MENTAL HEALTH AND THE NEW RELIGIONS

BARBARA HARGROVE

As a sociologist, I tend to approach the subject of mental health within a framework supplied by the sociology of knowledge. That is, I begin with the assumption that all human beings of necessity organize the raw data of their experience into systems of meaning which are broadly shared in a society. Such systems are shaped in and reflected by the language, are varied within broad limits by such social factors as age, sex, social class, and the like. The meanings are upheld in conversation with one another, where what we take for granted is reinforced by similar assumptions expressed by one another. In quick overview, this is what is meant by the social construction of reality.[1]

From this point of view, mental health may be defined as the ability to be sufficiently in touch with reality—both the physical reality of one's surroundings and the social and conceptual reality of one's culture—to be able to function effectively as a member of the society. Mental illness may be defined as being so out of touch with those surroundings that one is in danger of harming either oneself or others, or destroying the social fabric upon which both the self and others depend.

In earlier periods, dangerous levels of deviance from social and/or physical reality structures was defined as a crime, as possession by evil spirits, as witchcraft or its consequence, or as sin. Each of these forms of etiology were, of course, based on patterns in the social construction of reality shared by most people of that time and place. That is, if a basic understanding of what it means to be human affirmed free will and personal intent, deviance could be treated as a deliberate criminal act; if influential spirits, good or evil, were posited as part of the environment, then witchcraft was expected. If the patterns of social and physical reality were assumed to be divinely mandated, then any deviance would be sin. In today's world, we live largely in a period reflecting what Philip Rieff has termed "the triumph of the therapeutic."[2] That is, deviance of any sort is most likely to be deemed illness.

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[1]This term has become part of the language primarily through the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, whose book by that name gives an excellent and detailed description and discussion of the phenomenon.

[2]Cf. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: The Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

Etiology, of course, implies the forms of cure. If deviance is criminal, punishment is called for. If it is possession, exorcism is necessary. If witchcraft is the source, it is necessary to eliminate the witch. If deviance is sin, atonement and forgiveness are indicated. If it is an illness, therapeutic methods must be applied.

In most societies, religion is at the base of the social construction of reality. Shared interpretations of the world are through religion given cosmic dimensions. The way in which we experience and share reality comes to be understood as part of a divine creation, mandated by the divine, providing a framework of shared values, hopes, and fears. To doubt this divine order is to threaten all human meaning, so that in some sense heresy is the most dangerous of deviations, the source of all others except for cases of unintentional error.

Modern society posits a scientific and technological base, which ignores, if it does not refute, the otherworldly aspects of a religious worldview. Yet this scientific, technological base is held to with the tenacity of religious belief, since it, like religion, produces a cosmological framework for the social construction of reality. Modern medicine, including the mental health profession, is quite clearly a participant in this cosmology. Modern religion, at least in the forms of the western Judeo-Christian tradition common to so-called "mainline" religious institutions, has tended to affirm much of the scientific-technological worldview, preferring therapy to exorcism or sacrifice, and finding the divine order affirmed through rational science.

Thus in the primary carriers of modern culture, the middle to upper classes of western societies, the reality which is socially constructed tends to be rational, orderly, based on commonly held, if not oversophisticated, assumptions of natural and social science. Specifically religious elements of that worldview may or may not be denied, but are usually pushed to the periphery where they serve the central paradigm by offering a patina of ultimacy to a basically secular view, and by assisting persons in coping in a world sometime less rational in their experience than in their expectations. In American society we cherish the right to choose among a range of religious options the one (or a series) that can best enhance our individual lives, but that range tends to be limited to religious groups that have been proven unlikely to disrupt the prevailing worldview. While some religions would seem to contradict the ruling consensus quite sharply, they have tended to be the choice of persons occupying social positions quite far removed from the primary centers of that view, among the poor or ethnic minorities, for example. Or they have been cast in such a way as to allow them to be perceived as isolated portions of our lives that we label "spiritual," rather than affecting the public concensus.

