

A LINE ON LIFE

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Cults and Conversion *

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In 1978, some 900 members of Reverend Jim Jones' *People's Temple* picked up paper cups and drank purple Koolaid laced with the deadly poison, cyanide. To most of us, it is difficult to understand why so many people would commit suicide. Psychologically speaking, it is not too hard to understand. Isolated in the jungles of Guyana, intimidated by guards, lulled by sedatives, cut off from friends and relatives, and totally accustomed to obeying rigid rules of conduct, the members of Jones town were primed for Jim Jones' final "*loyalty test*."

What types of people join a cult — or are converted into another religion? How is this conversion achieved? Is there any way that a person can be forewarned that joining a new group may develop into a terrible experience?

Any type of conversion — especially religious conversion — involves a radical reorganization of a person's identity, meaning and life. However, people are ripe for conversion only under certain conditions. What are some of these conditions?

Prior **socialization** is a contributing factor. Socialization is the process of learning the ways of a society — its culture. We all go through it. However, the socialization of a potential convert emphasizes a particular orientation to the world. Potential converts tend to define problems in a certain way. Although most of us have attended some church as young children, the potential convert has learned a strong tendency to define problems in *religious* terms.

Another factor is the **perception of severe personal problems**. These personal problems may be specific (divorce, death of a relative or friend, or an uncontrollable dependency on drugs) or general (a feeling of meaninglessness of life in our contemporary society). All of us have problems, but the potential convert sees these problems as disrupting their personal lives. Their prior socialization has an important bearing on whether they see religion as a possible means for dealing with their problems. If they are not experiencing personal problems, people are poor candidates for conversion regardless of their socialization.

Potential converts also have **few meaningful, positive social ties** with others. Psychological studies indicate that most converts were "*social isolates*" before their conversion. They had few close friends or social ties. If they did have close friends, other studies have indicated that these friends failed to provide adequate support that the potential converts believed they needed. If desired social support is lacking, conversion is more likely to occur.

Then a specific **religious movement must be perceived as a solution** to resolve their problems. There are many different ways to cope with problems — psychiatric care, political action, or drug use, just to name a few. Typically, religious conversion is seen as a likely alternative only after several other strategies have been tried and rejected. When prior socialization leads problem-ridden people to make a connection between the message of a religious group and the particular problems they are experiencing, conversion is very likely to occur.

Conversion is much more than a religious experience.

Lastly, the potential convert needs to develop **positive ties with members** of the religious group. Conversion usually follows a period of intense interaction with members of that religious group. Viewed in this way, conversion is more than a religious experience. It involves entering a new group, which provides rewarding personal and social relationships. In other words, this dramatic change in belief is often part of a much broader psychological and social experience.

In another article, we will discuss how various cults — or any group — can seek out new members. In addition, we will give suggestions about evaluating the new group to see if it is likely to meet your needs without becoming a threat to your well being.

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, 1989, pages 614-615, and Jon M. Shepard's *Sociology*, 1984, pages 510-511, 530-532, both from West Publishing.