

American Family Foundation

Cultic Studies Journal

Psychological Manipulation and Society

Volume 17
2000

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The Relation of Group Philosophy to Different Types of Dangerous Conduct in Cultic Groups

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Abstract

Though dangerous behavior is not always present in cultic experiences, its occurrence remains a current social concern. In order to better understand the circumstances that may lead to the occurrence of dangerous behavior, a theoretical model is proposed that establishes a link between the types of philosophy implicitly or explicitly shared by members of different cultic groups and the types of dangerous behavior that can be experienced in such communities. Four types of group philosophical functioning are described at length as they apply to seven basic components of group life: leadership, membership, children, doctrine, rituals, spatial organization, and social organization. Following this presentation, a discussion of the specific types of dangerous behavior potentially present in each type of group is discussed.

For the general public as well as for social scientists, there are enough examples of extreme behavior in sectarian groups to warrant the study of the risks associated with being a member of such groups. Whether one thinks of forced group suicide, as in Jonestown and Uganda, or of child sexual and physical abuse as occurred in some groups affiliated with Krishna consciousness and in Catholic and Protestant boarding schools during the last century, such disturbing phenomena beg the attention of scholars.

Although the study of these excesses demands objectivity, a good dose of humility, and, all too often, some courage, it is nevertheless gratifying to think that research can help protect society's more vulnerable members. Also, unbiased research can contribute significantly to reducing the risk that marginal spiritual experiences will be the target of inappropriate social discrimination. In light of this backdrop, the aims of the present paper are twofold: firstly, to describe four specific types of group philosophical functioning, and secondly, to relate these philosophies to certain types of dangerous behavior that occur in some cultic groups.

By philosophy, I am referring to an implicit, and often explicit, way of viewing life, of representing one's actions and conduct, and of interpreting the conduct of others. Philosophy in this sense is akin to definition number 5 of Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary (1989): "a system of principles for guidance in practical affairs" (p.1082). Thus, the philosophy of a group is seen as having a most important effect on many aspects of group members' daily lives. The internal politics of a group, the manner in which children are treated, or the way in which the group interacts with the outside world, for instance, are determined in a large part by shared group philosophy.

In the first part of this article, four types of philosophical functioning are described at length as they apply to seven elements of paramount importance in everyday life. I choose to present each philosophy through these seven elements in order to illustrate the ubiquitous quality of a shared philosophy of life. Indeed, group philosophy is seen as exerting a determining effect on: types of leadership, types of membership a particular group will favor, how children will be treated, the role rituals will play in the group, the way the doctrine will evolve, and the types of spatial and social organization that will develop. Although the conduct of members who share in any one of these philosophies can very well

stay within the limits of the law, each philosophy possesses inherent risks of leading to certain types of excessive behavior. In the second part of this paper, a discussion of the types of risks associated with each of the four philosophies will thus be presented.

Philosophy of Separation

A philosophy of separation can be best defined by three simple words: *Us and them*. Accordingly, a constant demarcation, or division, is sought in order to set members of the group apart from others. Thus, the term "separation" refers to: "the act, state or an instance of separating or the state of being separated (*Webster's*, p.1301).

Groups that adhere to a philosophy of separation usually seek to encourage orthodoxy whatever the doctrine or belief system. Even if group leaders make doctrinal changes, it is expected that members will adhere immediately to these changes without questioning their relevance or showing discomfort. Such obedience to orthodoxy serves to maintain the group's cohesion, so the split between *us and them* is always clear-cut. Being able to know what is *in* and what is *out* is thus a way of distinguishing outsiders from insiders. Being up-to-date on subtleties of doctrine, discourse, or ritual can give individual members a feeling of being closer to their leaders and the opportunity to express stronger faith than their co-believers. Thus, in a group supported by a philosophy of separation, everything that can be used to differentiate the *us* from the *them* is of great value.

Indeed, the feeling of strength and of righteousness that is felt by being one of us is not only used to distinguish between members and non-members. Often, the us-and-them distinction finds a natural extension inside the community as well. An internal segregation among those members who show signs of greater orthodoxy or closer ties to the political leadership is common. These distinctions can rigidify into cast-like subgroups, which are often related to tasks accomplished or functions held, with prestigious tasks making those who hold them appear to be better members than those occupying low-prestige positions. Hence, when a philosophy of separation is active, splits occur at every level of functioning.

The constant us/them categorization makes members wary of strict obedience to doctrine, rituals, and discourse. They come to feel that such strict obedience is essential to be categorized as *us*. Thus, the use of many buzz words, details of dress, and manner are likely to become overvalued by members who hope to "make the cut" so as not to be viewed as *them*. By putting so much emphasis on orthodoxy and normative ways, such groups tend to believe that others cannot understand their lifestyle. Different forms of secrecy may further separate members from non-members, while helping further to differentiate members hierarchically. Some very orthodox or traditionalist sub-groups of established churches illustrate well this type of philosophical functioning.

