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Gerry M. Lanuza



The mass suicide of the members of Heaven's Gate led by Herff Applewhite is a recent reminder that "destructive cultism" is not yet a spent force and that the contemporary history of religions is still replete with horrifying rituals. In the past two decades alone, the fateful end of the members of the Branch Davidians led by David Koresh (Waco, Texas, 19 April 1993),¹ the Jonestown massacre (Guyana, 18 November 1978), and the numerous worldwide deaths of the members of Solar Temple easily come to mind.² The thirst for self-members of baptized flocks, often turns into a thirst for revenge against incredulous heathens as exemplified by the series of nerve gas attacks recently perpetuated by the Japanese cult, Aum Shinrikyo (Supreme Truth) led by its founder, Shoko Asahara.³ The list of self-annihilating rituals and terroristic holy wars can go on and on (van der Vyver 1996).⁴

Attempts to explain rationally these seemingly irrational behaviors tend to totally reject cults as pure and sophisticated forms of religious charlatanism. Rejection comes in two different colors but with the same flavor: one is rooted in Christian fundamentalism,⁵ the other, in the holy alliance of family members of cultees, ex-cultees, psychiatrists, and deprogrammers (Singer and Lalich, 1995). In the United States, groups like the Love Our Children, Citizens Freedom Foundation and American Family Foundation embody such forms of rejection (Bromley 1988, 186).

A more sober approach avoids blanket condemnation of cults, on the one hand, and unenlightened glorification of excessive cultism, on the other. Principal advocates of this approach are usually the sociologists of religion like Robbins, Anthony, Richardson, Shupe, and Bromley.

This article essays a sociological analysis of this unprecedented cultic phenomenon worldwide. I have no intention of transgressing

the litigious limits of theology or religious truths and empirical data (see for instance, Johnstone 1975, 5ff.).⁶ I am not interested in discussing whether there are aliens and UFOs, or whether Bo is the new custodian of the planet or Koresh is the Messiah. My interest lies in whether these beliefs and ideologies have something to do with the larger social environment and the processes that are currently transpiring within the system.

But the more important focus of the inquiry should be on the individual's altered perception in these new religious communities. There should be integration between the microstructure of cults and their links with the dynamics of macrostructure of society. I believe that a sociological analysis of these cults can provide people with a sense of deep respect, critical sympathy, and an enlightened view of these cults. This point was best articulated by Pico Iyer in his article in *Times Magazine* (7 April 1997) that "though the Heaven's Gaters' (or other cultees for that matter) doctrine may seem weird to us as ours apparently seemed to them, the wider tragedy of the cruel suicides would be if our own faith prevented us from lavishing at least as much sympathy on the group as curiosity." This sympathetic attitude towards cults, I risk being misconstrued by anti-cult crusaders as another naive apologist for cults (Singer and Lalich 1995).

The Politics of Defining Cult

A good starting point is to define cult since failure to demarcate it from other religious organizations (traditionally called the church-sect-denomination typology) will very likely obfuscate the issue. An example of this unhealthy confusion is the ill-fated attempt of some cult scholars to lump together all new religious groups and movements under the catchall concept of cult (Ron Rhodes 1994; McDowell and Stewart 1982). This unwarranted move may be interpreted as a guileful attempt to harass and discredit all unorthodox and heterodox religious groups whose doctrines do not readily dovetail with the basic norms of society and mainstream Christian doctrines (Robbins and Anthony 1982). It would not be very helpful here to draw out Max Weber's insistence on the value-neutrality of an ideal concept like cult. Each interest group of people, scholars included, will define a cult differently. Let readers be reminded, however, that a good sociological definition of a cult should avoid, wittingly or not, maligning presently existing cults.⁷ Consequently the operational

definition of cults below is simply an ideal type definition and may not necessarily capture the complexity of individual cults.⁸

We can begin here by noting that there are two broad approaches to defining cults. The traditional one is given by Glock and Stark (1965). In their definition cults are "Religious movements which draw their inspiration from other than primary religion of the culture, and which are not schismatic movements in the same sense as sects whose concern is preserving purer form of traditional faith" (p. 243). A very similar definition is given by Lofland (1965) when he defines cults as "little groups which break off from the conventional consensus and espouse very different views of the real, the possible, and the moral" (p. 1). In this definition, a cult is identified with what society labels a deviant group (see also Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 25ff).⁹ This approach has been rightly questioned. First, because it is starkly value-loaded (Swatos 1978). Second, because deviant character cannot be applied to cults alone but also to other sectarian groups (Wallis 1975, 90; Bainbridge and Stark 1985, 25; Campbell 1977, 379). And third, because deviance is too relative a label and might be used politically to badger cultees (Swatos 1978; Robbins and Anthony 1987).

Some sociologists of religion have refined this by going back to Troeltsch-Weber's analysis of mysticism. In this view, "cults stress the insistence upon the direct, inward and present religious experience, spiritual evolution, and reunion with God" (Swatos 1978, 22; Campbell 1978, 381-82). Or in the words of Campbell (1978, 232): "cults may be defined as non-traditional religious groups based on a belief in a divine element within the individual. They exist outside established religions, and they emphasize individual experience and individual concerns." The stress on individual religious experience has a weakness, the most telling of which is that it does not distinguish between individualism found in all religions and in particular cults. Individualistic emphasis on salvation also exists in major religions.

