

The RELIABILITY *of*
APOSTATE TESTIMONY
ABOUT NEW
RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

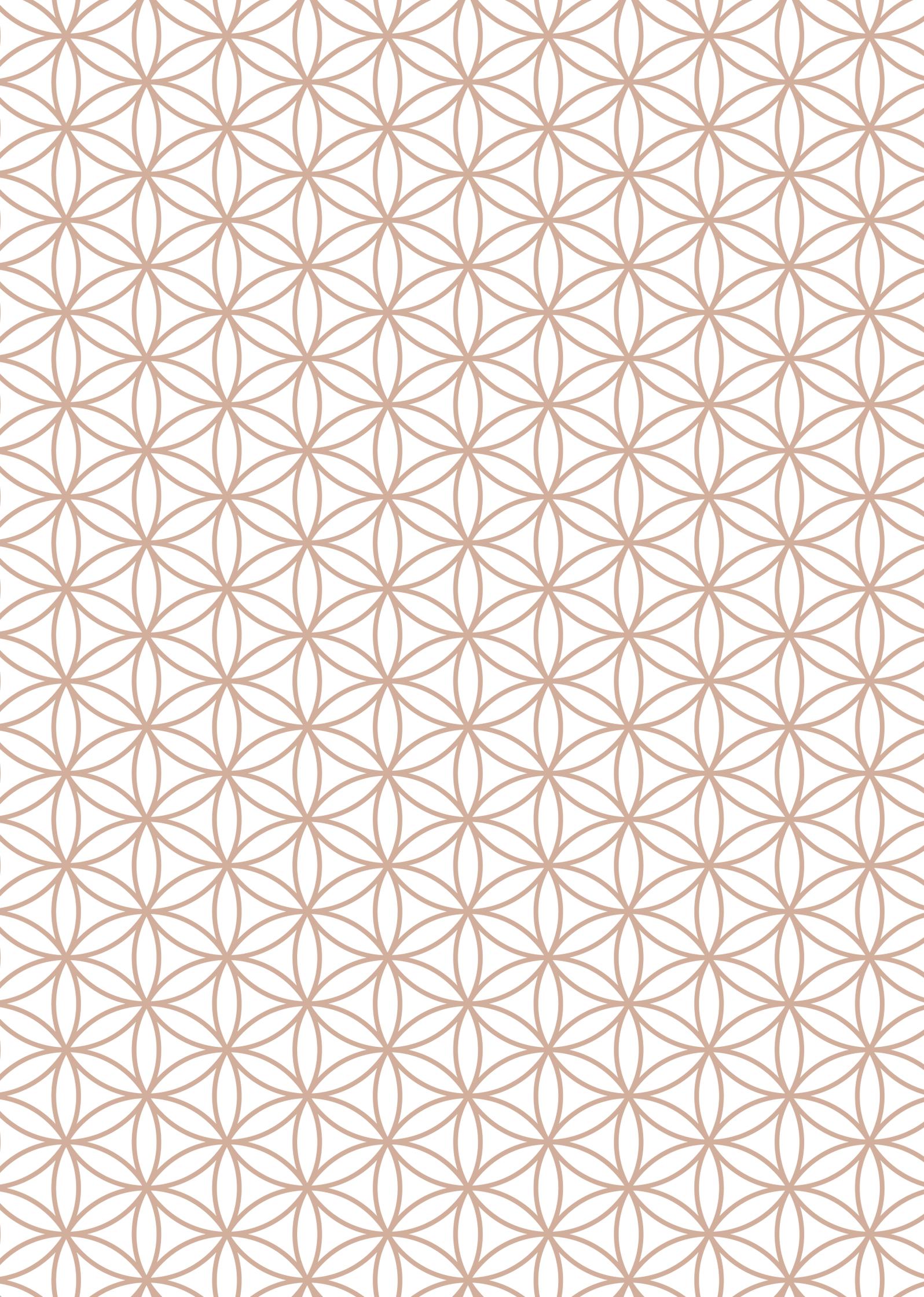
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24 January 1995

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I.
PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

I received a Bachelor of Arts *magna cum laude* in Psychology from Hardin-Simmons University in 1955. I completed as Master of Divinity *cum laude* at Union Theological Seminary of New York in 1959. I received a Doctor of Philosophy in Religion and Philosophy from Duke University in 1963.