Leadership

Leadership is most often exercised by a small elite. These prestigious few act as social control agents assuring that members respect the reigning orthodoxy. Since groups that adhere to a philosophy of separation so greatly value the distinction between *us* and *them*, members are often grateful that they can look to the elite for guidance. Group cohesion is thus assured through obedience to leaders seen as being wise enough to determine what is right and what is wrong or, more precisely, what is expected of *us* and *them*. Even if power can be exercised in an authoritarian manner or in a more subtle form of persuasion, attention to the smallest deviation is a constant preoccupation of the leaders. Moreover, a subtle hierarchy among the elite often results in one or two members becoming the bearers of moral authority over their colleagues.

Membership

One of the major tasks of members is to ensure group cohesion by maintaining the constant separation between *us* and *them*. Often, this will lead members to see themselves as soldiers who share a common and constant task—keeping all signs of *them* at bay. Bonding among members is hence achieved through a shared determination to keep *us* well differentiated from *them*. Although members bear the common responsibility for maintaining cohesion through orthodoxy, much can separate them one from another. Since a complex, and mostly unofficial, power structure often exists in such groups, many members feel jealousy and envy toward the elite as well as toward those who appear especially close to the leaders. Because social status within a philosophy of separation group is gained by proximity to the leaders, being close to them or to their entourage is greatly valued. Such proximity is often sought by adhering in the strictest fashion to all written and unwritten rules.

All members continuously judge who is acting in an orthodox fashion (*us*) and who isn't (*them*), and even though final judgement is passed by the elite, every member feels vulnerable to peer judgment. Hence, all members are expected to maintain group cohesion by continuously screening out *us* conduct from *them* conduct in themselves, their children, their families, their neighbors, and their friends. This continuous vigilance, however, engenders a great deal of jealousy, envy, and feelings of injustice for a group that paradoxically places such importance on being united. Consequently, conflicts between individuals are judged harshly. But since members are expected to be constantly preoccupied with making sure that no one appears to be acting like *them*, the way is paved for much hidden conflict and feelings of guilt.

Children

Children are often prized in philosophy of separation groups as important conservators of tradition. In groups that do not recruit new members, children are seen as the main means of transmitting the faith. Procreation is hence highly valued, so women's role, destiny, and prestige are most often limited to their child bearing and rearing capacities. But since orthodoxy is also highly valued, being a child in such a group can be quite demanding. Childlike behavior and immaturity, especially if it makes one akin to *them*, is unacceptable. Children who deviate, even slightly in some groups, are not only shamed publicly by being compared to *them*, but may also suffer harsh physical punishment. Strong social pressure is thus put on children to behave in strictly prescribed ways. Shame is often used as a disciplinary tool, and scolding a child for not being a proper representative of the group, one of *us*, is quite common. Unfortunately, the social pressure toward conformity may cause some children to be physically abused, according to the standards of most children's aid agencies, although, according to the group's norms, such discipline is justified.

In addition, since children are seen as the group's future, they are expected to become very knowledgeable about doctrine. This may lead in some communities to a highly charged curriculum in cult specific knowledge at the expense of education in other subjects. In some communities, grown children may then have little choice but to stay in the community, for they lack the skills and basic knowledge necessary to function outside the group. Even if some of these children may be scholarly in their knowledge of the group's belief system, rules, rituals, and tradition, they may be functionally illiterate.

Rituals

Rituals are used to evaluate members' faith and orthodoxy in philosophy of separation groups. As the group's cohesion is sought by demarcating rigorously those who are with *us* from those who act as *them*, rituals play an important role because they offer a good vantage point from which to judge conformity. Thus, rituals become a means of social

control. No member can refuse to practice a ritual, nor even change the slightest aspect of participation. Often the slightest deviance singles out the offending member, who may in some circumstances be judged heretic and even expelled from the group. This stigmatizing situation is usually a personal crisis for individuals who value being part of a cohesive group above all. During such inner crises strict observance of rituals becomes crucial to maintaining not only the group's unity but also each member's social identity.

Doctrine

Absolute fidelity to doctrine represents the most fundamental virtue in these groups because it marks the difference between *us* and *them*. Often the wording of sacred texts exemplifies the dichotomy between *us* and *them*. Since these groups fear any loosening of this categorization, they show a strong tendency towards conservatism and usually shun evolution of doctrinal matters. Scholars in doctrinal knowledge are thus expected to maintain doctrine unchanged, neither introducing modifications of rituals, nor proposing new interpretations of sacred texts or holy books. Hence, keeping group beliefs and traditions intact, unaltered, and timeless is emphasized. When however, some doctrinal change is made, the whole group is expected to adhere to the new elements of doctrine as if no novelty existed.

Spatial Organization

Members of groups that share a philosophy of separation may tolerate geographical promiscuity with non-members, often living in urban settings or close to small towns in rural environments, for example. Although social immersion is not the rule, minimal contact with non-members is accepted. This social promiscuity is tolerated because the separation between *us* and *them* is guaranteed in everyday life through the many overt signs of group identity. To the group members, these overt signs are interpreted as identifying an *us* as contrasted to the *them* of the environment. The corollary is that the citizens of the shared social environment are also likely to refer to the cult members as *them*. The group welcomes such an occurrence because it signifies that their efforts to distinguish themselves are effective. Indeed, it can be said that such groups thrive on discrimination.

