

This paper compares deprogramming with exorcism, thought reform, and resocialization, and offers insight into how members of the anticult movement justify their own involvement in "coercive conversion." It serves as a fitting, if ironic, close to this issue on conversion and commitment in contemporary religion.

Deprogramming

The New Exorcism

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The mid-to-recent 1970s have witnessed a growing wave of sympathy among the courts and legislators for the apprehension, detention, and involuntary resocialization ("deprogramming") of persons belonging to such marginal religions as Hare Krishna, the Children of God, and Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. The justification for such actions rests on the beliefs of many that these groups are gaining converts through a manipulative process of stressful conversion popularly known as "brainwashing"—hence, the converts do not act of their own free will or voluntary commitment. Under "temporary conservatorship" laws, designed for emergency situations when their irresponsibility might prove irreparably self-injurious, adults may be declared legally incompetent and forcibly held, with the approval of their "guardians," until the presumed effects of the given sect's or cult's influence are undone (i.e., until they recant their new

Authors' Note: *The authors wish to thank David Bromley, Joseph Ventimiglia, and Frank Weed for constructive criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper.*

AMERICAN BEHAVIORAL SCIENTIST, Vol. 20 No. 6, July/August 1977
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faith). In the meantime, the rights of the alleged "incompetent" to be legally represented and to contest this status in court can be suspended. Recently a tax-exempt organization called The Freedom of Thought Foundation, complete with "rehabilitation" ranch in Arizona, was established to conduct conservatorship-protected deprogrammings (Montagno, 1977).

The advent of this application of conservatorship laws has obvious societal implications for the freedom of religion. The state's willingness (with psychiatric cooperation) to consider attempts to distinguish "legitimate" religions from "illegitimate" ones¹ has been interpreted by some (Robbins, 1977; Knickerbocker, 1977) as a serious threat to civil liberties. The legitimacy of the process termed deprogramming (i.e., involuntary resocialization of cult members), directly or indirectly, has been associated with this controversy. The purpose of this paper is to report on those organizations currently advocating deprogramming and to examine their justifications for such reconversion. In doing so, we compare the phenomena of commitment to marginal religions and the deprogramming of persons so committed to demonic possession and exorcism, respectively. The latter are not intended as merely superficial analogies. Rather, the discernible similarity of assumptions and techniques may put current issues in a more relativist perspective. While a similar analogy to demonology has been suggested previously (Bauer, 1957) for communist thought control and indoctrination, the analogy has not yet been explored for marginal religious commitment and backlash.

METHODS

Data to support the generalizations asserted here have been gathered from a variety of sources. Since fall 1976, we have been involved in an ongoing investigation of the emerging anticult movement in North America (see Shupe, Spielmann, and Stigall, 1977) and have been in contact with national leaders of this movement.² Much of our information has derived from direct face-to-face or repeated telephone interviews with various groups' leaders as well as from the published literature of anticult groups, from mail-out questionnaires to their spokespersons,

and, in one case,³ from participant-observation of a national organization's headquarters. In addition, popular accounts of deprogramming (e.g., see Patrick and Dulack, 1976; Crittenden, 1976; Rasmussen, 1976) and interviews with eye-witnesses of deprogramming have been utilized.

In order to provide a background for discussing the deprogramming phenomenon, it may be useful to describe briefly the composition of anticult organizations (for a more extensive description, see Shupe, Spielmann, and Stigall, 1977). Most groups possess a fairly loose and informal structure, working with small budgets based on voluntary contributions. Their memberships can be typed into several general categories.

The largest category is made up of relatives and friends of persons who have joined marginal religious cults. The relatives are often parents, but may also include spouses. Their motives initially are twofold: first, to locate a particular cult member, and second, to persuade the member to leave the religious group. If the relatives are insistent, and if the member refuses to leave (or has previously refused), the next step may be to abduct the member against his or her will. Since many families perceive these marginal religions as exploitive and harmful, pursuit of the member (and the often mobile group) takes on a moral imperative. Conversely, the religious groups appear to appreciate the threat of this dogged determinism and serve to intensify the families' efforts by hiding, disguising, and isolating members.⁴ While the return of a family member may signal the end of anticult involvement for some families, other families remain active in the movement. In many cases, a "functional autonomy" of involvement develops. The prolonged trauma of "losing" a family member, the efforts to "regain" that person, and the frequent adaptation of family lifestyle patterns to time-consuming anticult activities mean that anticultism becomes a powerful commitment not easily extinguished. This commitment may sustain continued involvement of the family long after a particular member has been recovered.⁵