I have previously held full-time faculty appointments in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Texas at El Paso from 1962–65, rising to the rank of Associate Professor, in the Department of Religion at Trinity University of San Antonio from 1965–69, in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Windsor of Ontario, Canada, from 1969–75, rising to the rank of Full Professor. Since 1973, I have held an appointment of Full Professor of Religious Studies at Southern Methodist University, serving as chairperson of the Department of Religious Studies from 1975–86 and from 1993 to the present.

I am a long-time member in good standing of the American Association of University Professors, American Academy of Religion, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, American Theological Society, Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, Canadian Theological Society, Council on the Study of Religion, and I have held national office, chaired professional committees or served on editorial boards in most of these professional societies.

I am a philosopher of religion and culture with special competence in the religions of the modern era. As such, I am primarily concerned with the changing forms of religious belief and practice in both mainline and newer religious movements as these older and newer religions respond to the challenges and changes of modern life. I regularly teach a variety of courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels in the comparative, philosophical and social scientific study of religion at Southern Methodist University. I also carry on a sustained program of scholarly research and publication in my area of specialization, having published five books dealing with modern religious thought entitled *Radical Christianity* (1968), *H. Richard Niebuhr* (1977), *The Shattered Spectrum* (1981), *The Terrible Meek: Essays on Religion and Revolution* (1987), and *Dax's Case: Essays in Medical Ethics and Human Meaning* (1989) as well as numerous articles in such leading scholarly journals as *Harvard Theological Review*, *Journal of Religion*, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *Studies in Religion*, *Religion in Life*, *Religious Studies Review*, and *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

As a specialist in modern religions, I have conducted an extensive scholarly study of the Church of Scientology. I have read most of the major theoretical texts written and published by L. Ron Hubbard, reviewed many of the technical and administrative bulletins prepared by Mr. Hubbard and the administrative and ecclesiastical officers of the Church, and examined representative examples of the training manuals used by teachers and students in various courses offered by the Church. I have also read a number of journalistic and scholarly studies of the Church of Scientology. In addition, I have talked with practicing Scientologists, and visited their 46th Street Church and 82nd Street Celebrity Centre in New York City, their Flag Service Organization in Clearwater, Florida, and their Celebrity Centre in Dallas.

II. ASSIGNMENT

I have been asked by the Church of Scientology to give my expert opinion on two broad issues: (1) The incidence of apostasy in new religious movements and (2) The reliability of apostate accounts of their former religious beliefs and practices. These two questions are of crucial importance for a proper understanding of new religious movements because such apostates are often singled out as reliable informants about their former beliefs and practices in media exposés and even scholarly studies of non-traditional religious movements. Moreover, a limited number of apostates have filed grievances for damages, variously charging their former religious communities with deceptive and fraudulent practices or physical and emotional duress. In turn, these individual litigants have often served as expert witnesses in other cases brought against new religions either by governmental agencies or by hostile dissidents.

The special attention given by the media to apostates from new religious movements and their recourse to the courts for alleged damages suffered at the hands of their former religious group involves a profound shift in the public attitude toward and treatment of apostates in this century. In the past, apostates were roundly condemned for abandoning their faith. Indeed, the punitive action taken against the apostate by the rejected religious group was often reinforced by the power of the state. By contrast, in recent years the apostate is more likely to take punitive action against the religious group, sometimes with the support of the law. Apostates from new religious movements are often seen as victims rather than as turncoats by virtue of the harshly negative stories they tell about their religious past. But the question remains whether these apostate accounts are reliable reports of their past religious associations and activities.

The Church of Scientology's special interest in the question of the reliability of apostates is based on the fact that it has been the target of apostate-based media "exposés" and civil litigation. In anticipation of the full discussion that follows, I am convinced by reason of my own professional training and scholarly research that the apostate should not be accepted *uncritically* by the mass media, the scholarly community, the legal system, or governmental agencies as a reliable source of information about new religious movements. The apostate must always be regarded as an individual who is predisposed to render a biased account of the religious beliefs and practices of his or her former religious associations and activities.

III. APOSTASY IN THE PAST

The word "apostasy" is a transliteration of the Greek *apostasia*, which originally denoted insurrection or secession. Its religious usage denotes the deliberate abandonment of one's religion. Apostasy is closely related to heresy where the rejection of orthodox for heterodox beliefs and practices within a given religion is seen as a categorical denial of true religion. As such, apostasy must be understood as a public rather than a private occurrence. Apostasy is not a matter of private religious doubts or lapsed religious practices. Apostasy is a public renunciation and condemnation of one's former religious beliefs and practices. The apostate often abandons one religion for another, but may renounce religion altogether.

