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# THE BLACKLISTING OF A CONCEPT: THE STRANGE HISTORY OF THE BRAINWASHING CONJECTURE IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION\*

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Benjamin Zablocki

**ABSTRACT:** This is the first part of a two-part article on the concept of brainwashing in the study of new religious movements (NRMs). The use of this term has become so emotionally charged that scholars find it difficult to discuss its merits and scientific utility with calmness and objectivity. I devote Part One of this article to an examination of the cultural and structural sources of an extreme polarization that has occurred among scholars of new religious movements. I argue that a majority faction within the discipline has acted with a fair degree of success to block attempts to give the concept of brainwashing a fair scientific trial. This campaign has resulted in a distortion of the original meaning of the concept so that it is generally looked at as having to do with manipulation in recruitment of new members to religious groups. Its historically consistent use, on the contrary, should be in connection with the manipulation of exit costs for veteran members. In Part Two of this paper (to be published in a later issue of this journal), I go on to examine the epistemological status of the brainwashing concept and compare theories based on brainwashing to alternative theories accounting for patterns of switching out of new religious movements.

*In principle, the cult is derived from the beliefs, yet it reacts upon them.*

*Emile Durkheim<sup>1</sup>*

What happens to individuals when they become swept away by commitments to charismatic social movements? This is an important question, never more so than in the waning years of our cataclysmic twentieth century. People have done some bizarre things when caught up in the enthusiasm of commitment to global, national, or communal ideologies. The recent mass suicides of the Heaven's Gate group are but one dramatic manifestation of this familiar

\*This is Part One of a two-part work. Part Two will appear in our second issue along with a response from David Bromley.

phenomenon. But whether to attribute disturbing and perplexing acts such as these to ordinary religious enthusiasm, or to brainwashing, or to mass-psychosis, or even, as some have suggested, to calcium deficiency<sup>2</sup> has remained an unsolved mystery of social science.

The sociology of religion has thus far missed a golden opportunity to make progress in solving this mystery. It could have done so by taking advantage of the naturally occurring social experiment that has been presented to us since about 1965 in the form of a proliferation of what have been called “new religious movements” or “cults.” The argument of this paper is that most sociologists of religion have failed to use the normal scientific procedures of careful conceptualization, theoretically derived hypothesis testing, and systematic observation to make progress in solving this mystery. Instead, sadly, they have become caught up in a culture war—a destructive polarization (mainly but not entirely over entrenched positions on the brainwashing conjecture) that has divided the field into a majority and a minority camp whose members seldom cite and rarely even talk to each other. For reasons I will shortly explain, I have called the dynamics of this polarization “blacklisting.” The majority camp (debunkers of the brainwashing conjecture) has declared victory and demanded premature closure to the scientific debate. The minority has retreated to obscure journals and has been marginalized within the discipline.<sup>3</sup> None of this has helped us get any closer to what should be our primary aim—understanding what makes people tick in intense religious situations.

Neither of the two sides in this debate is going to be happy with my arguments in this paper. I believe that both sides have contributed—through abrasiveness, smugness, and paradigm-mongering—to the rather hateful polarization that now exists.<sup>4</sup> Rather than seeking common ground in a shared respect for scientific procedures, they have chosen to culturally contextualize the dispute using such epithets as “cult-basher” or “cult-apologist.”

Because the intellectual climate is so polarized on these issues, I feel it necessary to preface my arguments with the following disclaimer. I am not personally opposed to the existence of NRMs and still less to the free exercise of religious conscience. I would fight actively against any governmental attempt to limit freedom of religious expression. Nor do I believe it is within the competence of secular scholars such as myself to evaluate or judge the cultural worth of spiritual beliefs or spiritual actions. However, I am convinced, based on more than three decades of studying NRMs through participant-observation and through interviews with both members and ex-members, that these movements have unleashed social and psychological forces of truly awesome power. These forces have wreaked havoc in many lives—in both adults and in children. It is these social and psychological influence processes that the social scientist has both the right and the duty to try to understand, regardless of whether

such understanding will ultimately prove helpful or harmful to the cause of religious liberty.

Although it may seem paradoxical to say so, I think that the brainwashing conjecture best fits within a rational choice perspective on religious motivation and behavior as seen for example in the work of Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, Roger Finke, and Lawrence Iannaccone.<sup>5</sup> Iannaccone, in particular, by modeling communal religion as “a club good that displays positive returns to ‘participatory crowding’” provides a basis for understanding the function that brainwashing might play within a high-demand religion.