Social Organization

The power structure is usually shared by a small group of elite members who exercise their power a bit in the manner of an executive committee. Nonetheless, a vertical structure in which power rests in the hands of a sole individual, who commands moral leadership and often dominates his co-leaders, is usually simultaneously present. However, although enjoying the highest prestige and exercising the most power, such a leader is not permitted to reign in an absolute manner.

Many other members, while not belonging to the elite, may hold positions of high responsibility. Political struggles are consequently an omnipresent reality of the social organization in these groups. Conflicts surrounding power issues may erupt between members, leading to major crises within the group. Internal scapegoating is often resorted to in the context of such power struggles. When this happens, individual members are often identified as the unorthodox, or heretical ones responsible for the crisis. Such social stigmatization reduces that person's importance within the group and all but stops his chances of ever being recognized as a valuable member. In certain groups and circumstances, such stigmatization can lead to expulsion of the offending member. This is often felt as the equivalent of a psychological death penalty. Members close to the "offender" through family ties or friendship are also quite often the objects of social stigmatization.

A strong patriarchal social organization is the norm in many of these groups. Males are identified as the strongest gender, and a strict discrimination between the roles and

responsibilities of men and women is often the rule. Men exercise power within the group; women are relegated to subservient roles or confined to the family. As a means of gaining prestige or power weddings can be arranged. For instance, marrying the daughter of a politically strong member may be the best way for a young man to gain access to the elite.

Philosophy of Purity

Philosophy of purity is an exacerbation of the philosophy of separation. Purity is the central concept of this philosophy, the maxim of which could be: "*our only goal is attaining purity.*" In this manner, all things -- material and spiritual -- are judged according to the criteria of purity and impurity. Such groups expect members to strive for purity in every moment of their existence. Human characteristics, such as emotions, sexuality, and bodily needs, are deemed impure. Consequently, members are expected to exercise extreme vigilance in controlling such expressions at all times. Moreover, because of the dichotomous quality of the *pure/impure* criteria, they must constantly struggle with themselves to demonstrate their purity in their own eyes. As such, purity becomes a continuous pass-or-fail measure that puts a lot of stress on daily living. The Heaven's Gate group appears to have functioned according to such a philosophy.

Leadership

Often leadership is in the hands of a sole person deemed, or sometimes elected, as the purest soul of the community. Since power is restricted to one person, totalitarian rule is often present. Such a power structure can lead to arbitrary rule becoming the norm. This can be all the more accepted within the group since power has been attributed in a consensual manner to the individual who is judged to be the purest, hence the wisest. The leader is thus regarded as the supreme brother, the only one who may exercise power and hold responsibilities. All decisions are left to the leader, who becomes the incarnation of the Law, the Truth, and sole judge of the pure and the impure.

Membership

A philosophy of purity encourages the creation of a brotherhood-type community. All members see themselves as equal and sometimes even interchangeable. Members are expected to entertain good relationships with each other in an unindividualized way. Neither friendships nor animosities are tolerated, as these would signify emotional attachment, an impure phenomenon. A blending and leveling of individual personalities occurs and is even overtly encouraged as individuality is viewed as vanity or egoism. Moreover, strong group cohesion is sought as it demonstrates the attainment of each individual's detachment from his impure nature. This continuous process of denial of bodily needs, emotional ties, and subjective realities puts a heavy strain on each member. Hence, the ritualization of relationships and daily activities becomes a means of attaining purity while controlling every potential expression of individual differences. In some cases, this ritualization becomes so excessive that talking, looking at others, or thinking one's own thoughts are considered major faults.

Children

Since sexuality and procreation are deemed impure and, consequently, forbidden, these communities often do not accept children. When they are present, for instance because a parent becomes a member, children are expected to act in the least childlike way possible. In fact, they are expected to act like the adults of the group. Because of their inability to do so, children are usually segregated so as not to disturb the adults' devotion to purity.

In those communities that accept them, children are at risk of being physically abused because corporal punishment may be aimed at eliminating their impure behavior. Severe neglect in the form of insufficient food, water, sleep, warmth, or medical attention may also

occur since children are expected to shun bodily needs in the same way as adults. Usually, however, children are excluded from philosophy of purity groups since they symbolize impurity through their genesis, uncontrollable bodily and emotional needs, and fundamental immaturity.

Rituals

All aspects of daily life are often highly ritualized since ritualization aims at controlling manifestations of impurity. Because impurity is virtually always present, rituals prescribe correct and detailed ways of being, doing, thinking, sleeping, etc.

One of the main aims of excessive ritualization is to keep one's mind occupied, for impurity is felt to be most perniciously experienced in one's thoughts. The constant repetition of meditation, prayer, song or hymn singing keeps impure thoughts at bay. Since impurity is often equated with individuality, a never-ending battle with trivial and seemingly inoffensive thoughts is fought within each individual through strict observance of rituals that often take on an obsessive-compulsive quality.

Other group rituals aim at the purification of the soul. The leader usually leads these ceremonies for the whole community. Whether such rituals resemble a public confession of each one's impure acts and thoughts or is based on a private confession of one's sins, the final aim of this type of practice is to rid members' souls, at least for a second, of all impurities.