The reasons for this seem quite clear. Deviations from expected patterns of behavior threaten the social order by making us unpredictable to one another, so that even if we are not physically dangerous to one another we endanger the common, unexamined flow of life that allows us to get things done.

Deviations from the prevailing worldview are more dangerous, because they threaten the consensus by which we interpret experience and give meaning to our lives. If we are thrown into the primeval chaos where every experience is given equal weight and fits into no frame of reference, we cannot function as a society or as individuals. And most dangerous of all is the deviance from that portion of the worldview which gives our lives ultimate significance, which is one way of defining religion.

Generally speaking, societies that are more nearly tribal, composed of persons very like one another engaged in very similar occupations, are the most threatened by any form of deviance, since it is in their likenesses that people find their social solidarity. In modern societies where there is a wide diversity of social roles and styles, where our unity depends on our interdependence as specialists needing another's services, we allow a much wider range of behavior and thought. Personal liberty in these areas becomes a cherished value. This is one reason for the shift from definitions of deviance as crime or witchcraft, which require the elimination of the perpetrator from the social system, to a view of deviance as illness, which assumes treatment that will allow the person's re-entry into social patterns as soon as he or she can be cured. But in both cases, and in all the range in between, it is evident that there are ranges of thought and behavior in all societies beyond which a person is not allowed to stray.

There are also variations in the amount and the toleration of deviance in particular cultures in different periods of time. Dysfunctions within the culture may call forth certain responses that are defined as deviant, increasing their number in times of social stress. On the other hand, if social stress is great, fear of deviance may be particularly high, since there tends to be a high level of anxiety during such periods. Some societies may prize change and encourage a certain amount of deviance as a source of change, while others may be particularly fearful of anything new. But even in the former type, deviance beyond expected limits, particularly during unsettled times, may evoke considerable fear and repression.

While conformity in local groups has often been demanded, American society as a whole has often deliberately encouraged an uncommonly wide range of behaviors and orientations. Early theorists of American society spoke not only of the creation of a new political form in this supposedly virgin territory, but also of a new kind of human being, who would rise above the tired forms of Europe into new greatness. But as Oscar Handlin has demonstrated, by the end of the nineteenth century the general idea seemed to have come to be a belief that that new humanity, the prototypical American, had been achieved, and it was now the duty of each new group of immigrants to adapt to it.[3] The range was beginning to narrow.

[3]See his *The Uprooted* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1951), pp. 264-285.

Yet the objective reality of our lives continues to change, and with it the central model of what it means to be human. As we move from an economy based on heavy industry to what has been termed an "information society," we no longer find quite as useful the self-directed capitalist or the worker for whom physical effort or the number of visible products may be the measure of worth. Rather, the people moving to prominence now are those who deal in systems—systems of information, systems of people within organizations. And this calls forth new emphases in the public definition of the world, if our leaders are not to be defined as marginal.

It is my contention that at least some of the new religious movements represent a search for alternatives to the earlier worldview. As such, they may be particularly attractive, not to people on the fringes of society as the earlier sects tended to be, but to those most likely to occupy central positions within it, or—more especially—those training to move into such positions. Thus the threat to the reigning consensus is particularly disturbing, a deviance not likely to be allowed.

Consider for a moment a recent movement not usually linked with today's "new cults," the Black Muslims. In spite of a militant ideology that challenged both the accepted definitions of America as a Christian (or Judeo-Christian) nation and the doctrine of white racial supremacy, the Black Muslims were seldom if ever suspected of "brainwashing" their adherents, of inducing a kind of psychosis that would lead to "snapping" from a true perception of reality to some kind of robot-like surrender of their will to a leader. Instead, while some political caution was directed their way, the Black Muslims were observed transforming third-generation welfare recipients into taxpaying citizens, prostitutes into responsible housewives, criminals into law-abiding workers. Like other sects before them, the Black Muslims were aiding a marginal group to enter the mainstream of the society. In spite of their rhetoric, they reinforced the ruling paradigm, helping keep the perceived realities solid and reassuring. If they induced members to give up earlier worldviews, it was all to the good; clearly the new views they took on were consistent with the society's general definition of reality, and so mentally healthy.