A third criterion is mysticism. This criterion is advanced by Von Weise and Becker (1932, 627) and Nelson (1969, 354). In this criterion, cults are distinguished from traditional religious organizations in their stress on the deep religious experience of the individual. This criterion, however, fails to consider the complexity of the original meaning of Troeltsch's (1931) religion of mysticism and spiritualism (see Campbell 1978, 354 for detailed discussion). In fact, mystical experience can also be found in major religious organizations.

Taking these things into account, we can now define cult as a non-traditional form of religion, the doctrine of which is taken from di-

verse sources—either from non-traditional sources or local narratives or an amalgamation of both, whose members constitute either a loosely knit group or an exclusive group,¹⁰ which emphasizes the belief in the divine element within the individual, and whose teachings are derived from either a real or legendary figure, the purpose of which is to aid the individual in the full realization of his or her spiritual powers and/or union with the Divine. (A similar definition can be found in Richardson 1979).

Contemporary Resurgence of Cults

The Passivist Paradigm

Traditional investigations of cultic phenomena (and we may include here other traditional religious groups such as sects, churches, and denominations) have focused almost exclusively on the cultic milieu. Cultic milieu refers to the external macro factors that facilitate cult formation. This model tends to view people as mere passive recipients of proselytization by cults. In this externalist-functional model, external factors may be of two levels: the intraindividual and interindividual. On the intraindividual level (that is, on the individual level) the dominant explanation is couched in the language of psychological determinism. According to this explanation, people are mindlessly lured into the cults because of the presence of irresistible psychological states within the individual. These include powerful mystical experiences which lie beyond the control of the individual (the classic example of this is the conversion of St. Paul), strong affectional and emotional attachment to other converts (Stark and Bainbridge 1980; 1983; Lofland and Stark 1965, 872; Roberts 1968), psychopathological socialization of converts which covers diverse aspects such as neurotic, psychotic, and schizophrenic conflicts (Pattison 1972; Catton 1957), inability to solve personal problems (Lofland and Stark 1965), unmet psychological needs (McDowell and Stewart 1982), psychopathological personality, and in combination with poor education (Garrison 1972), stress reduction (Galanter 1984), and effects of previous religious socialization (Halami and Argyle 1975).

On the interindividual level, this passivist model looks at the predisposing environment or the cultic milieu which induces people to join the cults. The most popular explanation of this model is Charles

Glock's (1964) theory of deprivation. In this catch-all theory, as Virginia Hine (1972) puts it, people turn to these cults because they want to compensate for their relative deprivation in economic status, psychological dispositions, health, and other items (Stark and Bainbridge 1983).

Another well-established explanation is the theory of anomie and disorganization. According to this theory, migrants are easy prey to cult's proselytization because they have recently been uprooted from their communal ties (Poblete and O'Dea 1960; Roberts 1968). These disorganization processes caused by rapid urbanization and modernization undermine the traditional value system of the people (Beckford 1987, 291). Most of these people, who are migrants, are also experiencing "cultural shock" (see Holy 1940; Nelsen, Hart and Whit 1972). Under these circumstances, the old normative mazeways can no longer provide a stable meaningful plausibility structure (Wallace 1972). Consequently a new supermarket of religion emerges in which novel plausibility structures coexist and compete with one another (Wilson 1982; Stark and Bainbridge 1983). These new religious enclaves provide the believers with new and profound sense of belongingness which can no longer be delivered by the traditional religious communities (Robbins and Anthony 1981).

A third possible explanation is the theory based on the general theory of secularization. In this view, as secularization gains momentum, religion is radically separated from other spheres of society. In effect, religion is reduced to a mere consumer item available in the market of spiritual and material goods (Colson 1987; Stark and Bainbridge 1983). The new religions cater to the pervasive individualism that afflicts secularized society (Wilson 1982). Their stress on religious therapy, quasi-magical effects, and self-actualization reinforces the narcissism of the culture of individualism (Cox 1977). Cults therefore thrive on a secularized society that celebrates individualism.¹¹

Finally, it must also be mentioned here that cults have the propensity to flourish actively when the goods produced by traditional religions and established churches are no longer marketable for the people. People who are spiritually dissatisfied are more likely to join cults (see Catton 1957, 563; Stark and Lofland 1965). Cultic recruitment increases rapidly in direct proportion to the decline of traditional religions (Bell 1970:443; Enroth 1987, 34, 49; Tucker 1989).¹² Nonetheless, it is not only the failure of traditional religions that triggers the birth of new ones, but also the failure of the old secular gods of science, rationality, and technology (see Richardson and

Sewart 1977; Moody 1972; Greeley 1977; Tiryakian 1967). Youths who join cults are alienated from the scientific-instrumentalist culture. These people are trying to make sense of their fragmented self-creation by atomization in modern society. This fragmentation is largely due to the inability of traditional institutions "to promulgate or transmit or preserve particular orientations" and "to formulate, standardize, authenticate, or validate words and symbols in which beliefs and other modes of orientations are expressed" (Eister 1972, 615). The appeal therefore of Eastern cults may be explained in reference to their holistic and subjectivistic worldview and the overcoming of excessive objectification and alienation of the self by way of stressing the liberation of the individual's self.