As we put the brainwashing conjecture on trial, we must try to establish (to borrow a metaphor from criminal justice) motive, opportunity, and weapon. I believe that motive and opportunity can be derived as corollaries within Iannaccone’s model. It follows from his model that some religions will wish to raise social-psychological exit costs as high as possible within the constraints of the United States Constitution’s guarantee of freedom of religious conscience and religious affiliation for all citizens. It also follows that some religions will have the opportunity to do so by virtue of the high levels of trust and willingness to make heavy personal sacrifices that members of these groups exhibit. If I am right, it only remains to demonstrate the existence of the weapon and not to be too squeamish to see the weapon for what it is, once it has been found.

In the past thirty years I have visited hundreds of religious communes and talked with or interviewed over a thousand members and ex-members of these groups. Enough of these people have explained their experiences by something like a brainwashing model to convince me that the weapon exists. Some of them probably are lying or confabulating, but it is unlikely that all of them are. Most had no particular ax to grind, nor were the majority associated with any anti-cult organization. Moreover, most of those whom I have had the opportunity to interview repeatedly over long periods of time (sometimes decades or more) have tended to stick to their stories even as their youth has given way to presumably more judicious middle age.

One interview in particular impressed me with its veracity. I was talking with a man—not a respondent but a personal friend—who knew that he would soon die of AIDS. He had been a member, not of a religious community or an anti-cult organization, but of a revolutionary political group organized as a totalist community. He had left the group and was quite bitter about the corruption of its leadership but had not spoken publicly against it. His main concern was with his health, and he would probably not have spoken to me of this group at all except that he knew I was interested in this subject. He told me that the leaders of his group had studied the thought-reform techniques of the Chinese Communists with great admiration and had quite openly and successfully used these

techniques to brainwash the members of the group. He made it clear that some group members at least knew that they were being systematically brainwashed and acquiesced to the process because they felt it would be for the good of the revolution. However, this voluntary acquiescence did not lessen the effectiveness of the technique. When the time came that he and others became thoroughly disillusioned with the group's goals and methods, they nevertheless found it emotionally impossible to leave. They felt trapped. Years later, this man was still convinced that he had been trapped and was able to leave only after the group began to disintegrate. Of course one anecdote does not constitute a smoking gun. But stories like this have convinced me that the real sociological issue ought not to be whether brainwashing ever occurs but rather whether it occurs frequently enough to be considered an important social problem.

Somewhat closer to a smoking gun is the evidence provided in interviews with former leaders or top lieutenants of religious movements who have since left their groups or witnessed their groups' disintegration. In four such interviews, those in positions of power have showed surprising candor in the admission that brainwashing procedures were consistently and deliberately used "to keep weak members from straying." In one case, the leader I interviewed was well aware of the parallels between what he was doing to his followers "for their own good" and the classic brainwashing model as described by Lifton.<sup>6</sup> In the other cases, the leaders interviewed were naïve about the classical brainwashing model and somewhat amazed when I pointed out parallels between their practices and the classic model. However, the testimony of these leaders cannot be considered definitive because the possibility cannot entirely be ruled out that all were motivated to fabricate evidence in order to discredit the groups they had left.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper, the first in a two part essay, I will confine myself to discussing definitional and cultural issues surrounding the dispute over brainwashing. Questions of the epistemological status of the concept and the empirical evidence for its utility must, for the most part, be deferred until the second part of the essay to be published in a later issue of this journal. In the next section of this paper, I will discuss problems in the definition of the term "brainwashing." I will show that definitional imprecision has contributed to the persistence of polarization in the discipline and made it more difficult to resolve issues. Of course, if the conflict were simply one of terminology, we could solve it by inventing a new term. Therefore, I go on to show in the following section that the intellectual conflict goes far beyond the definitional. There is on one side a strenuous effort to ban any investigation of the manipulative effects of charismatic influence in religious groups out of fear that it will be used to suppress freedom of religious expression. On the other side, there is an equally strenuous (and equally wrong-headed)

effort to evaluate the activities of intense religious groups by the standards of secular humanism. After discussing how this unfortunate state of affairs has resulted in a blacklisting mentality of which disinterested empirical research has been the victim, I will then go on, in the last section of this paper, to assess the current state of the conflict and to make some suggestions for how moderation and scientific integrity can be restored to this area of inquiry.