Doctrine

Doctrinal emphasis is put on severing all bonds between body and soul. When a holy book is the basis of the doctrine, all passages that highlight spirituality, condemn bodily functions, and idealize purity are considered dogma. If the doctrine is novel, its elements will stress the fundamental distance between body and soul, the highest form of life being a pure soul detached from all bodily ties. Deities will also be idealized as entities that are completely detached from all that is material. Consequently, doctrinal imperatives will value asceticism in all its forms. Since pleasure is associated with emotion and bodily satisfaction, food will be kept simple and maybe even cooked so as to be tasteless and bland. Also, it will most likely be eaten in sparse quantity.

Moreover, fear of contamination from impure elements is often of central concern. Rituals meant to purify food, clothes, and bodily functions may be the rule as all that is connected to bodily needs is shunned. For the same reason, medical treatment may be rejected because such a philosophy views the body as a hindrance more than an asset. In such a philosophy, the less one thinks or takes care of one's body the better. Also, in some groups that adopt a philosophy of purity, physical ailments may be seen as a sign of impurity, making members hide symptoms, or even adamantly deny their evident presence. Additionally, medical help is often rejected because of the fear of contamination either from impure material elements or from contact with non-members, who are deemed impure. Finally, for some members of these groups, as for some groups as a whole, death is equated with the liberation from bodily ties, and hence is seen as a deliverance from the daily struggle to stay pure. In such cases, major physical illness is often experienced as a relief because it signifies imminent death of the body and liberation of the soul.

Spatial Organization

These groups tend to live outside mainstream society. Their tendency to segregate themselves from others in order to avoid contamination makes them choose isolated areas or secluded retreats. Sometimes the group seeks more and more geographically isolated regions in an effort to find an area that is not contaminated. Quite paradoxically, as they

search for more isolation, the leader and his followers may come to view hostile land or regions with extreme climate as safe environments.

Often a complete segregation of the sexes will be the guiding principle ordering the spatial organization within the community. To ensure the most complete protection from the impurities of society and avoid contamination philosophy of purity groups will value self-sufficiency highly.

Social Organization

Members place high value on two principles that often come into conflict in their social organization. On the one hand, egalitarianism through uniformity is actively sought, and on the other, autarky is highly valued. Some individuals, however, become indispensable to the group owing to their greater capacity at ensuring self-sufficiency for the community. This entails a conflict of value within the group since, according to the first principle, no individual qualities should be identifiable, but according to the second, the community must depend on itself to ensure its isolation from the rest of the world.

This paradox places constant strain on the entire social organization and puts able individuals in a difficult position because even if their capabilities are much needed, recognition is denied and pride is frowned upon. One way of reducing this moral conflict is to favor group work. By favoring small working units the abilities, and limits of individual members become indistinguishable. Thus, work is accomplished by a working unit of unindividualized members who are, nonetheless, of varying levels of competence. Such discrepancy may often be the source of much guilt-provoking frustration for members.

Another strategy for adapting the social organization to a philosophy of purity is to view individual competency as a demonstration of the purity of one's soul. The rationale for this representation of talent is that it is considered possible to work in an optimal fashion when one has control over distraction, emotional or bodily needs, and physical limitations. In this way, the more able individuals can be recognized as such since their ability is associated with their being purer than fellow members. Although such discrimination often awakens jealousy and envy, these emotions may not be expressed or even acknowledged within oneself without evoking a despairing feeling of failure. To ward off such personal grief, group purification rituals are used. Nonetheless, by publicly accusing oneself of this type of emotional sin, the offending member appears impure. Consequently, an informal hierarchy progressively forms in which individuals are viewed as more competent and purer, if they are of an unemotional character type while individuals who are of a more emotional character type will be seen as the least talented and the least pure. Furthermore, since confrontation, competitiveness, aggressiveness, or even assertiveness are associated with human nature, and thus with impurity, an outward atmosphere of harmony is sought at all times. Although tensions between members inevitably exist, perfect control of one's emotions is expected of all members. This expectation adds impetus to the ritualization of relationships between members.

Philosophy of Survival

Groups that share a philosophy of survival can be said to exemplify the following aphorism: *if you're not with us, you're against us*. In these groups, projection of maliciousness outside the group makes the world appear dangerous to members. Thus, such groups adopt an extreme version of a philosophy of separation by which they not only differentiate between *us and them*, but also project upon *them* all that is seen as bad. Since all that is associated with maliciousness is intolerable, all that can be interpreted as representing evil is systematically attributed to the world outside the group. One consequence of such a philosophy is that by continuously attributing evil to the outside world, members come to view as potential enemies everyone who is not part of the group. Leaders and members of

such groups thus feel in danger of being victimized by political leaders, public institutions, the police, and anyone who has some level of institutionalized authority. Feeling constantly threatened, they strongly believe they must protect themselves against outside attack.

Leadership

Usually, the leader rules as a plenipotentiary master who exercises power in a solitary fashion, although he may choose a select few to assist him in his work. In extreme cases, the leader will have total control over the group as well as over all aspects of each individual's life. But even in less extreme cases, the authority of the leader is never contested since the members often regard him as an earthly god. As a result of this attribution of godlike wisdom and authority to the leader, he is usually the focus of the group's life.

The leader usually makes all decisions, from the most important to the most banal. However, when this is not feasible because of the large size of the community, decisions made by others are provisional, as the leader can overturn each for whatever reason. As he exercises power in a totalitarian fashion, he usually wants to be informed of all that goes on among the members. Moreover, he may tend to establish a coercive mode of relating to his followers, sometimes to the extent of being tyrannical and frequently resorting to the use of sanctions or even harsh physical punishment.