The passivist model of conversion and its accompanying theories discussed above has dominated the sociology of religious conversion until recently (Straus 1979). And this paradigm easily lends itself to the arguments of the deprogrammers and anticult crusaders. In this view, people are seen as suffering from a form of false sense of religious freedom arising from false awareness and blindness about the destructive effects of cultism. The cultees—under the spell of the authoritarian charismatic leader—are supposedly unable to realize that the cult's activities are at cross-purposes with the traditional values of society, the family, and the individual (Singer and Lalich 1995). I will return to these anticultist arguments. But now I present the other side of the story, the new paradigm of religious conversion, the activist or agentive model.

The Activist Paradigm

The activist model of religious conversion is a reaction to the lopsided emphasis on external stimuli in the traditional passivist paradigm. In this new model, conversion, rather than being seen as "something that happens to a person who is destabilized by external or internal forces and then brought to commit the self to a conversionist group, "is defined as an individual seeker's striving and strategizing to achieve meaningful change in his or her life experiences, and which treats the groups and others involved in this process as salesmen, skills, coaches, guides, and helpers—"themselves typically converts farther along their own personal quests" (Straus 1979, 158).

This paradigm may be linked to Victor Frank's (1958) existential psychology of "search for meaning," to Leon Festinger's (1957) well-

known theory of cognitive consistency, and to attribution theory (see Proudfoot and Shaver 1975). Whereas in the cognitive consistency theory, human beings are described as having cognitive needs to perceive wholeness and coherence in their lives, in Frankl's existential psychology, human beings are seen as actively looking for the underlying meaning of their life, the goal and ground of existence (see further Paloutzian 1981, 153). People who join cults in this view are persons who are wont to construct a more satisfying culture or lifestyle (Garrison 1974; Heirich 1977, 675). On the other hand, in attribution theory, persons are depicted as active constructors of their emotional states, the meaning of which are circumscribed within a particular definition of the situation. Moreover, as Kilbourne (1989) suggests, individual selves in this paradigm are seen as having volition, autonomy, in search for meaning and purpose, undergoing multiple stages of conversion, having rational interpretation of experiences, gradual and continuous conversion career, negotiating as a potential convert with the group, and beliefs and roles are learned (Athens 1995; Shibutani 1961, 522ff.).

This paradigm of religious conversion does not downplay external factors in toto. While "these theories of conversion," as Kilbourne puts it, "focus on different parameters of aspects of the social context (e.g., the convert's role, the reference group, the subcultural milieu, the organization context, the quality of social interaction, the degree of community, or the opportunities and resources in the convert's environment, etc.);" nonetheless, it does not throw the baby with the bathwater. It merely places the role of culture and social situation in their proper places.¹³ It is therefore pointless to oppose these two paradigms against each other.

A more useful way is to see these two paradigms as the extremes of a polarity, a continuum in which a variety of possibilities exist in between. Total freedom is as nebulous as absolute mind control. Perchance, Stark and Bainbridge's (1983, 422) very cogent observation is worth noting at this point: "There may exist cults that fit the brainwashing metaphor. But we have not seen them." The question of the degree of freedom of an individual convert cannot be settled a priori, but should be based on detailed empirical analysis.

The Brainwashing Issue and Beyond

As I have intimated earlier, the passivist paradigm easily lends itself to the arguments of anticult crusaders. Interestingly enough,

brainwashing or coercive conversion is one of the explanations that can be found in the bag of tricks of the proponents of this paradigm, at least at the intraindividual level. Cults and other religious groups, the argument goes, are using subtle but effective mind control on hapless converts (see Enroth 1987; Edwards 1979; Singer and Lalich 1995). But what is brainwashing? A textbook description of brainwashing can be found in a recent textbook on the sociology of religion:

When most Americans use the word brainwashing, they have in mind some form of hypnotic trance or mysterious mind control. The implication is that the new religious groups manipulate the minds of potential recruits so that the latter are unwitting and somewhat passive victims of the process (Roberts 1995, 115).

And as an antidote to this supposedly mendacious technique, the anticultists employ the equally furtive idea of deprogramming. Deprogramming simply means snatching cult followers, who have undergone "pseudo-conversion"¹⁴ (Shupe 1977, 945) from cult enclaves and total control of the charismatic guru. West gives the classic definition of deprogramming.

Deprogramming aims at breaking the chains of fear, guilt, and repetitive thought, and at forcing evaluation of the unexamined beliefs that were injected into the victim's unresisting mind by the cult leaders after the behavioral chains were originally established. The process does not involve any alternative behavioral programming, but rather, a dramatic, and hopefully, shocking presentation of alternative interpretations of specific phenomenon (as quoted in Shupe et. al. 1977, 947).