### DEFINITIONAL CONFUSION

Sociologists of religion do not generally agree on a definition of the term "brainwashing." In this section, I will discuss three elements of confusion in the definition of brainwashing that have prolonged dissensus within the discipline, making it more difficult for the polarized camps to talk to each other. These are (1) confusion over whether the term refers to deception in recruitment or obstacles to disengagement, (2) confusion over the extent to which brainwashing can be identified and measured empirically, and (3) confusion over whether brainwashing is to be conceived as a mysterious property found only in unpopular ideological groups or along a social-psychological continuum of normal influence processes occurring in a wide variety of groups and organizations. After discussing the distortion of perspective that arises from these areas of confusion, I will briefly sketch a definition that I believe is consistent with historical usage as well as being precise and scientifically testable.

The first of the distortions abetted by the polarization I have mentioned above is that popular usage, especially in the media and in civil law, has grossly misunderstood this concept. Popular usage has come to imply that brainwashing has something to do with recruitment mechanisms when, on the contrary, it has mostly to do with socio-emotional exit costs. An examination of any of the foundational literature makes it very clear that what these researchers were attempting to explain was the persistence of ideological conversion after the stimulus was removed, not how subjects were initially hooked into the ideology.<sup>8</sup>

How may we explain this shift in the definition of brainwashing, from a concern with difficulty in extricating oneself *after* joining to a concern with deception in recruitment *before* joining? I believe it is an example of how the debased currency of litigation can all too easily drive out the honest currency of science. Lucrative stipends to expert witnesses were offered by members of both sides of this dispute in court cases involving allegations of deception in recruiting. And so it came to be in the mutual interest of both extreme camps in this debate to perpetuate a common distortion of the phenomenon, while at the same time arguing in favor of opposite positions as to whether or not the phenomenon itself was real or an illusion.

The issue of whether some NRMs practice deception in recruiting is not germane to the point and is beyond the scope of this paper. The brainwashing conjecture is concerned with whether something happens to a member while he or she is in a group to make it emotionally not impossible, but very difficult to get out again. Does something occur to create, in the mind of the person, a social-psychological prison without guards or walls?

A second source of distortion has to do with identification and measurement. Ironically, in their eagerness to discredit each other, scholars on both sides have fallen prey to the same error. In social psychology, there is a type of error that is found very frequently when ordinary people attempt to attribute causes to puzzling events. This error is so widespread that it has been given the name *the fundamental attribution error*.<sup>9</sup> The error consists of overemphasizing the importance of dispositional factors and underemphasizing the importance of situational factors in the attribution of causation:

The fundamental attribution error is pervasive. For instance, letters to advice columns such as "Ann Landers" or "Dear Abby" provide a good illustration of the phenomenon. When social psychologists . . . analyzed the letters . . . they found that writers tended to attribute the cause of their circumstances to the situation when describing their problems ("I'm always late to work because the bus doesn't run on time," or "We're having marital problems because my wife won't sleep with me anymore"). On the other hand, observers reading the letters were more apt to see the problem in terms of the characteristics of the person writing the letter ("She's too lazy to take an earlier bus" or "He should take a bath more often").<sup>10</sup>

In the dispute over the brainwashing conjecture, observers on both sides have demonstrated that they are no more sophisticated in attributing cause than the observers of the Ann Landers and Dear Abby letters. One side has attempted to marshal evidence for brainwashing by attempting to measure dispositional changes in the "victims," while the other has attempted to refute the existence of brainwashing by demonstrating the absence of any such measurable dispositional changes. Neither side has sufficiently recognized that the brainwashing conjecture is about relationships, not about individual dispositions. Alleged symptoms of brainwashing, such as deployability and passive complicity, are not individual dispositions but relational characteristics. If they exist, they will not be understood or measured without also bringing in that charismatic leader lurking at the other end of the puppeteer's string, not to mention the stage on which the puppet show is being enacted.

Many of the harshest critics of the brainwashing conjecture assume it to be an evaluative concept for the existence of which it is impossible, even in principle, to marshal empirical evidence. But this criticism has never been supported, to my knowledge, by a careful epistemological

comparison of brainwashing with other sociological concepts derived from theory. How is brainwashing as an explanatory concept any more nonempirically evaluative than charisma, or risky shift, or the strength of weak ties, or white flight, or institutional completeness, or role-strain? Once the concept of brainwashing has been rehabilitated from definitional confusion, I think it will be clear that it deserves to be treated like any other social psychological concept.