III.I. APOSTASY IN HELLENISTIC JUDAISM

The Hebrew Bible strongly condemns the national apostasy of the ancient Israelites, who again and again reverted to the polytheistic religion and culture from which they emerged. But the first acts of individual apostasy occurred during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes (c. 175–164 BCE), when many Jews were compelled by this pagan emperor to renounce their worship of God in

favor of Greek gods. A passion for Hellenistic culture made serious inroads in Jewish religion and culture until the Maccabean Revolt, which succeeded in restoring Jewish Law and Jewish nationalism. Sporadic apostasy continued, but such abandonment of the Jewish Law was met with harshest condemnation within the Jewish community.

Under later Roman Rule, the Jews were allowed to practice their religion freely under the nominal political rule of a Jewish Tetrarchy. Sectarian movements flourished during this period, none more powerful than the Christian movement which in time separated itself from Judaism altogether. Sectarians and Christians were condemned as apostates. Moreover, such apostasy was condemned in political as well as religious terms because among the Jews, religion and citizenship were fused. Apostasy was seen as a crime against the state as well as a sin against God. The apostate was denied both salvation and citizenship.

III.II. APOSTASY IN PAGAN RELIGIONS

In general, the idea of exclusivity was alien to Greek and Roman religions, given their polytheistic nature. The pagan cults did not expel members who adhered to rival religious traditions or philosophical circles. But often the gods of pagan religions were officially recognized by the civic authorities and identified with the well-being of the state. In such instances, the abandonment of politically sanctioned religions met with public criticism and even state-sponsored persecution. In the Greek East, Christians were accused of atheism because they rejected the gods of the people. In the Latin West, Christians were charged with abandoning the religion of their ancestors. On either charge, the early Christians who refused to pay respects to the civic gods were condemned and often persecuted for insurrection against the state. In short, apostasy only became a problem in pagan society when its ancestral customs or its civic gods were rejected.

III.III. APOSTASY IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Many early Jewish and pagan converts to Christianity continued to observe Jewish ritual law or to participate in pagan religious festivals. In the beginning, the persistence of old religious customs was not regarded as apostasy. Apostasy only became a clear-cut issue when the Christian church had separated itself from Jewish and Gnostic forms of Christianity. Already in the New Testament, apostasy is associated with the false teachers and prophets whose appearance will signal the apocalyptic end of the age. In the early centuries, apostasy was largely an internal problem as orthodox Christianity separated itself from heretical and schismatic movements. But with the conversion of Constantine, apostasy became a civil offense punishable by law. Thus began more than a thousand years of mutual cooperation between Church and State. The State used the power of the sword to protect the Church against apostasy and the Church used the power

of the scripture to protect the State against insurrection. Apostates were deprived of their civil as well as their religious rights.

The open abandonment of Christianity was rare where the bond between Church and State was firm, but even covert apostate movements were actively suppressed. Torture was freely employed to extract confessions and to encourage recantations. Apostates and schismatics were excommunicated from the Church and persecuted by the State.

Apostasy on a grand scale also occurred in Christian history. The so-called “Great Schism” between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Catholicism in the 8th century marked the first great division within Christendom, resulting in mutual excommunication. The Protestant Reformation in the 16th century further divided Christian against Christian. Each sectarian group claimed to have recovered the authentic faith and practice of the New Testament Church, thereby relegating rival versions of Christianity to the status of apostasy.

Moreover, those Protestant churches which enjoyed territorial monopoly employed the weapons of religiously mandated excommunication and politically sponsored persecution against rival claimants to authentic Christianity. Only with the end of the religious wars and the enactment of edicts of toleration did such active political suppression of apostasy come to an end. Formal and informal religious sanctions were still imposed, ranging from excommunication and disinheritance to censure and shunning.

As this brief overview demonstrates, the condemnation of apostates has served as a “legitimation strategy” for all those religions in the past which made exclusivistic claims to be the only religion possessing the proper religious belief and practice. In national and territorial settings where political and religious loyalties were merged, legal as well as religious sanctions were imposed against apostasy. The apostate was deprived of citizenship as well as salvation. As such, the apostate was seen as a purveyor of falsehood and immorality that threatened the purity of the religious community and the stability of the political order.

Apostasy became less and less a problem in the modern world as religious traditions softened their dogmatic claims and as secular societies separated themselves from religious endorsement. The acceptance of religious pluralism and the privatization of religious faith in this century largely freed from the legal and religious odium of the apostate those individuals who changed their religion. To be sure, the Roman Catholic Church still retains the weapon of excommunication, Protestant Fundamentalists decry the dangers of heresy, and occasionally devout families may

disown children who marry outside their faith or convert to another religion. But these sanctions do not carry the public or the private weight they once did. They are the ritual gestures of religious dogmatists who have lost their unquestioned authority in pluralistic and secularistic cultures.