How different the fate of that group that began as a mainline Christian congregation, and though predominantly black, counted as members white people whose education, skills, and contacts would put them very much in the mainstream—Jim Jones' People's Temple! Surely if ever there were a case of mass psychosis, this is it. How could these people have become so deluded? If only they could have been reached in time with some form of therapy! Perhaps Jones and some of his lieutenants could be defined as criminally deviant, but not all those people! How could they have so defined reality as to choose death over the destruction of their community? Surely here we are talking about the psychological manipulation of people. And it is here that we turn to what has been said by those in the so-called "anti-cult" movement about other new religious groups that have not proven so ultimately dangerous—yet.

The anti-cult movement had its organizational beginnings among a group of parents whose children had joined the Children of God, an apocalyptic, more or less Christian community in the late 1960s. The parents found a primary ideologist in Ted Patrick, a black evangelist who developed a technique of "deprogramming" as the therapeutic model for sufferers from presumed cult-induced psychosis. One of the most frequently cited academics was Robert Jay Lifton, who had studied the process of "thought reform" in Korean prison camps in the 1950s. As more organizations, more leaders, and more theorists have been added, a general pattern has arisen, which is applied to nearly all new religious movements, regardless of their particular ideologies. It goes something like this:

New religious movements primarily attract young people, who tend to be vulnerable to such groups because they are in a transitional period of their lives, and are particularly vulnerable at such moments of transition as going away to college or leaving home to take their first job. Says psychiatrist John Clark[4], who has testified against new religious groups in court cases as well as speaking against them in less formal settings, there are two types of persons most likely to be susceptible to the so-called cults. The first are those whose mental health had tended all along to be a problem, troubled youth who had had difficulty in school and with their families, who have trouble developing intimate relationships. This group would include, according to him, schizophrenics, the schizoid, those with personality defects, sexual perverts (his term), and all who are generally uncomfortable, who somehow feel that the world as it is is not theirs. These he terms "seekers," those who move from one orientation to another, seeking some form of total experience. Such a definition of the "seeker" as ill tends to raise hackles on many who identify themselves in this manner, but he goes even beyond that to say that such people may be attracted to a cult, take their time joining, but eventually perceive it as the end of their search, accept its ideas, cease thinking, become "robots" moving at the will of cult leaders.

The other group, says Clark, is just the opposite. It is composed of young persons who are healthy, growing, making it, whose families are strong and may have provided fairly strong religious backgrounds—though seldom a Fundamentalist one. When they go off to college they miss their families and become depressed—a depression often increased by their first set of tests, when they do not do as well as they were accustomed to in high school. It is about this time, says Clark, that they are most vulnerable.

In spite of a wide difference in actual behavior in such groups, anti-cultists claim that all "cults" tend to surround potential converts with group situations filled with trickery, where they are surrounded with apparently lov-

[4]While John Clark has written and given testimony in a number of places, where he essentially makes these same points, direct reference to his ideas below comes from a talk given at the Yale Divinity School on November 4, 1976, entitled, "Psychological Dimensions of the New Cults."

ing persons who are excited about the "truth" they have come to accept. They are accused of keeping peole under controlled conditions for long hours, giving them low-protein diets which lessen mental acuity, cutting them off from any outside influence of friends or family. As the indoctrination continues, their consciousness is thought to narrow, and critical faculties to disappear. They begin to accept changed definitions of terms. Says Dr. Clark, "From this time it is very, very hard for individuals to turn. They are lost." They begin, he says, to take in information more rapidly, to pick up a jargon that will allow them to speak meaningfully only with members of the group. They will talk differently, become humorless and unable to deal with irony and metaphor. They can no longer be argued with. They are, Clark says, in a state of thought control, where emotional and intellectual growth stops and they become totally dependent upon the structure of the organization.