The second category is made up of ex-cultists, including those who simply became disillusioned and those who themselves have undergone deprogramming. The latter type of ex-cultist is

particularly apt to become an activist spokesperson due to the explicit negative reinterpretations of cult experiences gained during deprogramming. In addition, the emotional trauma surrounding the deprogramming experience and subsequent "return" to families appears to provide the foundation for strong personal commitment to anticult activists.

The third category consists of sympathetic sideliners whose involvement is typically more professional and less emotional. Such persons include psychiatrists, physicians, social workers, journalists, and sometimes social scientists. It may be that their services were at some time requested or that they gradually acquired a personal interest in marginal religions (e.g., Merritt, 1975). Occasionally they may have a professional or scientific interest in some aspect of cults (e.g., Clark, 1976). Though small in number, this type of member provides an extremely important legitimization function for the anticult movement. Such a person lends scientific credence to claims of "brainwashing" and "psychological enslavement," reinforcing the suspicions and fears of families. Such scientific legitimacy is an important component of the deprogramming rationale.

THE DEPROGRAMMING RATIONALE

The logic of deprogramming assumes the following: (1) that a person has experienced, through deception, hypnosis/drugs, or a lowering of normally resistant rationality by special techniques of deprivation, conversion to a new religious creed; (2) that after this conversion, the person is psychologically "enslaved" and is unable to act independently of a manipulator's directives; and (3) that a process reversal, or deprogramming of the "programmed" victim, is necessary to restore free will and rational choice. Since these faculties are fundamental elements of the American values of individual pursuit of happiness and personal growth, deprogramming takes on not only presumed therapeutic, but also moral, legitimacy.

Technically, however, anticultists do not regard the new religious commitment to marginal religious beliefs as the result of "true" conversion. Rather, due to the manipulative circumstances of the change in commitment, it represents a "pseudo-

conversion.” Explicitly rejecting the notion that deprogramming is resocialization (i.e., substituting one set of beliefs for another), West (1975: 1) reiterates this theme: “most of the cults whose members are subject to deprogramming were actually brainwashed rather than converted in the first place.” Similarly, Merritt (1975: 3) states: “I strongly believe that the members are not exerting their own free will. Their free will has been given up to the whims of their leaders by the isolation, lack of sleep, sexual acts, poor eating and the sophistication of the psychological manipulations of the leaders. . . . The only comparisons that can be made with these groups, to help explain them, is to that of the Hitler Youth and the techniques used by the Chinese during what they call ‘re-education.’” Cult methods of recruitment and indoctrination, it is claimed, utilize methods similar to those employed by communist thought reformers on Korean and Vietnam prisoners of war. The gradual whittling away of critical thought processes is accomplished through persistent challenges to conventional religious beliefs that begin at an imperceptibly subtle level but which increase until the *naive* person is emotionally entrapped. This fact, coupled with strategically arranged fatigue, poor nutrition, little time for adequate reflection, and repetition of mesmerizing sounds or terms, disqualifies cult indoctrination from being resocialization.⁶ In West’s (1975: 2) words, cult “pseudo-conversion” involves “unthinking participation in group activities, a schedule designed to deprive followers of sleep, and a technique for short-circuiting reason through a conditioned reflex which is reinforced by group interaction.”⁷

Because cult membership is believed to involve only “pseudo-conversion,” anticultists maintain that the freedom of religious worship is not a relevant issue. Freedom of religion, as they interpret it, means the freedom to rationally and freely select the religion of one’s preference. The conditions of “pseudo-conversion” therefore dissociate deprogramming from First Amendment considerations. In this way, anticultists perceive the apparent religious commitment of converts to marginal religious as actually representing “mind suppression,” “psychological kidnapping,” and “mental manipulation.”

