

- **Elements of Brainwashing Theory** (Anthony & Robbins, 2004)
 - Psychological coercion eliminates free will
 - Predisposing factors are not important
 - Hypnotic processes cause suggestibility and disorientation.
 - Brain conditioning limits free will
 - Conditioning causes “defective thinking”
 - Indoctrination creates “false ideas”
 - Brainwashing results in “false self”

Critique of Brainwashing Theory

- Thought-reform and mind-control don't work
- Hypnosis is not effective in causing people to involuntarily participate in activities that are "immoral, illegal, or against their own self-interest."
- Personality factors are important components of NRM "success".

Conversion to an NRM

Lofland and Stark's Model

Background (predisposing factors):

1. Acutely felt tension between actual and desired
2. Individual has a religious orientation to solve the problem.
3. Tension is not solved by traditional religion, and the person chooses to seek answers in an unusual religious experience.

Conversion to an NRM

Situational Factors:

4. A transitional period of life.
5. Strong emotional bonds are formed quickly.
6. Previous bonds begin to diminish.
7. Intensive interaction between the convert and the members, and increased time commitments to the group or movement.

Other Personal Factors

Wuthnow (1978) Based on participation in eastern religions in the west.

- “Exposure”: knowledge of and contact with NRM’s
- “Legitimacy”: liberal orientation on social issues
- “Opportunity”: to experiment socially (life transition)
- “Motivation”: lack of satisfaction with an aspect of life.
- The first three were most predictive of attraction to and participation in unorthodox eastern religions

Other Personal Factors

Galanter (1989):

Psychological distress and social alienation.

Simmonds (1978):

Tendency toward addiction

Levine (1984):

Identity crisis and “growing up”

Related web sites

- <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/>
 - http://www.cesnur.org/text_gen.htm
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