IV. APOSTASY IN THE PRESENT

In the last thirty years, apostasy has once again become an issue in public as well as private circles, although as noted above, the treatment of the present-day apostate bears little resemblance to the way apostates were regarded in the past. Since the 1960s, a variety of new religious movements have appeared in all modern, democratic societies. Many of these minority religious movements make “totalizing” demands of their members, claiming absolute commitment to their religious teachings and complete devotion to their religious community. Other new religions do not require complete immersion of all members in their communal life and mission, yet still require strict adherence to doctrinal, ethical, and ritual standards. Certainly all new religions hold beliefs and practices that are at variance with mainstream religions. Not surprisingly, given these rigorous demands, some of those who became involved soon decide that a particular religious movement is not for them and leave. Their departure usually goes unnoticed because most of the individuals involved regard their past experience positively as one more step in their own spiritual journey.

But in contrast to the above, among those who leave voluntarily are a few defectors who have gained great notoriety by publicly attacking their former religious associations and activities through the press and in the courts. As welcome sources of information for a public both curious and fearful about these unfamiliar new religions, such apostates are often treated as *cause celebres* rather than as social outcasts. But, as we shall see below, neither the quietly appreciative former member nor the vocally aggrieved apostate from a new religious movement can be taken as an objective and authoritative interpreter of the religious movement to which he or she formerly belonged.

IV.I. TYPES OF DEPARTURE

There is a widespread misconception in the general public that few departures from new religious movements are voluntary and positive experiences. The image of new religions as highly regimented groups that control the thoughts and actions of their members through a variety of “mind control” techniques is deeply embedded in the public imagination, thanks to the media fixation on the horror stories of former members and to the propaganda of anti-cult groups. Even many early scholarly descriptions of new religious movements perpetuated this mistaken notion by basing their studies almost entirely on apostates who were forcibly separated from their previous religious

associations either by coercive deprogramming or involuntary hospitalization. But a number of recent scholarly studies (e.g., James A. Beckford, *Cult Controversies: The Societal Response to New Religious Movements*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1985; Stuart A. Wright, *Leaving Cults: The Dynamics of Defection*, Washington, D.C.: Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1987) have clearly demonstrated that two very different types of apostasy exist which, in turn, can be correlated to two very different apostate assessments of new religious movements.

Only a small minority of defections from new religious movements are the result of coerced apostasy. Forcible efforts to “rescue” a given individual from a new religious movement are always initiated by outsiders. Relatives who are opposed to an individual’s involvement in a new religion are faced with a double problem—why that person joined and how that person can be separated from that religion.

The first question is typically answered by a “brainwashing” explanation which, in turn, justifies a “deprogramming” solution to the second problem. The brainwashing scenario “explains” how a convert to a new religion comes to embrace and defend what to the outsider seems to be such absurd beliefs and practices. The individual in question is seen as the victim of various psychological and sociological techniques of mind control. Given that circumstance, the only means of rescuing that person is some dramatic form of intervention that will free the individual from such bondage. Recourse to forcible kidnapping and deprogramming or to legal conservatorship and hospitalization are justified as the necessary means for saving from themselves misguided and manipulated followers of the new religions. In one form or another, allegations of brainwashing and justifications of deprogramming are the bases of all such “rescue operations.”

Because of their high visibility in media exposés and legal proceedings against their former religious associates, such coerced apostates have helped to foster the controversy surrounding new religious movements. Their availability as “cult survivors” makes them hot copy for the media, which is often the only information about new religious movements that is available to the general public. At this stage of the process, the logical connection between brainwashing and deprogramming works in reverse. The very fact that the deprogramming process “works” is taken as evidence by concerned outsiders as well as some former members that the brainwashing scenario is true. The abrupt and radical change in their belief and behavior brought about by deprogramming is seen as clear proof that the retrieved individual was, in fact, the victim if not the prisoner of a malevolent religion. Moreover, the fact that they “got their loved one back” prompts relatives to help others “get their children back” by going public with their story and by supporting the anti-cult organizations that supported them. In this way, a small percentage of apostates and their

“rescuers” have shaped (or, more properly, misshaped) the public’s perception of all defectors from new religious movements.