Also, the imagery surrounding the leader will often present him not only as the spiritual father of all, but as their biological father as well. This idealized vision of the leader gives rise to legends about his birth and exceptional childhood, legends that he encourages and uses as tools to control or dominate his community.

Membership

Total submission to the leader's authority is expected from members in such groups. In this sense, members fully accept to restrain their own will, surrendering themselves to their leader's commands, whims, and wishes. Since the leader is viewed as an earthly god, members often feel privileged to serve him. Loyalty to the leader is hence a most important virtue for each individual member and is also viewed as the most important group value.

Although social status, wealth, or personal prestige of individual members may be important in certain groups because they enhance the prestige of the leader and hence of the whole group, often the total number of members is more important than the prestige or talents of individual members. Also, since the size of the group is often seen as a symbol of the leader's worth, recruitment of new members is often emphasized. Competent recruiters are consequently usually highly valued members.

Children

Children in such groups must often meet high standards of conduct. Since immaturity is sometimes interpreted as maliciousness, children are often scolded and publicly rebuked. Moreover, the leader may feel jealous of the attention parents give to children, often expecting that all attention be concentrated on him. When this happens, parents and guardians may enforce very strict codes of conduct on young children for fear that their own loyalty and devotion to the leader may be put in doubt. In such a context, children can be at risk of severe maltreatment aimed at repressing their infantile traits. Furthermore, interpreting infantile traits and immaturity as something bad can make the leader and even members at large view a particular child as an evil incarnate, rendering that particular child very vulnerable to being severely maltreated and neglected by many if not most members of the community.

In order to ward off fear that children could potentially disrupt the group's functioning and, more importantly, weaken their parents' loyalty to the leader, some groups test the

children's faith in the leader. Through such tests, children are expected to show that they, like the adult members, have unfailing confidence in the leader's wisdom and are willing to blindly put their fate in his hands. When a community lives in fear of outside attack, these tests of loyalty can become abusive, either because such trials are evidently out of the children's reach, thereby condemning them to failure, or because they put children at risk of injury, tax their health, or hinder development. Indeed, the more the group projects maliciousness onto the outside world, the more such a group is liable to become intolerant toward children, for childlike manifestations are interpreted as signs of failing loyalty to the leader. In such a context, if a child does not obviously show that he is totally devoted to the leader, he is at risk of being seen as an internal enemy, a potential danger to the leader's and the group's survival.

Although many children may tolerate such social pressure, some are unable to bear the strain or the demands of the group. Their weaknesses or failures can cause such children to become scapegoats. In the more extreme philosophy of survival groups, this can lead to serious physical punishment or severe deprivation of emotional and biological needs. In one small group of this type in the province of Quebec, physical punishment and deprivation became so harsh on specific children that some died. This, however, appears to be a rare occurrence.

Rituals

Group rituals appear to be of the highest importance in these communities, usually playing a central role in group life. More specifically, rituals performed in group settings serve to cement devotion and loyalty toward the leader. Group rituals are often organized around the spiritual attributes, discourse, or feats of the leader. Hence, they are sequenced in such a manner as to progress toward a paroxysm in the ceremony, at which time the leader appears before the members, who by then are anxiously awaiting his arrival.

Loyalty toward the leader is often an important theme in many rituals in which individual members or sub-groups publicly testify to their devotion to him. When the leader fears the group's loyalty has diminished, he may order a particular ritual in which he proceeds to demonstrate his powers or even godlike attributes. For instance, Jim Jones would conduct miraculous healings of cancerous tumors -- now proven to have been staged -- in the same manner as Joe DiMambro of the Order of the Solar Temple staged performances of omnipotent psychic powers. Since in a philosophy of survival group, members, and often even more so the leader, feel endangered, group rituals are used to motivate members and demonstrate the group's strength while helping to keep anxiety and fear at tolerable levels. These hidden functions of rituals also explain why it becomes imperative that all members, whether children or adults, attend all group rituals. Members fear that their absence may be interpreted as an expression of disloyalty or as a sign of the group's weakness in the face of outside enemies.

Doctrine

Usually, a group adhering to a philosophy of survival attaches more importance to the leader of the group than to the doctrine. The leader's strengths, his abilities, his charm, and his worth as a protector of his people tend to supersede the importance accorded to the doctrine. Indeed, when the doctrine is based on a holy book or a sacred text the leader's interpretation of these scriptures dominates all other interpretations and is seen as the only correct one. But since the leader's interpretation is fundamentally more important than the doctrine per se, the group accepts all doctrinal modifications, as well as the introduction of new principles, rituals, or beliefs, with the same dedication that characterizes their loyalty to their leader.

Spatial Organization

The fact that the outside world is represented as malicious tends to make these groups seek geographically isolated areas. Often, the group clearly wishes to create an autarkic community so as to protect itself more effectively from the outside world. The more the outside world is seen as dangerous, the more a philosophy of survival gains credence among members and the more a need to protect both the leader and the community may lead the group to resort to active measures of self-protection. When this happens, the architecture of the buildings, the landscaping of the surroundings, the choice of a strategic location become imperatives that influence the lifestyle of the whole group. As a philosophy of survival develops, quasi-military principles of passive and active defense systems may make the community resemble more an army compound or a medieval fortress than a spiritual retreat.