For those of us who consider the free exercise of choice a basic human right—and that is most of us, I suspect—this is a very frightening scenario. If the convert is truly lost, no longer has the ability to turn from a course never freely chosen, what is to be done? It is here that Ted Patrick and his imitators come to the fore. Their answer is that the person must undergo a reversal of the process by way of another process known as deprogramming. And since he or she is incapable of exercising free choice in the matter, coercion will be necessary in order to reverse the psychological coercion the person has suffered. Thus anguished parents who have seen their children undergo personality changes as well as changes in their loyalties are encouraged to hire experts at deprogramming who will help them forcibly to remove family members from the clutches of the cult and subject them to a process that may again involve sleep deprivation, a controlled environment, and the like, during which they may be shaken loose from the imprisoning ideology which has supposedly engulfed them. Many parents have risked confrontations with the police to help kidnap their children from religious groups. Many others have sought legal conservatorships on the ground that their children, though adults, are no longer mentally competent. Some have pushed for laws making conservatorships a matter of easy access.

For example, the so-called "Lasher Amendment" sought to amend the mental hygiene law of the State of New York to allow for the appointment of a temporary conservator

> of the person and the property of any person over fifteen years of age, upon showing that such persons for whom the temporary conservator is to be appointed has become closely and regularly associated with a group which practices the use of deception in the recruitment of members and which engages in systematic food or sleep deprivation or isolation from family or unusually long work schedules and that such person for whom the temporary conservator is to be appointed has undergone a sudden and radical change

> in behavior, lifestyle, habits, and attitudes, and has become unable to care for his welfare and that his judgment has become impaired to the extent that he is unable to understand the need for such care.[5]

Given its ambiquities, and they are many, the amendment did not pass, but clearly a definition like that given by Dr. Clark was accepted by the bill's sponsors, and the sense of danger to mental health in the cults expressed. Similar bills have been introduced in other states, and in the meantime some judges have found sufficient grounds for the granting of such conservatorships without changes in legislation. In general, the understanding is well encapsulated in the words of the memorandum in support of the Lasher Amendment:

> ...recruits have been subjected to systematic and sophisticated attempts to alter their perceptions of reality to the extent that they may not be able to make a rational decision in regard to joining the group.
>
> A conservatorship statute is necessary to ensure that young people are afforded a temporary opportunity to reassess their options before committing themselves to groups which demand the renunciation of family, friends, former lifestyle and values.[6]

One reason why such measures tend to fail to become law is that, since laws are supposed to apply to all, they might be applied to groups other than those targeted by the bills' supporters. For example, mainline religion has generally been applauded, not only in foreign cultures but also when dealing with members of the underculture of our own society, when they have successfully obtained "the renunciation of family, friends, and former lifestyle and values"—if those former ties and styles were considered deviant or inferior.

The reality of the potential threat to mainline religion can be seen in the words of Dr. Clark, speaking at a theological seminary a few years ago, when he said, "So-called 'standard religions' ought to be very careful about what they're doing in certain practices, such as the charismatic church movement and really strong evangelical efforts, because they may also at times induce catastrophic change in mental functions. They may not also know what kind of subjects they are approaching."[7]

While his criticism must be taken seriously as a legitimate caution, it, as well as many of the proposed laws, tend to raise fears among church people as

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[5]As reproduced in Herbert W. Richardson, *New Religions and Mental Health* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 182), p. 21.

[6]*Ibid.*, p.30

[7]Clark, *op. cit.*

to the limits of the exercise of action against religion-induced change. Clark's definition of catastrophic personality change often resembles descriptions of classic religious conversion, and few churches, even if not highly evangelical themselves in their approach, would support making religious conversion illegal.

Of course, much is said about the deceptive quality of the appeals of the "cults." One would assume that this could be a dividing line between genuine conversion and improper psychological manipulation. Yet we must take seriously the nature of the social construction of reality. What seems deceit may be simply action out of a different worldview. Many mental health professionals are admittedly "religiously tone deaf," to use Weber's term. To go back to Dr. Clark again, during the same talk quoted above, he responded to a question about spiritual approaches to life in this fashion:

> I have yet to understand quite what the word "spiritual" means, unless it means that right now you see Satan on my shoulder, as one young man told me.[8]

Clearly his perception of the world and that of many religious people are so far apart that *either* might accuse the other of deception in speakng out of that framework of meaning.