In addition, many anticult leaders seem conversant with the psychological literature on brainwashing published shortly after

the Korean War (such as Lifton, 1963, 1957; Hunter, 1962, 1953; Sargent, 1957; Meerloo, 1956) and are aware of research on the effects of sensory-nutritional deprivation on suggestibility (see Biderman and Zimmer, 1961). They often point to the similarities between indoctrination/interrogation techniques of communist nations and the high pressure conditions of proselytization in cults such as the Children of God and the Unification Church.

Sympathetic professionals in the movement have offered evidence, however limited, that corroborates the "pseudo-conversion" perspective. For example, Clark (1976: 2-3), a psychiatrist, found that 15 of 27 cult members whom he examined (no details on the examination were provided) were either chronically schizophrenic or borderline personalities who sought conversion as "restitutive" or compensatory coping strategies. Clark distinguished between the "original" and the "imposed" personalities of cult members, the former being the normal product of socialization and maturation, the latter their temporary thought/behavior patterns established under cult influence. Deprogramming, Clark testified to a special investigating committee of the Vermont legislature (currently deliberating legislation to curtail cults), is thus a restoration process, an act (in his words) "of repersonalization."

By such arguments, anticultists justify the forced detention and deprogramming of cult members. Since cult members have surrendered their critical reasoning powers to others, there is little hope that they will drop out of their own conscious volition.⁸ Literally, they are *possessed*, i.e., under the control of a separate personality or force that suppresses their own individual dispositions and uses them for purposes that they would normally not accept. Irrespective of the particular theory of demonology that may derive from a given theology, this phenomenology of attributed possession is not radically different from similar instances gleaned from the history of Christianity and other religions (see Keller, 1974; Robbins, 1974; Toner, 1974; Starkey, 1961). Other characteristics of the possessed, such as general physical debilitation, can be found in both historical and current cases.

DEPROGRAMMING AS EXORCISM

Thus far we have argued for the analogy between demonic possession and the brainwashing of cult members alleged by anticultists. In both cases, the victim is presumed beyond responsibility for his or her actions; when the influence of a third person or force is removed, the original personality and independent volition will be restored.

Nor is the analogy between deprogramming and exorcism a specious one. As support, we offer five characteristics of the exorcism rite that closely parallel deprogramming: purpose, characteristics of the exorcists/deprogrammers, duration, violence involved, and alternating threats and appeals.

PURPOSE

Exorcism can be defined as:

the act of driving, or warding off, demons or evil spirits, from persons, places or things, which are, or are believed to be, possessed or infested by them, or are liable to become victims or instruments of their malice. [Toner, 1974: 31]

In more contemporary jargon, West (1975: 2) claims:

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 phenomena.

In psychiatric terms, both processes attempt to restore normal ego-functioning. The emphasis in both is not on resocialization, but rather on the "liberation" of the possessed person. When possession is removed, the former "acceptable" personality will be free to manifest itself. In this sense, the deprogrammer is no more trying to convert the cult member than is the priest attempting, through the litany of the exorcism rite, to reconvert the person possessed by a demon. The priest addresses the demon,

the deprogrammer (indirectly) challenges the influence of the cult.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EXORCISTS/DEPROGRAMMERS

The qualifications of exorcists in early Christianity resemble those of deprogrammers in the emerging American anticult movement.

In early Christianity, nonclerics and nonordained Christians could cast out demons in the name of the Holy Spirit. Only later, in the second and the third centuries, did exorcists become a specialty within the church hierarchy. Later, exorcism became a professional prerogative of those who had taken holy orders. Similarly, the first deprogrammer, Ted Patrick, had no special qualifications in psychology or psychiatry. The initial deprogrammings were essentially unstructured ad hoc affairs, without legal protection or more than a sense of urgency to guide the procedures.

More important, often those who have conducted or participated in exorcisms/deprogrammings have themselves experienced the respective "liberating" processes. Robbins (1974: 201) notes that during medieval outbreaks of demonic possession, exorcists tended to originate in the ranks of the previously possessed and exorcised. He quotes from the early eighteenth-century treatise, *L'Histoire des Diables de Loudun*: "exorcists almost all participate, more or less, in the effects of the demons, by vexations which they suffer from them, and few persons have undertaken to drive them forth who have not been troubled by them." Similarly, our informants in the anticult movement report that the most successful and enthusiastic deprogrammers are ex-cultists who have recently been deprogrammed. Better than others, they can empathize with the conflict experienced by cult members during the deprogramming. Part of their fervor may result from a wish for revenge against the cult. Their familiarity with cult doctrines may also aid the deprogrammer's attack on the given cult's claim to legitimacy, its inconsistencies, and so forth.