Contrary to public opinion, the overwhelming majority of defections from new religious movements are a matter of voluntary apostasy. Moreover, the clear majority of those who leave of their own free will speak positively of certain aspects of their past experience. While readily acknowledging the ways a given religious movement failed to meet their personal expectations and spiritual needs, many voluntary defectors have found ways of salvaging some redeeming values from their previous religious associations and activities.

But there are some voluntary apostates from new religious movements who leave deeply embittered and harshly critical of their former religious associations and activities. Their dynamics of separation from a once-loved religious group is analogous to an embittered marital separation and divorce. Both marriage and religion require a significant degree of commitment. The greater the involvement, the more traumatic the break-up. The longer the commitment, the more urgent the need to blame the other for the failed relationship. Long-term and heavily involved members of new religious movements who over time become disenchanted with their religion often throw all of the blame on their former religious associations and activities. They magnify small flaws into huge evils. They turn personal disappointments into malicious betrayals. They even will tell incredible falsehoods to harm their former religion. Not surprisingly, these apostates often appeal, after the fact, to the same brainwashing scenarios usually invoked to justify forcible disengagement from new religious movements.

IV.II. TACTICS OF RE-ENTRY

Disengagement from former religious associations and activities is only half the process of renouncing one’s faith in a new religious movement. The apostate, whether voluntary or coerced, faces the more formidable tasks of returning to the dominant culture and of reformulating a new identity and worldview. Re-entry seldom means simply returning to one’s previous lifestyle and worldview before joining a new religious movement. The “prodigal” son or daughter returns as a different person, bringing a whole set of experiences that must somehow be explained and integrated into a new psychological and social situation. This transition is often influenced by family systems, social networks, religious groups, educational institutions, and anti-cult organizations. Not surprisingly, the influence of these groups profoundly colors the apostate’s interpretation of past religious activities and associations.

Regardless of the manner of their leave-taking, apostates must take account of both their earlier conversion to and subsequent separation from a non-traditional religious movement. They often

receive the self-justification they are seeking from anti-cult organizations or fundamentalist religious groups, both of whom provide them with the brainwashing explanations to rationalize their sudden adherence and equally sudden abandonment of a new religious movement. The information provided by these groups is usually highly negative and heavily biased against the organization left behind. More precisely, these groups furnish them a *lingua franca* for telling their stories of seduction and liberation. Numerous social scientists have pointed out that these biographies of “cult survival” are highly stylized accounts that betray the influence of borrowed scenarios of captivity and liberation — each account a rehearsed story of social isolation, emotional manipulation, physical deprivation, economic exploitation, and hypnotic control. These “atrocities tales” serve both to excuse the individual apostate as well as to accuse the new religion of irrational belief and immoral behavior. They also feed and form public perceptions of the new religions as dangerous threats to religious freedom and civil order. Given this negative press, even those apostates who do not fall under the direct influence of anti-cult organizations or fundamentalist religious groups are often influenced by their negative portrayals of the religion they have left behind.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The above analysis clearly shows that while there is a certain incidence of apostasy in new religious movements, the overwhelming majority of people who disengage themselves from these non-conforming religions harbor no lasting ill-will toward their past religious associations and activities. While they frankly acknowledge the ways their religious needs and hopes were disappointed, they were able to realize some positive meaning and value from their past experiences. By contrast, there is a much smaller number of apostates who are deeply invested in discrediting if not destroying the religious communities that once claimed their loyalties. In most cases, these apostates were either forcibly separated from their religious community through the intervention of family members and anti-cult groups, or soon came under the influence of anti-cult groups and literature after their own voluntary defection from a new religious group.

There is no denying that these dedicated and diehard opponents of the new religions present a distorted view of the new religions to the public, the academy, and the courts by virtue of their ready availability and eagerness to testify against their former religious associations and activities. Such apostates always act out of a scenario that vindicates themselves by shifting responsibility for their actions to the religious group. Indeed, the various brainwashing scenarios so often invoked against the new religious movements have been overwhelmingly repudiated by social scientists and religion scholars as nothing more than calculated efforts to discredit the beliefs and practices of

unconventional religions in the eyes of governmental agencies and public opinion. Such apostates can hardly be regarded as reliable informants by responsible journalists, scholars, or jurists. Even the accounts of voluntary defectors with no grudges to bear must be used with caution since they interpret their past religious experience in the light of present efforts to re-establish their own self-identity and self-esteem.

In short, on the face of things, apostates from new religions do *not* meet the standards of personal objectivity, professional competence, and informed understanding required of expert witnesses.

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