The logic deprogramming and de-conversion therefore assumes the following unexamined arguments. They are the following arguments:

1. People have been converted through deceptive methods and techniques, coercive or otherwise, which are stealthily concealed from the unsuspecting convert (*ibid.*, 944);¹⁵
2. The victim, following this process, is unable to look at reality outside the group's ideology for he or she has already succumbed to a form of menticide (Shapiro 1977, 80);
3. This menticide produces in the individual the syndrome of "destructive cultism," which is characterized by behavioral changes, loss of personal identity, cessation of scholastic activities, estrange-

ment from the family, disinterest in society, and pronounced mental control and enslavement by cult leaders" (ibid., p. 80, as quoted in Anthony and Robbins 1982, 284);¹⁶

4. These "authoritarian cults" are not entitled to the freedom of religion because the real issue is not freedom of religion but "freedom of thought" and such freedom is vacuous because cultists "do not possess their freedom of thought" and such liberties pertain exclusively to rational and responsible persons who are not brainwashed" (Robbins and Anthony 1981, 177);
5. Since cultists are sick (because they are controlled by forces beyond their control) they must be cured or rehabilitated through deprogramming. Consequently, deprogramming must enlist the cooperation of medical experts especially the psychiatrists. In addition, this argument medicalizes the deviant behavior of cultists: "that it is less reprehensible to impose a possibly unnecessary course of treatment than to risk leaving a pathological condition untreated" (Robbins and Anthony 1982, 286);¹⁷
6. The cult's total way of life is a grave threat to traditional values of familialism, individual autonomy (Horowitz 1983), and social responsibility;
7. The success of deprogramming is well documented to warrant any further doubt or apprehension on its effectivity.¹⁸

This armory of arguments does not only possess persuasive force but is also backed up by powerful institutional and organizational resources and networks.¹⁹ It would come as no surprise therefore that many impassioned supporters of anticult movements are former ex-cultees and relatives of converts.

While deprogrammers and anticultists have numerous airings and enormous organizational resources, the antideprogrammers and civil liberties advocates are few in number. But the latter culled most of their counterarguments from sociological studies of cults and religious organizations. What I present now are the counterarguments of anti-anticultists.

First, on the charge that cultists are coerced to experience conversion, I would argue that people are not mere passive recipients of cult brainwashing, that people are rational shoppers of religions. This is supported by studies conducted along the activist paradigm of religious conversion (Straus 1979; Richardson and Stewart 1977). As Balch (1980) has argued convincingly, conversion may "change their behavior by adopting a new role. The changes may be sweeping and

dramatic, but they are not necessarily supported by conviction." New roles are learned and negotiated rather than imposed. Moreover, the seekers, no matter how desperately they search, are "never completely devoid of the opinions, values, etc. contained in the stock of knowledge. Neither can they even be said to be without cognitive style" (Greil 1977, 122). Hence, the burden of proving the contrary rests on the side of the anticultists.

Second, in the argument that cultists are suffering from menticide or the loss of freedom to consider other alternative religious ideologies outside the group, it must be pointed out that there is a high rate of defections and voluntary disaffiliations even in the most totalitarian cults;²⁰ and the concept of an open marriage and courtship rather than brainwashing may be more appropriate here.²¹

Third, on the charge that cultists are suffering from the syndrome of destructive cultism, it must be borne in mind that cults do not only bring destructive symptoms but also constructive and therapeutic effects.²²

As to the argument that these cults utilize sophisticated mind control techniques, it must be argued that such allegation also applies to institutions which are considered as nondeviant, and normal like schools, mass media, churches, army, asylum, and family.²³

As for the charge that deprogramming can be taken up by medical experts, it must be argued that: (1) medicalization of deviance is an ideology of the medical experts to control and monopolize the treatment of so-called pathological behavior; (2) that medicalization must be tied to the complex relationship between expert medical knowledge and its power in society.²⁴

As to the claim that cultists' lifestyle is a grave threat to family values, individual autonomy and social responsibility, it must be argued that "cult involvement is neither a cause nor a symptom of family disorganization.²⁵ Affiliation appears to be unrelated to family experience and, as such, cannot be symptomatic of declining family" (Wright and Piper 1986, 22-23). If, indeed, these people are turning away from traditional family values, it is because the new religions offer them more satisfying human relations; parents are merely projecting onto these cults their sense of helplessness and failure.²⁶

Finally, on the alleged flashy success of deprogramming, it must be asserted that there are serious methodological problems in these so-called "success stories," notwithstanding the effects of sensationalized coverage of the media of deprogramming in the early 1980s"

(see Bromley 1988). First, most of these claims are inferred from ex-cultees who either left or had been abducted by family members. These ex-cultees might have suffered traumatic experience and have been stigmatized by the community. As a result, their *ex post facto* account of their cultic life is open to doubt. Second, these stories were retrospective accounts of ex-cultees whose authenticity, in all likelihood had already been prefabricated by the deprogrammers and abductors. Worse, "while modern anticultists perceive commitment to cult's doctrine as the result of brainwashing, their own attempts to restore their loved ones to 'normality' closely resemble the very phenomenon they profess to despise" (Shupe et al. 1977, 952).²⁷ Deprogramming only leaves the cultees either with no new social role or without new religion (whose status may also be put into question).²⁸

In summary, the anticultists are fanning a public hysteria as very similar to "witchcraze" of the sixteenth century. Their arguments are either culled from a one-sided negative assessments of cults, or from *ad hominem* attack on their leaders.