DURATION

Toner (1974: 4) mentions that in the case of a tenacious possession, repeated performance of the exorcism rite is sometimes necessary. Robbins (1974: 209) also comments that exorcism can prove a time-consuming ordeal.

Similarly, deprogramming is rarely accomplished without some lengthy effort for both cult member and deprogrammer(s). For example, Rasmussen (1976: 112) reports from his informants that the process often requires several days. Crittenden's (1976: 100) account of Ann Gordon's deprogramming mentions a third, and possibly fourth, day involved in her sessions at the hands of Ted Patrick. When one of our informants had his own daughter deprogrammed, he was relieved that it only required 12 hours.

The length of time involved in deprogramming is a function of this reconversion process' basic technique: argument. The efficacy of deprogramming rests in the deprogrammer debating inconsistencies in cult doctrines and behavior with the cult member, convincing the latter that they were deceived by cult leaders and had lost their "sense of reality" through exclusive exposure to cult perspectives. This sort of exchange, aided by the physical and psychic strains on cult members, can only occur if they are induced to participate by responding to challenges. If responses of silence (or, in cases such as Hare Krishna, with other techniques to frustrate deprogrammers, such as chanting) are met with by deprogrammers, further attempts to induce debate may be made. Violence, as illustrated in the following section, has at times been one such tactic.

VIOLENCE INVOLVED

Aside from the struggles of the demon to remain in possession of his victim, and the accompanying physical manifestations of this in the latter's body (sensationally depicted in the recent movie, *The Exorcist*), Robbins (1974: 215) mentions that flagellation of the possessed in medieval times was a common practice. Its purpose was "more to scorn the devil than afflict the demoniac." Restraint of the possessed, cruel by modern standards, was also common.

Similarly, verbal abuse targeted at the cult believer, his beliefs, and cult leaders is a fundamental tactic of deprogramming (see Rasmussen, 1976: 113). By relentless scatological discrediting of the cult, its awe and sanctity may be weakened. In addition, there are indications of physical, rather than just verbal, violence in deprogramming. The following is part of a transcript taken verbatim from a recorded interview with an anticult leader:

Leader: It's [deprogramming] a bad thing to go through, because when it's your own child it nearly kills you. You think they're going to ruin your child. They [the child] may commit suicide or you don't know what. It's a horrible thing.

Interviewer: Are the parents usually there at the deprogramming?

Leader: They ought to be. If they're not, it gets out of hand . . . it becomes physical. You're encouraged to be there. I always urge people, if they're going to have a deprogramming, to be there. In the beginning they did it physically. They'd pick a guy up and throw him down if he wouldn't talk. [They'd say] 'You answer! You talk, damn you! You say something!' It was like a gang. They might slap him. It was the only way they knew . . . but it was very successful. That's all changed, but you still have too much physical abuse. Particularly when you have somebody who doesn't know or understand what they're doing, somebody who has just come out, full of hate for the cult and knowing they have to save the kid by making him forcefully listen. You have to force somebody to listen.

ALTERNATING THREATS AND APPEALS

According to Robbins (1974: 209ff.), alternating prayers and threats or exorcisms can produce a powerful psychological effect on the possessed person. An inspection of his abstract of the *Rituale Romanum*, a seventeenth-century rite of exorcism reprinted in 1947 by the New York Catholic diocese, shows three identical threat/appeal sequences. Each sequence is composed of a psalm reading, a prayer to God for divine aid during the rite, a Gospel Reading, another prayer, then the exorcism (a venomous disparagement of the possessing demon, including abusive name-calling, threats, and commandments to leave), followed finally by a prayer. After this sequence had been

performed three times, the rite could be administered again as many times as necessary.

Bible-reading, particularly of sections from the New Testament that refer to false messiahs, such as the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew, is an integral part of many deprogrammings. This contrasts with the violence already described. Patrick rarely went into a session without his Bible (Patrick and Dulack, 1976), and West (1975: 3) advocates readings of the scriptures interspersed through the process.