One of the major arguments for the assertion that brainwashing is not intrinsically a scientific concept is the claim that the conjecture is based on questions of "free will" which are not scientifically verifiable even in principle. But the brainwashing conjecture does not assert that subjects are robbed of their free will. Free will is a philosophic concept that has no place in scientific theory building. Neither the presence nor the absence of free will can ever be proved or disproved. However, free will is an important ideological concept, and, therefore, the brainwashing conjecture, when distorted in this way, is ideologically threatening to our sense of the value of individual responsibility. This should be of no particular concern to the researcher, but it becomes only too relevant when researchers are called upon to function as expert witnesses in civil or criminal cases.

The brainwashing conjecture does assert that resocialization remaps the values and preferences of the subject so that the subject voluntarily chooses to do what the group wants him to do. The goal of brainwashing is to create deployable agents. A deployable agent is one who evaluates his self-interest rationally as the group would wish. It does not argue the elimination of choice but rather the modification of the preference structure on which choice is based. The brainwashed individual remains capable of rational choice and action but over a transformed substrate of values and preferences remapped to conform to the collective ideology.

This important distinction becomes clouded by an imprecise use of the term "choice." For example, Janet Jacobs argues that, "In contrast to this 'brainwashing' perspective, other researchers . . . maintain that religious commitment is a matter of choice on the part of devotees who assume a religious problem-solving approach to life."<sup>11</sup> The brainwashing conjecture does not deny, however, that group members make choices that are rational in the context of their newly transformed values and preferences. Such distinctions lead into a hopeless quagmire when they are made in legal depositions, but they are exactly the sort of distinctions that are most helpful to scientists trying to build more general theories of human socialization. Here we see a concrete instance in which the needs of courtroom law and the needs of science are in opposition.

A third source of distortion has to do with whether the phenomenon of brainwashing is something mysterious and specific to certain ideological movements or whether it is consistent with other types of

influence found in a wide variety of social groups and organizations. *Fu Manchu* movies to the contrary, there is nothing about the brainwashing process that should be incomprehensible to the typical undergraduate student of social psychology. The particular combination of structural characteristics including totalism, extreme psychological persuasion techniques resulting in a symbolic death-rebirth experience, and fluctuations in the religious marketplace eliciting both a high level of demand for and a high level of supply of charismatic leaders and charismatic followers is not commonplace. But neither is it confined only to Chinese and Korean reeducation centers and prison camps and American NRMs. It does not trivialize the concept to demonstrate that it may also be at work in institutions such as the United States Marines and in Catholic monasteries both past and present. It is quite likely that something similar to what we now call brainwashing was used as early as the twelfth century by the Assassins of Alamut.<sup>12</sup> What may be new in the late twentieth century is the extent to which technological advances (e.g., electronic bugging devices or psychoactive drugs) may be increasing the efficiency with which it may be employed. However, brainwashing is likely to always remain a relatively rare phenomenon because of the difficulty of achieving the high degree of milieu control and charismatic influence necessary to make it effective.

It is little wonder that scholars have rejected a concept that seems to involve frightening powers of mental abduction of innocent bystanders with a loss of free will accomplished through mysterious mechanisms of persuasion which appear to be possessed only by the leaders of unpopular ideological movements. I too would reject such a concept. However, the concept of brainwashing as it appears both in the foundational literature and in the great majority of the accounts by ex-members of religious groups that I have seen has nothing to do with such nonscientific attributes. To locate a scientifically useful concept of brainwashing, we must turn away from these metaphysical speculations to what we can directly observe.