Social Organization

A hierarchical organization usually typifies philosophy of survival communities. The leader usually controls the hierarchy of members, who hold responsibilities under his strict authority. This translates into a structure of power in which no one member is assured of his own or of others' influence or current status. The leader additionally uses promotions and demotions to keep his lieutenants from competing with him, either by gaining prestige or exercising authority over the group. This however, greatly fuels rivalry and competition among his lieutenants. Hence, power struggles among members are common. The prestige and power that being close to him brings also produce much rivalry and many overt conflicts, even if such privileges may be temporary. As loyalty to the leader is the most important virtue, proofs and manifestations of loyalty, and disloyalty are used to gain more power or to exclude rivals.

Since the quantity of membership is usually important, often the leader deems no one member irreplaceable, regardless of the individual's true contribution to the group. Thus, scapegoating and expulsion of members can be resorted to without concern about weakening the group. Indeed, the fate of any given member, either through his hierarchical demotion or physical expulsion from the group, is commonly used to control potential rivals and strengthen the group's loyalty to the leader. In this sense, servitude is expected on the part of all members. Paradoxically, the higher the status of any given member, the more his loyalty will be questioned by the leader and the more vulnerable he will be to demotion or expulsion. Such social tension and justifiable apprehension, as well as so much overt rivalry for power and prestige, produce an atmosphere of intense conflict between members and sub-groups. The unequal and ephemeral distribution of power also gives rise to strong feelings of injustice and envy among members and is often the cause of much personal distress, disappointment, psychological exhaustion, and at times even despair. As such an atmosphere develops, the leader or his close lieutenants may identify a new outside enemy as a tactic for refocusing members on an outside source of danger, thereby lessening the tension provoked by the internal struggles.

Philosophy of Indulgence

In groups that adopt a philosophy of indulgence, a very open-minded and nonjudgmental attitude prevails. If an aphorism could be suggested to describe such a philosophical stance, *be and let be* would be apt. Members of such groups manifest a great indulgence toward all members of society and explicitly recognize diversity of faith and ethics. In everyday life members who share a philosophy of indulgence tend to be socially active and to mingle with others, not only to evangelize and publicize their group, but also to personally engage in and contribute to their social environment. As a group, they usually show overt respect for all faiths, although they firmly believe that having some form of formal spiritual faith is necessary.

Leadership

Leaders of groups that share a philosophy of indulgence are usually charismatic. Their mode of relating to others is often seductive. They possess charm, and their interactions with the members of their group are characterized by warmth and understanding. Usually wary of exercising power in a domineering fashion, the leader of a philosophy of indulgence group will choose to exercise his power through persuasion, seduction, and moral authority. One way of exercising this moral authority is to voice opinions or make wishes known indirectly, either via close collaborators or through third parties.

Since the leader is identified as the wisest and most knowledgeable member of the group, his influence over individual members and the community is very important. Explicitly seen as possessing the truth, his word is very highly valued. His main function is to guide fellow members and show by his example and his experience the road members should follow. Usually, he will leave entirely to others the daily administrative tasks, sometimes in order to avoid making unpopular decisions. Although apparently still infrequent, the leaders of such groups may be women.

Membership

Members often feel that their personal worth is optimized by their membership in the group. A strong feeling of personal value is often felt at having been chosen by the leader to be part of what is felt to be a unique and prestigious community. Thus, the feeling of being part of an elite group is strong and contributes to an important, although often superficial, social cohesion within the group. Often lacking a strict formal internal organization, the prestige of specific members usually reflects a hierarchy based on doctrinal knowledge and level of personal spiritual development. Since these values are the keys to gaining prestige and political power, intellectual and spiritual activities that promote these values become lifelong endeavors.

Although all share the desire to become knowledgeable and although, strictly speaking, any member can become the group's leader and spiritual guide, very few members are true contenders for leadership. Indeed, the road to gaining prestige within the group is based not only on one's doctrinal knowledge and spiritual development compared to one's rivals, but also on one's lineage and political alliances. Harsh political infighting between members may occur in some groups, depending on the power structure and the strength of the leader. Nevertheless, outwardly an attitude of indulgence and social harmony is sought and usually overtly maintained. Unlike the other types of groups previously described, many communities based on a philosophy of indulgence do not systematically stereotype women's role, nor do they restrict women's functions to domestic and family affairs.

Children

Children are highly valued in philosophy of indulgence groups because they ensure the growth and transmission of tradition to future generations. This view of children is also held when a particular group recruits new members, since the prestige of a given member is often passed down to each new generation. During childhood each young member receives an education predominantly based on spiritual doctrine. Higher doctrinal education means access to higher social position and status within the group. However, in this sense all children are not seen as equal in that the offspring of more prestigious families or of families with a longer history in the group are favored by subtle positive discrimination. In some groups children born to high-ranking members are openly seen as possessing through lineage higher spiritual worth.