DEPROGRAMMING AS RESOCIALIZATION

The implicit reasoning involved in denying cult believers belief legitimacy seems to reduce to the following: (1) my (son, daughter, family member) has embraced a "strange" religion; (2) only inherently "strange" people would be voluntarily attracted to such a religion; (3) my (son, daughter, family member) is obviously not an inherently "strange" person; (4) hence, he or she must have been hoodwinked or brainwashed into participating. The "seduction premise," as Toch (1965: 226) calls it, is a familiar one in the rationales for persecution of social movements.⁹ Through its logic, anticultists can deny that deprogramming represents counterbrainwashing or any violation of civil rights to freely select one's religion.

What, then, is deprogramming? The definition of resocialization offered by Kennedy and Kerber (1973: 39) could easily serve for deprogramming:

Resocialization is that process wherein an individual, defined as inadequate according to the norms of a dominant institution(s), is subjected to a dynamic program of behavior intervention aimed at instilling and/or rejuvenating those values, attitudes, and abilities which would allow him to function according to the norms of said dominant institution(s).

Moreover, whatever its stated rationale, deprogramming bears a close resemblance to accounts of brainwashing, or radical resocialization. Richardson, Harder, and Simmonds

(1972) applied an 11-step model of brainwashing developed by Lifton (1963, 1957) to the "thought reform" of the Jesus movement and found, despite points of inadequacy, overall resemblance. This model involved, first, a "stripping process" designed to confuse the individual's assumptions of reality and identity with a reference group; second, a rechanneling of identification that leads the person to a new integration with a new (or former) reference group by way of a confession of past "errors"; and, finally, an ultimate "rebirth" of the self-concept safely ensconced within the approved limits of the new referents.¹⁰ One crucial difference between Lifton's model and the conversion processes of marginal religions is the coercion factor. While there are few if any reported instances (not based on deprogrammed reiteration) of marginal religions gaining adherents by abducting and forcibly restraining them during proselytization, such coercion runs rampant throughout accounts of deprogramming. Based on current sociological understanding of the religious conversion process, the tendency of the probable convert to seek a religious solution to his or her problems is an essential predisposing factor (Lofland and Stark, 1965). This seems likely in the case of conversions to marginal religions. Nobody, however, ever claimed for the deprogrammees a predisposition to become deprogrammed.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Possession and exorcism, rather than representing historically curious but extinct phenomena, are still with us. As two specific forms of more generic reactions to religious deviance, they are now labeled "psychological enslavement" and "deprogramming." In the 1970s, the rationale undergirding this pair of concepts has permitted families and friends of cult members to disenfranchise the legitimacy of the latter's religious commitment. This, in turn, may have significant implications for the future of religious freedom in this country. Meanwhile, it is ironic that while modern anticultists perceive commitment to cults' doctrines as the result of brainwashing, their own attempts to restore their loved ones to "normality" closely resemble the very phenomena they profess to despise.

A number of issues here, such as science's willingness to help define religious "legitimacy" from "illegitimacy," have been given only cursory attention and deserve further study. In particular, the historical definition of evil, and how to deal with it, requires development and integration into deviance theory. It is safe to make one generalization, however: Lifton's religious "totalism" (1963: 419), particularly those elements which he refers to as excessive conviction, is not the preserve of the religiously marginal.

NOTES

1. During the same month, 43 congressmen and one senator petitioned the new U.S. Attorney General, Griffin Bell, to investigate charges of "brainwashing," "mind control," and "mental manipulation" brought against certain religious groups (Conlan, 1977). The Justice Department demurred on the grounds that no clear violation of federal law, such as kidnapping or slavery, was demonstrated.