Conclusion

The sanctimonious fires of deprogrammers have not only descended upon tabernacles of cultists, but have also targeted the sociologists (notably Anthony and Robbins) who are having fun defending the new religious groups by neutralizing the seemingly sophisticated arguments of deprogrammers, neo-inquisitors, and neo-exorcists. While the *auto da fe*, the public burning of witches, is over we are still, unfortunately, witnessing the resurgence of a new kind of religious persecution (Robbins and Anthony 1981). The controversy in itself has set fire to the old-age issue of objectivity and ethical neutrality in the social sciences, prompting the editors of *Sociological Analysis* to devote an entire issue (in 1985) debating the relationship between scholarship and cult-sponsored research on new religions.

In the meantime even as memory of the Heaven's Gate continues to fade, we can expect deprogrammers and anticultists to stoke up their "crusade." The interest of the sociologists of religion, however, should focus more on explaining the socio-psychological environment of these new religious movements. If there is anything significant that sociologists can learn from their rancorous altercations, it is that sociologists can no longer fall back on the happy position of positivist

neutrality and objectivity. Perchance, this turn of events can provide the sociologists of religion the knowledge and opportunities to reexamine the convoluted issue of religious tolerance, scholarship, personal values, and social norms.

If there is anything that philosophers can learn from the polemics on cultism, it is that deprogrammers appear to be sporting the same banners as modernist-Enlightenment partisans, though the latter may refuse to be so categorized, in their insistence on individual autonomy, false consciousness, and true picture of religious reality. Meanwhile, postmodernists might take a second look at these new religious movements—their holistic ideology, their “irrationalism,” distrust and subversion of Reason, non-Western ways of knowing—and situate them within the collage of postmodern valorization of social tolerance, pluralism, and multicultural relativism. Of course these cults may also be absolutist and ultrasectarian. The plea for pluralism has already been anticipated by Edward J. Moody when he openly advocated the tolerance of satanic cults. Moody (1974) suggests that “Perhaps what is needed is a greater tolerance for multiplicity of alternative solutions from which various individuals may select the one most applicable to their particular needs. Perhaps we need more religions in which speaking in tongues is not a sign of abnormality, or in which honest aggression is accepted and recognized as a realistic response to some situations” (p. 382). With the collapse of what Eister calls overarching social communication among various institutions and individuals, Moody’s plea can now be seen as less outrageous than it appears at first glance. Perchance “we will need other means of giving meaning to our environment, of bringing cosmos from chaos and making life predictable and understandable. The more flexible nature of marginal religions provides one answer” (*ibid.*).

But pressing and interesting questions worth mentioning here are: Could the extreme forms of “totalitarian cults” (e.g., the branch Davidians, the Heaven’s Gaters, the Jonestown people) set limits to social tolerance in a liberal society? Where do we set the demarcation line between social or community intervention and individual responsibility? Answers to these basic questions are, unfortunately, beyond this article’s threshold of sociological inquiry. Sociologists of religion can only help clarify these issues at the empirical level. They can enlighten people on the controversy regarding brainwashing and the effects of cultism. But in so intervening, sociologists can be anything but neutral (see Robbins 1985). The studies of Bromley and

Shupe, for instance, have earned for them the contempt of anticult activists. It is apt here to be reminded of the admonition of Bryan Wilson regarding the scientific study of cults based on the sponsorship of a particular religious group. Wilson (1982, 184) writes, "To understand a religious group does require emphatic insight, but empathy need not lead to advocacy."²⁹

Epilogue: The Future of Cultism in the Philippines

Offhand, one can safely claim that cultism (as defined and discussed in this article) has never been that controversial in the Philippines (except for occasional outcries and public commotions about the Maharishi movement in 1980s, the Children of God and Moonies in 1990s). Apart from the observation that Filipinos are generally tolerant of new religious groups, even of esoteric ones, Philippine society also had never encountered serious jolts from cults, which would have merited such grave public outrage.

Another possible reason for such tolerance is the fact that cults in the Philippines have never really challenged traditional Filipino values and have never enticed cudgels from the established churches (against whom they might compete not only for supremacy but also for marketability).

A third explanation of Filipinos' tolerance for new religious groups could be the official churches' tolerance for folk and pagan beliefs and rituals of the people as expressed in popular religions—practices which have supported rather than undermined traditional Filipino values.

Lastly, we can mention here the presence of nativistic and revitalization movements within the established churches that accommodate and provide alternative venue for the outburst of charismatic experiences which could have found their expressions in the establishment of cultic groups (see Iletto 1989; McAndrew 1987). Hence, some useful cues for cults in the Philippines (wishing to be successful) can be given offhand: never to undermine traditional Filipino values and avoid attracting the censoring eye of the public especially the established churches.³⁰ Of course, we can add here that cults should also be able to tap the rich historical reservoir of Filipino culture and myths. This does not in any way insinuate full support, much less, encouragement of cults in the Philippines. This observation merely highlights the cultic milieu in the Philippine society

(which McAndrew, et al. call "peripheral capitalist society") in stark contrast to Western societies (notably the United States).