Surprisingly, there exists a fair amount of consensus with regard to the underlying observable sequence of events which the brainwashing conjecture purports to explain. These behavioral facts comprise a sequence of events often spread over a considerable number of years. This visible and relatively unambiguous sequence consists of four steps: (1) affiliation, (2) lifestyle modification, (3) disaffiliation, and (4) disenchantment. People (most often adolescents and young adults) are observed to affiliate with certain NRMs (sometimes labeled "cults"). Affiliation is soon followed by a sharp and sudden rejection of prior roles and relationships and a substitution of new roles and relationships prescribed by the group. This adds up to an often rather dramatic lifestyle modification characterized by new behaviors that many people outside the movement label as deviant. Persons may stay affiliated with these

groups for widely varying lengths of time ranging from an entire lifetime to less than 24 hours. After a while (for some but not all), disaffiliation from the group occurs. Disaffiliation can be (a) voluntary, (b) forced by the group (expulsion), or (c) forced by outside agents (abduction). Among those that disaffiliate, a certain percentage eventually begin to complain that actions taken while associated with the group have come to be perceived as ego-dystonic (i.e., highly alien to the person's own current values as well as to the values held prior to affiliation as they are recollected). Without making any judgments as to the veracity of these complaints, let us refer to this step in the behavioral process as disenchantment. It should be noted that disenchantment in some cases comes prior to disaffiliation rather than afterwards.

Although the brainwashing conjecture is by no means the only possible explanation for these generally agreed upon empirical facts, a scientifically derived concept of brainwashing may be based on hypotheses that attempt to explain these facts. The core hypothesis is that, under certain circumstances, an individual can be subject to persuasive influences so overwhelming that they actually restructure one's core beliefs and world-view and profoundly modify one's self-conception. The sort of persuasion posited by the brainwashing conjecture is aimed at somewhat different goals than the sort of persuasion practiced by bullies or by salesmen and teachers. Bullies persuade by using threats to modify behavior. Salesmen and teachers utilize a variety of affective and cognitive influences to modify specific attitudes and beliefs. The more radical sort of persuasion posited by the brainwashing conjecture utilizes extreme stress and disorientation along with ideological enticement to create a conversion experience that persists for some time after the stress and pressure have been removed. There is no justification in the foundational literature to assume that this experience is either irresistible or irreversible.<sup>13</sup>

The brainwashing conjecture attempts to explain the lifestyle modifications of a NRM participant as the behavioral result of an intensely focused and highly structured process of manipulative influence. The influencing agent is a cohesive normative group with total or near total control of the social and physical environment (often although not always communal in organization) acting at the behest of a charismatic leader. The target of influence is always an isolated individual, frequently an adolescent or young adult.<sup>14</sup> According to the conjecture, some people may be more susceptible to brainwashing than others, and a given person may be more susceptible at certain times of life than others. However, the brainwashing conjecture does not focus primarily on initial characteristics of the subject. The assumption is that many different kinds of people can, with enough effort, be brainwashed. Attention is therefore focused on the charismatic leader and the manipulative group.

In summary then, brainwashing is to be understood as nothing more than an orchestrated process of ideological conversion that takes its subjects through a well-defined sequence of social psychological stages. To be considered brainwashing, this process must result in (a) effects that persist for a significant amount of time after the orchestrated manipulative stimuli are removed and (b) an accompanying dread of disaffiliation which makes it extremely difficult for the subject to even contemplate life apart from the group. There is nothing in the definition to imply that brainwashing is easy to accomplish, always effective, or impossible to resist.

Some people find this word “brainwashing” itself so offensive that they have difficulty following an argument in which the word is used, even if the argument might otherwise have made perfect sense to them. I am sorry if the word itself offends anyone. My concern is with the concept and I do not really care which word is used to describe it. In fact, in my earliest work on the subject (a study of the Bruderhof), I described the phenomenon without using the word “brainwashing” at all.<sup>15</sup> Instead I used the synonymous term “thought reform” favored by Robert Lifton in his foundational work on the subject.<sup>16</sup> Many synonymous terms for roughly the same phenomenon can be found in the literature. I have chosen to call this social-psychological phenomenon “brainwashing” because that is the one term with which most people are familiar. In any event, it is not the word but the underlying concept which is important. If the sociology of religion as a discipline were to reach consensus on the use of a different term to denote this concept, I would be among the first to adopt it in brainwashing’s stead.

There are persuasive reasons why it might be preferable to start out with a new term. Brainwashing<sup>17</sup> is a subject upon which much nonsense has been written from all sides. Some of this nonsense has come from sensationalist journalists attempting to frighten the public with images out of *The Manchurian Candidate*. Much of it, however, at least in recent years, has come from researchers attempting to debunk the concept without properly understanding it. It has been called the evil eye theory,<sup>18</sup> the robot theory,<sup>19</sup> an ideological weapon,<sup>20</sup> and cynical reductionism.<sup>21</sup> Thomas Robbins has said that “. . . sociological perspectives and findings are likely to undercut the more extreme ‘Invasion-of-the-Body snatchers’ stereotypes of cults. . . .”<sup>22</sup> James Richardson and Brock Kilbourne scoff that “a vocal minority of professionals and lay persons continue to use this scientifically defunct term. . . .”<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, these authors have focused their attacks and their hostility not only on the word but on the underlying concept as well.