2. Since the anticult movement is in a current state of flux, with local ad hoc groups arising (some of which affiliate with the organizations listed below or become independent bodies) and others merging or dissolving, it is virtually impossible to present an exhaustive list of all such groups. However, it may be confidently stated that the following sample represents the more established and ideologically typical anticult organizations: The Citizens' Freedom Foundation (CFF); Return to Personal Choice, Inc.; The Spiritual Counterfeits Project (recently merged with the Berkeley Christian Coalition); Love Our Children, Inc.; Committee of the Third Day; Citizens Engaged in Reuniting Families, Inc. (CERF); The Individual Freedom Foundation (IFF); Citizens Organized for Public Awareness of Cults; Free Minds, Inc.; The International Foundation for Individual Freedom (IFIF); and the National Ad Hoc Committee Engaged in Freeing Minds (CEFM). Until recently, the last organization was the interim national coordinating committee for all groups. However, on March 1, 1977, these groups formed a coalition called the International Foundation for Individual Freedom (*not* the IFIF listed above). Its purposes are to raise funds, to disseminate information on cults to families and to the media, to lobby for anticult legislation, and to perform more effectively those functions with which local and national groups had been previously burdened.

3. The National Ad Hoc Committee Engaged in Freeing Minds (CEFM), located in Grand Prairie, Texas. See Shupe, Spielmann, and Stigall (1977) for a more detailed description of its purposes, operations, and functions.

4. For example, The Children of God have been accused of screening mail, deliberately deploying members to the opposite end of the country (or even abroad) away from their families, and maintaining nomadic evasion patterns, all to discourage family contacts (State of New York, 1975). Similar claims have been made against Hare Krishna and the Unification Church.

5. In one related study (Shupe et al., 1977), it was found that persons who possessed higher occupational prestige (physicians, university professors, and similar professionals) or material resources tended to predominate in *initial* anticult reactions directed toward such groups as Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. This suggests that socioeconomic

status may be an important discriminator of families or individuals who remain active in the anticult movement after the initial goals of participation have been accomplished.

6. We encountered occasional allegations from anticultists concerning the use of drugs and latent or overt sexuality in cult membership recruitment.

7. It is not our purpose to dispute these claims, though there is mixed evidence as to whether the indoctrination methods used by marginal religious groups resemble the Korean War-style brainwashing. Journalistic accounts of the conversion process operating among many Unification Church missionary units (Rice, 1976; Rasmussen, 1976) indicate a gradual process of closure among religiously predisposed persons, rather than any sudden mind-numbing operation (for the importance of this predispositional factor, see Lofland and Stark, 1965). However, Richardson, Harder, and Simmonds (1972) applied an 11-step model of "thought reform" by Lifton (1963, 1957) to the Jesus movement when it possessed marginal status and found some similarities.

8. This view contrasts with evidence that such cults do in fact witness defections of conscious, disgruntled members. Of the dwindling membership base of the Unification Church, for example, Welles (1976: 38) states: "The church is now constantly losing members. While the arduous deprogramming often necessary to wrest devout Moon converts from the Divine Principle has gotten much publicity, many Moonies simply walk away from the church because they are worn out by the Spartan routine and frustrated and dispirited by the church's obsession with private gain instead of public betterment." The possession hypothesis was also contradicted, at least implicitly, in one of our interviews with the leader of a national-level anticult committee, when he admitted that there was likely some self-selection in the angry ex-cultists with whom he came in contact.

9. Toch (1965: 224) cites a similar instance of defining away a religion's legitimacy qua religion: "King Hussan II of Morocco . . . was questioned during a recent visit to New York about the impending execution in his country of three leaders of the Bahai sect, a social movement which preaches brotherhood and rationality. His Majesty responded that 'Islam was the state religion of Morocco but that there was freedom to all, to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. "*Bahai is not a religion, rather something that attacks public order.*" ' ' See also Wallis (1975).

10. While it is not our intention to detail the social psychological processes occurring in this reconversion, readers will doubtlessly anticipate a number of alternative attitude change processes operating. For example, the cognitive dissonance perspective (Festinger, 1957) would emphasize the incongruous cognitions between relatives' positive self-images and the facts of their kin's cultic activities (as extensions of themselves), which lead to a redefinition of the marginal religious commitment's legitimacy. Attribution theory (Shaver, 1975; Bem, 1967a, 1967b, 1966) would focus on the deprogrammer's attempt to place the locus of marginal religious commitment on the manipulative external agencies, absolving the deprogramme of responsibility for cult participation and facilitating reintegration into conventional society. In addition, Garfinkel's (1973) description of "degradation ceremonies" could also be applied to deprogrammers' attempts to disparage the cult status and replace it with one more acceptable to conventional society.

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