In addition to these tentative factors, we can append here other considerations based on the preceding discussion of this essay. It must be remembered that cults have the proclivity to survive and to form and coagulate in society undergoing rapid urbanization, modernization, and social change (Durkheim's theory of anomie). Such macro social processes disorient individuals and put the traditional plausibility structures into jeopardy, thereby creating intolerable uncertainty and widespread ambivalence (see Weigert 1988; Eiseter 1972). This leads individuals to experiment with new religious insights and join millenarian groups that promise the dawning of the New Age.

Second, extreme cults can serve as the barometer of family integration or disintegration. When the basic institutions of society are being challenged or in any way unstable, cults are likely to flourish and increase recruitment.

And lastly, when instrumentalist and bureaucratic ethos has permeated society—causing widespread alienation and discontent—esoteric religions become highly appealing, especially among the youths. Based on these somewhat haphazard observations we can say that as the Philippines moves to the twenty-first century and as Philippine society tracks the cascades of globalization and modernization, we can expect the vigorous resurgence of old religions (in the form of revitalization) and the birth of new ones (either in revivalistic, or nativistic, or millenarian forms, or a combination of these three). Filipino sociologists of religion will have to play a very strategic role in explicating these historic processes³¹ so that religion may be seen again as, in the Weberian tradition, a strong influence on the collective life of the people.³²

Notes

1. For discussion based on journalistic account, see Madigan (1993).

2. According to van der Vyver (1996) "On 23 December, 1995, the bodies of the 16 members of a religious cult, the Solar Temple, were found in an Alpine forest near Grenoble in south-eastern France; and earlier, in October 1994, the bodies of 56 members of the same sect were found in Canada and Switzerland" (p. 23).

3. Aum Shinrikyo was founded in 1984. It is claimed that its followers in Japan number around 10,000 and boasts of owning properties worth \$20 million (see van der Vyver 1996, 25, n. 6; *Newsweek*, 7 April 1997).

4. Singer and Lalich (1995, 83–102) provide a battery of data to substantiate their claims that cults are destructive. These include sexual harassment, manipulations, coercive persuasion, physical coercion, extortion, misdemeanor, etc. (pp. 83–102).

5. Example of this type approach is the anti-New Age tract of Randall N. Baer (1989), who was a former “naturopathic doctor, was an internationally known authority in the area of crystals, sacred sciences, and spiritual teaching...Baer now travels extensively exposing the deception of the New Age Movement” (from the back cover of his book).

6. I fully endorse here Bryan Wilson’s (1982, 13) attitude of “sympathetic detachment” in investigating religious phenomena (cf. Smart 1995, 22 for a very similar plea).

7. Singer and Lalich’s (1995, 670) rather unideal type definition of cults, which highlights the authoritarian and totalistic character of cults, is the exact opposite of this idea type I have in mind.

8. I disagree with Beckford (1987) who prefers the term “new religious movements” over “cults” simply to avoid the pejorative connotation of the latter label (also Foster 1987). Moreover Beckford refuses to provide any operational, no matter how provisional, definition of cults, nay new religious movements. I will not deal here with the typology of cults and their process of institutionalization. For further details on this topic, readers can consult the papers of Wallis (1975; 1975), Nelson (1969), Robbins and Anthony (1982), Campbell (1978), and Stark and Bainbridge (1983).

9. H.T. Dorhman (1958) also builds his definition of cults on its deviant character. In the local scene, Carlos Medina’s (1986) article on new religious movements employed the term sect rather than cult, which the author derived from Wilson’s typology of Third World sects. The problem with this term, however, is that it confuses more than it illuminates. Furthermore the term sect has a very strong Eurocentric connotation.

10. Scholars disagree on the organizational cohesion of cults. L. Von Weise and Howard Becker (1932), for instance, defined cult in this manner: “The goal of the adherents of this very amorphous, loosely textured uncondensed type of social structure...is that of purely personal ecstatic experience, salvation, comfort, and mental or physical healing....It therefore verges on the abstract crowd, although its well-marked ideology probably entitles it to a place among the abstract collectivities....The cult is the most ephemeral of all types of religious structure” (as quoted in Nelson 1969, 155).

11. It must be pointed out however that secularization theory (the theory which states that, in general, as societies become more and more modernized, religion or the influence of the sacred on secular spheres of society will dramatically but gradually decline) has been subjected to much critique and reevaluation (see Glassner 1977; Dobbeleare 1981; Crippen 1988). In fact the cult phenomenon in Western industrial societies is a testament to the refusal of religion to die in the face of massive onslaught of modernization and secularization.

12. Daniel Bell (1977, 443) observes that “when religions fail...when the institutional framework of religion begins to break up, the search for direct experience which people can feel to be religious facilitates the rise of cults.” Walter Martins blames cultism for the failure of Christian churches to properly indoctrinate their members (cited in Rhodes 1994, 36).