It is not my aim in this paper to claim that we currently possess evidence proving that brainwashing is the best explanation of commitment to NRMs. Personally, I believe it is merely the most parsimonious explanation available to explain the commitment histories

of *some* individuals in *some* NRMs. It is my more modest aim to show that brainwashing is a precise and empirically testable conjecture about a very important social-psychological process that has been treated shabbily by majority opinion within the sociology of religion. My argument is that the brainwashing conjecture has been convicted and dismissed without a fair scientific trial. It is this shabby treatment that I have called "blacklisting" and that we turn to in the next section of this paper.

### THE BLACKLISTING OF THE CONCEPT

In two essays on the differences between science and politics, Max Weber makes an important distinction concerning the treatment of minority positions in science as opposed to politics.<sup>24</sup> The norms of science clearly specify that an unpopular theory may not simply be voted or shouted down. It must be refuted. Moreover, this refutation must be epistemological<sup>25</sup> or empirical,<sup>26</sup> never cultural or political. The brainwashing conjecture has never been subjected to such refutation. Instead, a caricature of the brainwashing conjecture supplied by various anti-cult groups for litigational rather than scientific reasons has been put on trial in its place.

Even worse, this has been accompanied by an attack upon the motivations of those who are interested in studying brainwashing. It is said that they must be members, no doubt, of the anti-cult movement.<sup>27</sup> A climate of discourse is created in which it is considered reprehensible or suspicious for a scientist to be driven by curiosity to try to understand the behavior of NRM members and to be drawn to the brainwashing conjecture as one plausible framework. It seems to me that even if one believes that brainwashing is less plausible than some other conjecture in accounting for NRM behavior, such vilification is immoderate.

But why call this treatment blacklisting? Scientific theories have been shouted down by impatient or intolerant majorities many times in the history of science. Some, like the theories of parapsychology advanced by J. B. Rhine of Duke University, have been deservedly obliterated without a full scientific trial. Others, like the theory of evolution, the theory of the link between smoking and lung cancer, and the theory of white flight from the cities, have proven more embarrassing when evidence has eventually accumulated leading to the general acceptance of these theories. For me to say that a line of potential sociological inquiry has been blacklisted would be rhetorically excessive were it merely that an unpopular theory has been shouted down, shameful as that alone may be. To justify the charge of blacklisting requires additionally that there be some degree of collusion within the established power structure of a discipline to defame, ridicule, or ignore the theory and to

marginalize its adherents. I want to show that this has happened and try to explain why.

The prototype to which I am comparing my use of the term, of course, is the blacklisting of Communists and suspected Communist sympathizers by the Hollywood establishment (The Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals and later by The Screen Actors' Guild) from 1947 to about 1959:

The movie industry was conscripted into the Cold War in 1947 when HUAC [the House Un-American Activities Committee] was invited to Los Angeles. The committee's host was the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, an organization that struck a typical postwar stance in asserting that "*co-existence is a myth and neutrality is impossible . . . anyone who is not fighting Communism is helping Communism.*" About fifteen hundred members of the film community had founded the alliance three years earlier; they included John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Walt Disney, Adolphe Menjou, and Cecil B. DeMille.<sup>28</sup>

Compare this with the following statement at a meeting of a few sociologists of religion in 1989 shortly after an incident (discussed below) which resulted in their failure to get the American Sociological Association to endorse a statement to the United States Supreme Court denying the scientific validity of the brainwashing conjecture:

We need to find a way to neutralize the statements of a few well-meaning scholars [who] are not particularly well informed about the legal issues that have been of concern to our group. . . . We have been advised by [our attorneys] that even a single such statement, if left unrefuted, could be of harm to our cause. . . . Our meetings with [representatives of] the Unification Church confirmed that, while they share our goals and strategy, they are not prepared to help materially with this particular project.<sup>29</sup>