Rituals

Rituals vary greatly from group to group. Though a strong ritualization of daily life can exist in some groups, other communities have minimal group ceremonies, although members may spend much personal time on intimate rituals and personal spiritual activities. Small study groups are often encouraged as an intrinsic part of each member's spiritual practice and enlightenment. In some of these communities practically no group rituals are held; most spiritual activity takes the form of personal study of sacred texts, reflection on holy writings, or meditation. However, even in groups with minimal ritualization, particular forms of spiritual experiences, such as meditation or silent praying, are regularly shared in a group context. Finally, for some groups who share a philosophy of indulgence, spiritual practice is seen to be best experienced through proselytizing activities.

Doctrine

Often doctrine is impenetrable, obscure, or difficult to access. Secret documents and rare or highly valued sacred texts are very difficult to consult because access to the doctrine usually requires attaining a certain level of knowledge and spiritual enlightenment. Doctrinal information is thus extremely valuable and very well protected through hermetic language, difficult concepts, and rarity of documents. Hence, formalized doctrinal education is paramount to whoever wishes to pursue his or her spiritual development or play a role in the group's social organization. In practice, only a select few have access to all of the doctrinal texts or reference books. This unavailability of doctrinal material and its impenetrable quality once one has access to it encourage a mentor-type closed relationship in which a spiritual guide passes down to one or two selected youth the semantic, symbolic, and syntactic keys necessary to understand the very language of the doctrine. Owing to these secretive and hermetic aspects of doctrinal transmission, the doctrine often changes over time, being created and recreated as those who do access the doctrine integrate it and slowly make it their own.

When sacred texts are accessible to all members, their language and meaning are often obscure and are sometimes written in ancient or little known languages. A lifelong process of formal learning of the doctrine is hence necessary to distinguish oneself within the group.

Spatial Organization

Unlike the other types of groups described in this paper, members of philosophy of indulgence groups do not tend to segregate themselves from society. Indeed, their shared philosophy, whether it is manifest in active proselytism or not, stimulates a desire to share their life experiences with non-members. Hence, they feel free to engage in relationships with members and non-members alike, not only because they don't fear contamination or victimization, but because they wish to demonstrate through the discreet testimony of their own life the strength they feel their belief system gives them.

Social Organization

The informal hierarchy typical of such groups is of a pyramidal nature. One's social position within the group depends on how one is seen to master the group's doctrine. Though the exact power structure of a given group may remain partially obscure, even to the inside observer, the person seen by the group as possessing the most doctrinal knowledge and the highest spiritual development is usually at the top of the pyramid; he or she is the leader. Owing to the ineffable and esoteric qualities it takes to be the leader, leadership once attained is often kept until death occurs. Within the select few who are identified as being of a high rank in these pyramidal power structures, usually the leader has designated one successor as his or her spiritual heir. Though some political struggles may occur, they are usually restricted to such a high level of the social organization that most ordinary members are not aware of the conflicts.

When the group base is large enough, political turmoil may bring a small group of respected members high enough up in the political order to recommend that one of the potential successors move to a new town or to a distant region with the mission of building a new community. Such a solution is coherent with a philosophy of indulgence since all are apparently free to become a guide to fellow members. In this sense, a fraternal-type community is valued in which conflict, though acknowledged, is seen to be mostly a private matter meant to stay not only out of public view but also to remain unknown to group members not directly concerned with the conflict.

Since social harmony is greatly valued, the impact of a philosophy of indulgence is sometimes quite paradoxical. Thus, in some groups socially deviant behavior, whether expressed as conjugal violence, incest, or acts of fraud for example, may have a tendency to be denied, even in the face of blatant evidence. Especially when the prestige of the alleged perpetrator is high, some groups may have a tendency to minimize the problem in order to maintain intact the group's cohesion and social harmony. In the face of strong pressure from outside social control agents, the group may hold low level members publicly responsible for a socially inappropriate action of a more powerful member so as not to disturb the group's social organization and prestige in the outside community.

Discussion

The first part of this article has sketched out in general terms the specific types of dangerous behavior associated with each of the four group philosophies. I now wish to briefly summarize the relevant elements as they are applicable to each type of philosophy.

First off, I must specify that this paper associates dangerousness only with physical or severe psychological harm, such as child maltreatment, severe neglect, sexual or physical abuse, conjugal violence, self-harm in the form of self-mutilation or suicide, and criminal acts, such as assault, battery, and homicide. By so defining dangerous behavior in a restricted sense, I do not at all wish to minimize the personal suffering that can be associated with more subtle types of abusive behavior. Nonetheless, I feel it is necessary to focus on extreme forms of abuse in the hope of contributing to the development of a model that has the capacity of distinguishing not so much between positive and negative cultic experiences, but more precisely still between cultic experiences that hold a potential of dangerousness from those that, however disappointing or negative one may feel they have been, do not put one at risk of permanent harm, whether physical, or psychological.

The main types of danger that can be associated with *philosophy of separation* groups concern children who, for varying reasons, are not able to live up to their families' and the group's behavioral expectations. In such cases, child abuse can occur. Moreover, the social isolation of children, the patriarchal nature of the political structure, and social pressure toward conformity, may cause already victimized children to become at high risk of repeated maltreatment. Additionally, the social isolation of individual families and lack of contacts outside the community further puts children at risk of being victims of incest since such abuse leaves no visible signs. Finally, the patriarchal social organization, social pressure toward conformity, and the isolation of women within such closed communities can also constitute an added risk factor for repetitious conjugal violence.