13. I am not in the position here to solve the dualism between social determinism and voluntarism (which is still a black box in the social theory). Neither do I believe that the activist paradigm which stresses the role of agents solves the problem. Suf-

fice it to say that rather than seeing these two paradigms as diametrically opposed we can look at them as complementary. Thus we can acknowledge that cultic milieu indeed provides the background for one's conversion. And that this milieu is akin to a tool kit from which people draw their resources and schemes for actions (see Swidler 1986). But this abstract formulation does not specify the degree of determination. Hence highly specific studies on cults can at least illuminate and disentangle these conundrums. And it will be very helpful if investigators can use Giddens' structuration theory and other agent-centered sociological analysis like phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and symbolic interaction, to study religious conversion rather than use the brainwashing model.

14. Brainwashing is coined by Hunter in 1971 (see Singer and Lalich 1995, 53). Synonymous terms include mind suppression, thought reform, psychological kidnapping, mental manipulation, coerced conversion, reeducation, coercive persuasion, exploitative persuasion, coordinated programs of coercive influence and behavioral control, thought reform, and DDD syndrome (debility, dependency, and dread). See Singer and Lalich, *ibid.*

15. These techniques include isolating members from past and external sources of social support, giving love and support, that is contingent upon particular beliefs, pressures to maintain group unanimity, threat of physical harm, threat of psychological punishment, eliciting confessions or extensive past histories, systematic induction of psychological duress, division of the world into evil and good forces, continuous verbal and sensory barrage of pro-system information, and the deprivation of food or sleep (Killbourne 1989, 23). Extreme measures that are characteristics of "Chinese brainwashing" are of a course included here (see Schein 1958; Singer and Lalich 1995, 60ff.; Lifton 1961). Marc Galanter (1984, 53), a psychiatrist, argues that cult converts are lured through subterfuge, exploiting their emotional distress. These arguments are buttressed recently by two experts on social psychology of mass communication writing about daily propaganda. According to these authors, "cults use the same persuasion tactics often used by other propagandists; cults just use them in a more thorough and complete manner" (Pratnakis and Aronson 1991, 260).

16. According to Shapiro (cf. Singer and Lalich 1995, 60) menticide is a "dangerous form of mental coercion in which the free mind is attacked" (quoted in Robbins and Anthony 1982, 285). Once the mind is attacked it loses its capacity to think freely and autonomously.

17. The medical model of deviant behavior is heavily criticized beginning in the 1960s. Biological theories and pathological explanations are now replaced by a variety of sociological theories such as labeling theory, neutralization theory, differential association, social constructionism, and poststructuralist analyses (see Summer 1994). Medicalization goes hand-in-hand with demonization of cults. This latter labeling process, according to Shupe (1987), is based on the belief that evil "spread (s) contagiously (and for most of the current cult controversy a biological/medical model of viral disease, rather than learning, has predominated), and that "the natural response is to develop a typology of visible, unmistakable traits that identify the dangerous type of person. In medieval times these were called 'witches marks.' In the 1980s, North American scientists sympathetic to anticult movement sometimes develop their own list of "stigmata" that purportedly separate the 'cult members' from more 'normal' persons" (p. 215).

18. A classic example is the autobiography of Christopher Edwards (1979), an ex-Moon disciple. For other popular ex-cultee accounts (see Bromley 1987).

19. Here are some of these organizations listed in the Appendix B of Rhodes' (1994) anticultic book: Christian Research Institute International, Christian Research Institute Canada, Cornerstone Apologetics Research Team, Personal Freedom Outreach, Spiritual Counterfeits Project, Watchman Fellowship, Inc. An interesting organization is the Wellspring Retreat and Resource Center. It is "a residential facility for cult rehabilitation on 400 acres. . . . They provide professional counseling and therapy." Most of these counter-cult institutes focus their researches on New Age cults and occults. Anticultists also have official journals and regular newsletters like the following: *CAN* (Cult Awareness Network) *News* (monthly newsletter), *Cultic Studies Journal* (semiannual journal), *The Cult Observer* (ten issues yearly newsletter), and *Focus News* (quarterly newsletter for former cult members). These are listed in Singer and Lalich's (1995, 365) anticult book.

20. Ironically, the fact is a big number of people who attend the Moonie workshops and seminars do not return again for further indoctrination. Barker (1988) even estimates that as many as 40,000 Moonies voluntarily defected during the 1970s (cited in Wright 1988, 159). Recent survey in Montreal attests to the surprising trend that the drop out rate from new religious and parareligious movements was over 80 percent in this region alone (see Bird 1985, 163). According to conservative estimate the average membership in a cult is less than two years (see Barker 1988). This is also supported by the study of Beckford (1983) on conversion to Moon's cult. According to Beckford membership in such cult only amounts to "serial commitment." And most conversions to these cults are tenuous and tentative, even leaving is deliberately planned (Wright 1988, 153). It must also be noted that members of cults are not an amorphous mass of mesmerized followers. Bird distinguishes between adept followers, who are "expected to discipline their lives, their time, their thoughts, their activities, in order to realize as fully as possible the religious goals of their lives," the regular members, and "individuals who are loosely connected with the groups as students, clients, or affiliates" (pp. 160, 167-68).