Then, are all accusations of mental illness among members of so-called "cults" false? Some would say so, citing among other things the vested interests of mental health professionals. For example, Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, who are concerned about the threat to religious liberty involved in the question of mental health in new religious movements, have written this:

> The possibility might be considered, however, that in crusading against "cults" the mental health community is responding to two conditions: (1) "cults" and "shrinks" are competitors, i.e., many persons attempt to improve themselves or resolve their difficulties with the assistance of scientology or gurus instead of employing "legitimate" therapists; (2) Religious "deprogramming" and auxiliary services for the "rehabilitation" of cultists and ex-cultists expand vocational opportunities for psychiatrists and psychologists as well as for social workers, lawyers, detectives, clergy and ex-devotees. The institutional interests of psychiatry and clinical psychology thus confronts unorthodox gurus and movements in two areas; gurus and unorthodox therapies must not receive the support and subsidies from private and public health programs

[8] *Ibid.*

which psychiatrists hope to obtain;[9] moreover, the "abuses" of unorthodox groups may produce clients for the services of orthodox practitioners, thereby further pointing up the salience of such service and the need for public support.[10]

It is my opinion, however, that it would be foolish to take only this view of the situation. First of all, most religious professionals will admit to a concern that *any* religious group attracts a certain number of adherents or hangers-on who are embarrassingly unstable. In some cultures, people suffering from symptoms we would clearly identify as psychoses are judged touched by the gods and given special status as shamans or holy folk. Those celebrated as prophets in the Judeo-Christian tradition often behaved in ways that in our society would justify their commitment to a mental institution. More immediately, persons whose egos are unstable tend to attach themselves to religious groups or religious leaders in their search for something to bring stability to their lives. Persons with deep emotional needs seek out churches as one form of institution where emotional expression and emotional gratification are given legitimacy in a society that tends to be highly rational, objective, and controlled. New religious movements are not unique in attracting the unstable, but neither are they immune to such attraction. They do not need to induce mental illness to have in their membership persons who suffer from it. And since they are so often accused of creating such illness, they are likely to react more often than other groups with defensiveness, rather than to provide therapy for those of their number who may need it. Unlike established churches, which have developed pastoral counseling as a profession that tries to unite the insights of psychological therapy with religious practice, new religious movements are often faced with either insisting that no mental illness occurs among their members, or else trusting ailing members to therapists who are unable to relate to their religious worldview if not avidly opposed to it. Under such circumstances, it would be logical to assume a larger percentage of untreated mental illness in the so-called "cults" than in the rest of the population, given relatively similar age and social background. For family members and friends of persons known to be somewhat unstable even before joining such a group, this can be a fact that causes real concern. Since youth is defined generally in our society as an unstable period, that concern may be spread to those whose personal interest is focused on generally normal young people, and sometimes it is appropriate that it should.

At the same time, their concern may lead to continuing or renewed instability. For example, the methods used by at least the most extreme of the deprogrammers are quite psychologically violent, predicated as they are on the

[9]Eliot Marshall, "It's All in the Mind," *New Republic* (August 5, 1978), pp. 17-19. [Note in the original.]

[10]Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, " 'Cults' vs. 'Shrinks': Psychiatry and the Control of Religious Movements," in Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

need to reverse a psychologically violent process of "brainwashing." If their assumption of brainwashing is incorrect, they they may be guilty of exactly the procedure they attempt to fight. Indeed, my experience of a number of deprogrammed ex-"cult" members is that they have been as zealously devoted to the deprogramming movement as they had been to the religious movement out of which they had been "rescued." Only the *object* of their zeal—the fanaticism, if you will—had been changed. One could still ask questions about their mental stability.