In *philosophy of purity* groups, children are at an even greater risk of being physically or sexually abused or scapegoated, for they are seen as incarnating impurity. The risk of abuse increases when the care of children is left to guardians who hold low social status within the group. Moreover, because of their social isolation and low value to their own community, victimized children are unable to escape repeated victimization.

Since the leader of such groups is often the sole depository of power and because of the human impossibility of ever attaining the group's ideal of purity, adult members may be at risk of following him into destructive behavior that most probably would take the form of self-mutilation or group suicide. Because members of philosophy of purity groups, as well as some types of philosophy of separation groups, feel that they obey a higher moral calling than others, they may, in certain circumstances believe that their righteousness puts them above and beyond the reach of the civil and criminal laws of the society in which they live. Conduct that members would otherwise consider illegal or unlawful is, in the group context, thus seen as morally legitimate. Such rationalization may put vulnerable members at risk inside the group and in rare cases may pose a threat to representatives of the outside community. Furthermore, when the doctrine is interpreted in a strict sense, the group may shun medical help, putting the lives of adults and children in danger.

In groups based on a *philosophy of survival*, many different types of dangerous conduct can occur. If and when children are seen as malicious, they may be disciplined or neglected in a way that is abusive and harmful. Maltreatment may reach such intensity that many people might systematically abuse a particular child. Sexual abuse may also be rationalized as a just treatment for some children. In some groups, leaders may request sexual favors from any member, whether adult, adolescent, or child. In fact, whenever a leader is endowed with plenipotentiary power, any breach in his personal ethics may render members vulnerable to abusive behavior, be it physical, or sexual. In extreme situations, especially when geographical isolation exists, a totalitarian leader who becomes violent or sadistic may put individual members' lives in danger.

The danger of mass homicide, or coerced group suicide is also a risk in groups sharing a philosophy of survival. Two elements can contribute to such an outcome: first, the totalitarian nature of the leader's power, and second, the community's perception of constant threat emanating from the outside world and its representatives. Such circumstances may cause not only the leader, but also many members, to feel intense despair and a desire to end one's "earthly" life.

In a group that shares a *philosophy of indulgence*, the strong internal social pressure toward an appearance of harmony and serenity constitutes the main risk factor for members. Thus, children and other vulnerable members of the group may become victims of sexual or physical abuse that family members and community leaders deny or blatantly minimize. Such silencing of problematic or unlawful conduct is motivated by the wish to preserve the group's or an individual member's prestige and reputation in the immediate and larger communities. The group's elite may thus ignore dramatic situations of conjugal and family violence. Often the blame for such abusive behavior may even be laid on the victims of abuse in order to protect the reputation of the alleged perpetrator. In many instances, the higher ranked the accused perpetrator is within the group the less the victim will be heard or believed. In cases of fraud or other criminal acts committed outside the group, an extensive attempt at covering up the criminal acts may occur to protect the general public's view of the group.

Conclusion

In putting forth the hypothesis that a philosophy of indulgence is associated with the lowest risks for members, I am proposing that such groups appear to be at a point in their development in which they function as a church, according to Weber (1927), Troelsch (1931), and Yinger's (1946) categorizations of spiritual groups. As such, these groups resemble any closed community in which saving appearances is highly valued, but differ from these communities in that philosophy of indulgence groups may put certain vulnerable members at risk of being blamed for the misdeeds of those whose reputations and prestige the community seeks to protect. The group value of appearing "good" may be more

important than recognizing the reality of individual victimization and the emotional and physical price victimized members are requested to pay in order to maintain an image of the group's high moral standards.

This may also hold true for many groups that adhere to a philosophy of separation. However, since a philosophy of separation shares with philosophies of purity and survival the common trait of categorizing members as better than other citizens, this moralistic stance may make some philosophy of separation groups consider unlawful behavior as morally justified according to group norms. For instance, some philosophy of separation groups will advocate severe forms of physical punishment towards children, believing their ethical principles are of superior worth than society's laws against child abuse.

Finally, it must be stated that in its purest form, the groups that share a philosophy of survival appear by far to represent the most likely and severest risk of danger—to members and non-members, children, women, and men. Fortunately, relatively few groups seem to fully correspond to such a pure form. Jim Jones' People's Temple appears to have been under the influence of such a philosophy, especially during the last years of the movement.

In ending, I wish to emphasize that what I have just proposed represents a theoretical model. It is most likely that in reality few groups will correspond to the pure forms described. In all probability different levels and kinds of mixes of these philosophies will be found, and further nuances will need to be developed as research continues. Also, one must remember that even it were shown that this model is correct in identifying risks of abuse or excess, groups could adhere to one or another of these philosophies without ever succumbing to dangerous behavior. Consequently, any attempt at applying this model to reality must be made with circumspection. Eventually, the application of this model in the form of complete case studies will permit researchers to test its validity as a working model to evaluate the type and severity of risks that some groups may represent. However, applying with premature confidence this or any other model could do harm. Whatever the application, it must be remembered that only a neutral and unbiased use of such a model can be ethically justified.

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