21. This model is developed by Wright (1988; 1991). Wright points out that just as there are bad marriages, so are there bad cults. The bad publicity received by cults is not enough to discredit new religions, just as cases of broken families do not discredit the family itself as an institution.

22. Robbins and Anthony (1982, 290-91) have catalogued these positive effects based on empirical findings. They are the following: termination of illicit drug use, renewed vocational motivation, mitigation of neurotic distress, suicide prevention, increase in social responsibility and compassion, clarification of ego identity, and general problem-solving and therapeutic assistance. Researchers also do not find any mental disorder in present and former participants in several cults. However Robbins and Anthony also caution that "Positive therapeutic consequences of involvement with cults are not incompatible with the possibility of serious pathological effects. Nevertheless, the anti-cult publicity presented a one-sided picture of a complex situation" (p. 2941).

23. Irving Goffman (1961) for example (and more recently, Michel Foucault (1978) had analyzed the totalistic character of mental institutions and prisons. And I know only one research which attempts to dissociate convents from these totalistic institutions, that of Hillery (1969). Anticultists however would not like the analogy. For them the institutional organization of US Marine Corps is far better than totalizing cults (see Singer and Lalich 1995, 101-102 for point-by-point comparison).

24. It is interesting to note that most anticultists are psychiatrists and psycholo-

gists (like Singer, Clark, and Galanter) while most "cult apologists" are sociologists (like Robbins, Anthony, Wallis, Richardson, Bromley, and Shupe).

25. The irony of it all is that these cults in fact mediate between the value-orientation of the youths and larger collectivities. They bridge the gap between the decrepit instrumentalist-bureaucratic values of society with the values of counter culture (see Robbins and Anthony 1972). Moreover "many such groups provide a reintegration of affective and instrumental functions into a coherent social unit in a way which the discredited family no longer can. The group which attempts the most radical sectarian solution to their withdrawal from normal worldly involvements—almost explicitly from bureaucratic institutions which have compromised the integrity of the family" (Robbins and Anthony 1981, 79). In reality, mystical-monic religions provide "more effective orientating framework for psychotherapy than does the traditional Protestant ethic" (Robbins, Anthony, Doucas, Curtis 1977, 882).

26. On another occasion, Robbins and Anthony (1982, 240) write, "Parents of cult members are caught between their own allegiance to conventional society and their children's repudiation of it. They are drawn to a style of argumentation identified with the institutions which have appropriated their authority and upon which they feel dependent. By using the medical-psychiatric style of explanation to account for their children's behavior, they hope to enlist the aid of these institutions to which they ceded their authority (e.g., psychiatrists, social scientists and courts) in subduing their children's desertion of the family and their world."

27. It may be noteworthy here that in the study of Wright (1984) about the attitudes of defectors from their former groups, the finding reveals that 67 percent feel "wiser for the experience" and only 9 percent claim they had been brainwashed (cited in Wright 1988, 153). The study of Saul Levine shows that deprogrammers "arrest the very individual autonomy, the selfhood that parents and deprogrammers seek to preserve (cited also in Wright, *ibid.*, 161). Abrupt deconversion only destroys the adolescent's search for degree of maturity. In fact, the success of deprogramming may be attributed not to accidental factors but to the method itself (see Bromley 1988, 200).

28. Studies show also that reactions of ex-cultees to their former cults vary according to their mode of exit. That is, deprogrammed defectors show more negative and hostile reactions to cults than those who voluntarily left the movement (see Wright, *ibid.*). Interestingly enough, deprogrammed defectors exhibit the very psychological characteristics of the passive converts. This prompts Wright to conclude that if we accept the medical model of deviance, "the cure is worse than the disease" (p. 161).

29. But sometimes sociologists can not really be as objective as they may want to be. For instance, Edward J. Moody (1972, 382), who did a participant observation of Satanist cult, The Church of Trapezoid, is not satisfied with only a description of Satanist cult, but even boldly ventures that "marginal religions such as the Church of Trapezoid should be encouraged. They appear in many cases to be revitalizations that spring, in response to a changing world, more directly from the needs of the individuals who comprise their membership."

30. Interestingly enough, according to Stark and Bainbridge (1980) cults who appeal to "well-integrated people" rather than to social isolates are more likely to grow rapidly.

31. There is an upsurge of interest recently on the effects of globalization of the process of religious resurgence worldwide (see for instance Beyer 1994; Robertson and Chirico 1985; Robertson 1989).

32. The analyses of McAndrew, et al. (1987) on cultic phenomenon in the Philippines converge with the Marxist-materialist theory of religion. This research paradigm is absent in almost all sociological studies of cultism in the West. In this paper, I have deliberately avoided including the Marxist analysis of cultism. I hope I can address it in another paper. Nevertheless I have one misgiving against McAndrew, et al.'s use of the label "cult" in their respective articles. They assume quite unproblematically that the term "cult" applies also to indigenous religious revitalizations and local millenarian groups. Perchance the typology of Prospero Covar (1975) of religions organizations in the Philippines is more useful and less Eurocentric.

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