Even the accusations of ulterior motives of those who manipulate others can be used in both directions. Certainly many leaders of religious groups are wealthy, and can be accused of using their followers to gain that wealth. It is also true that deprogrammers charge distraught families high fees to return their loved ones to them, and often apply great pressure on families to prove their love to cult members by hiring them to do so. Throughout history various types of charlatans have proved adept at manipulating others for their own ends, and many have used religious appeals to do so. There is no reason to believe that this is no longer the case in all instances. Nor should we be surprised that some religious leaders or their opponents, though perfectly sincere, might be sufficiently unbalanced themselves to lead people in directions that are dangerous to believers and to the society as a whole.

As we consider responses to this situation, several questions arise. If mental illness is often really social deviance, deviance from a particular social construction of reality that cannot be expected to be the only possible worldview or to be based on some sort of absolute truth, must we say that there is no such thing as mental illness? Is there no need for therapy? Are all religious movements freely chosen options for members, to be supported by all who believe in freedom of choice? No, I think not. Let me say why.

The primary test of any kind of illness, including mental illness, is the ability of the person to function in the society in a way that is not destructive to the self or to the social whole. If a person is unable to fill basic social roles, is likely to harm himself or herself or to withdraw into an unreachable capsule of consciousness, that person can and should be diagnosed as ill. However, the inability to fulfill roles in one social setting accompanied by vary capable activity in another is more likely to be evidence that there was something wrong with the first situation rather than with the person. Many people who are members of so-called "cults," particularly those who have been in the movement long enough to have found careers for themselves within it, are far from the zombies described by the anti-cult movement. They appear to be functioning at particularly high levels of personal power and poise. Having committed themselves to a world different from the one they left behind, they are apparently healthily adjusted to their new reality. Are they, then, truly mentally healthy?

It is at this time that we must ask the next question, that of the relation of the movement to the rest of the society. History tells us that some movements

have been forerunners of needed social change. Their members, even if mistreated in their day for their deviance from the accepted view of the world, have become the heroes of those who inherit their new and better way of living in the world. History also gives us examples of persons who have been committed to causes that have not only destroyed them personally but also created havoc in the society around them. I would suggest that commitment to the former sort of movement is healthy, to the latter type unhealthy.

How, then, do we distinguish among the many movements of our day? First, of course, we must cease lumping them all together, as if there were no differences among them. Then we must learn all we can about what they stand for, what kind of world they create for their adherents. Then, and only then, we may be able to imagine what the future might be if their way of life should come to dominate the society. Is the future toward which they work one that would benefit us all if we were to join them in creating it? Or are they providing an escape from reality that could never in itself be a full life? Or are they seeking a future society that would oppress the human spirit and lead to destruction? One can never be absolutely sure of projections of the possible consequences of a movement, even from the inside where it is best known, much less from the outside position of partial knowledge. But I think that if we learn all that we possibly can about them, we can make some informed judgments and use those to "discern the spirits," that is, to test religious groups in ways that will give insight into their relative health and stability of members.

Acting on such judgment, we may then turn to ways of seeking to prevent undue influence of groups we judge to be unhealthy. I would suggest here that the best course is indeed prevention, that it is best to consider the needs for vision and/or stability that many new religions seem to fill, and to find more socially acceptable ways of filling that void. If the "cults" really do surround persons with group situations filled with trickery that offers a false sense of love and support, could their appeal be prevented if *genuine* sources of love and support were made available to persons at transitional times of their lives? If "cults" give people a false sense of purpose and importance, is it possible that regular social institutions need to consider taking seriously the idealism and energy of the young, rather than constantly treating them as unfinished human beings?

In other words, while new religions can and do play on psychological instabilities among members and potential converts, they find a significant market for their appeals only when there are within the society systematic sources of discontent that contribute to that instability. Often our labeling "cults" as creators of mental illness is a defense against treating seriously the critique they raise against current social definitions of normality. When that is the case, we lose the ability to distinguish those truly suffering from mental illness, and often as well lose our capacity to treat them therapeutically, substituting for one aberration we dislike another equally "sick" one that we

have chosen.

For the sake not only of members of "cults," but also of the whole society, we must learn to be more discerning, both concerning the specific offerings of different groups, and of our own contributions to a social situation in which they thrive. We have much to learn in the study of such groups; they may be the best mirror we have in which to see our own psychological and social failings.

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