

A LINE ON LIFE

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Cautions on Conversion *

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In a previous article, we discussed those qualities that made a person more open to conversion – whether it was to a cult or not. These factors involved:

- Being socialized to see solutions to problems in religious terms.
- Having personal problems that cannot be solved by other means.
- Losing meaningful, positive ties with others.
- Developing positive social ties with members of a religious movement, which offers a solution.

Religious conversion has a strong psychological basis in addition to its religious component. How does a cult – or any group trying to convert new members – successfully accomplish this task? How can the new recruit evaluate the claims of a religious organization to keep from joining the wrong group?

One wrong group was the *People's Temple* of Reverend Jim Jones. In 1978 in Guyana, about 900 members of this group committed mass suicide. Psychologist Margaret Singer has aided and studied hundreds of former cult members. Her interviews revealed that cults make use of a powerful blend of guilt, manipulation, isolation, deception, fear and escalating commitment in recruiting new members. In this respect, cults employ high-pressure indoctrination methods similar to those used in **brainwashing**.

Some of those interviewed by Singer were suffering from marked **psychological distress**, when they joined the cult. However, most were simply undergoing a period of mild depression, indecision, or alienation from family and friends. Cult members try to catch potential converts during a time of need, when a sense of belonging will be especially attractive. For example, many were initially approached just after a romance had broken up, when they were struggling with exams or a choice of college major, or when they simply were at loose ends and "*on the street*."

The conversion often begins with intense displays of affection and understanding – sometimes called "**love bombing**." The group offers social ties that seem to be unavailable at home, church, school or work. In some cults, recruits may be given new identities to set them apart from their former existence. (Entertainer Steve Allen's son, Brian, joined a group and was "*reborn*" under the name, "*Logic Israel*.")

Next comes **isolation from non-cult members**, along with drills and rituals to wear down physical and emotional resistance and to generate commitment. For instance, this may include all-night meditation or continuous chanting. In contrast to rational arguments and deliberation, cults tend to emphasize immediate experience and emotional gratification. Essentially, converts tend to "*experience*" religion rather than thinking about it.

Initially, recruits make only small **commitments to the group** – to stay at a meeting, for example. Then larger commitments are encouraged – staying an extra day, calling in sick at work, and so on. The final step involves making a major commitment, like signing over a bank account and personal property to the group. Financially, this makes the convert completely dependent on the group. To add to this, such a commitment makes it virtually impossible for converts to admit they have made a mistake.

Through a **firm authority structure** and a clear, simple set of beliefs and rules, the group offers the convert something to believe. Essentially, converts are exchanging uncertainty, doubt and confusion for trust and assurance. Converts seem to hunger for anything that will make their choices fewer and less difficult. Some of them are left with no choices at all. In reality, converts trade independence for security.

Once in the group, members are **cut off from family and friends**. In this way, cults control the information that converts receive. Members are cut off physically (by continuous activity) and psychologically from their former value system and social support.

There are warning signs to avoid joining a dangerous group.

If you are currently considering joining a new religious group, you need to accurately evaluate the claims made by that group. For your own protection, before you commit yourself to any new religious movement, answer the questions below.

- Does the group demand that you stop thinking critically and evaluating rationally?
- Does the group require – directly or by suggestion – that you cut yourself off from family and friends?
- Is intensive, hours-long psychological conditioning – or even physical punishment – a part of the program?
- Does the group want you to sign over all (or a major portion) of your worldly goods as a sign of your commitment?
- Does your group claim to have special knowledge that can only be revealed to insiders?

If you answered any one of the questions, "Yes," then you stand a chance of getting "hooked" into a potentially dangerous situation. If you answered several of these questions, "Yes," your chances of being hooked increase greatly. **Watch out!**

* 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.