To the best of my knowledge, my work on the subject<sup>30</sup> as well as that of Richard Ofshe,<sup>31</sup> Marybeth Ayella,<sup>32</sup> Robert Cialdini,<sup>33</sup> Amy Siskand,<sup>34</sup> Roy Wallis,<sup>35</sup> Philip Zimbardo,<sup>36</sup> and others has never been directly confronted, much less refuted by sociologists of religion. Rather it has been defamed, ridiculed, or ignored. There has been a sophisticated and subtle form of intellectual bullying by an entrenched majority within the discipline of a small minority composed of both sincere scholars and academic opportunists. By continuing to shine their spotlight on the opportunists and studiously ignoring the work of the scholars, the myth can be sustained that what this is all about is a purely ideological spat between the good guys and the bad guys.

It is interesting in this regard that "both sides" make use of similar victimization claims in a context of McCarthyite imagery. I don't think that either side is being hypocritical in this regard. I understand very well how Dick Anthony, Eileen Barker, David Bromley, J. Gordon Melton,

James Richardson, Thomas Robbins, et al. might consider themselves to be a small beleaguered minority courageously battling tremendous odds in a fight against the overwhelming power of the press and public opinion. I can understand how they can see themselves as defenders of religious minorities against bigots who would deprive them of their constitutional rights. However, it is also necessary to understand that those who stubbornly cling to an intellectual interest in the brainwashing conjecture are equally sincere in seeing themselves as an ignored or ridiculed minority within the smaller frog pond of academia. Depending on the context, both sides have a claim to the victim role.

Joe McCarthy appealed to a national hysteria that tended to see a communist under every bed.<sup>37</sup> In retrospect, it is easy to see how paranoid and ridiculous this was. I think that many sociologists of religion see themselves as victims of a paranoid public opinion that tends to see a potential Jonestown or Heaven's Gate in every unpopular religious movement. But at the same time, proponents of the brainwashing conjecture view themselves as victims of a paranoid scholarly opinion that tends to see every attempt to investigate the efforts of religious leaders to manipulate the minds and emotions of their followers as providing aid and comfort to deprogrammers and to apostates involved in litigation. In reality, it would be good to recognize that most new religious groups are not at all like Jonestown or Heaven's Gate and that, in reality, very few who leave religious movements get deprogrammed or sue their former groups for damages. In my own longitudinal study,<sup>38</sup> which comes closer to drawing on a national random sample than any other I know, only two respondents left because of a deprogramming. This mutual posturing in the rhetoric of victimhood helps to lend a comic air to the blacklisting of the brainwashing conjecture. It is time for the media to recognize that cults are not the symptom of wholesale cultural disintegration they may once have seemed. And it is time for sociologists of religion to recognize that the anti-cult movement is far from being the powerful monolithic threat to religious liberty that it may once have seemed.

Somehow it became politically correct, at least within sociology, to defend NRMs and to attack those who argued that some NRM members may have been brainwashed. Although the beliefs and practices of NRMs themselves are rarely praised, their constitutional right to be misguided and to mislead their members is vigorously defended. The harm of squelching a form of free religious expression seems to many to be a far greater danger than any harm that might come to members of NRMs or their children. Oddly, the opposite position is considered politically correct when weighing the rights of abused spouses and children against the value of privacy within the nuclear family.

In an attempt to explain this curious anomaly, Robbins has argued,

Critics of cults have expressed to the author the view that sociologists or other scholars who seem sympathetic to new movements are really “in love with religion.” Arguably, there is a general “pro religion” bias in the sociology of religion. . . . The effects of any “pro-religion” bias in sociology is possibly reinforced by the particular “esprit de corps” of the sociology of religion and solidarity of its practitioners. Since the sociology of religion has been marginal within general sociology, sociologists of religion have assiduously developed their own reference groups and their own systems of status-conferral, i.e. conferences and journals. These “frog ponds” tend to involve both sociologists and religious studies and divinity scholars, the latter being even more likely than sociologists of religion to be ordained and pro-religion.<sup>39</sup>

Another source of the bias against the brainwashing conjecture may be found in the role that NRMs play in sponsoring scholarly activities. Irving Louis Horowitz’s early warning of the corruption of the scientific community by lavish funding from NRMs is relevant to this issue.<sup>40</sup> Maybe all the money that flows from NRMs to scholars has no effect on research. But it is odd that all this cozying up to NRM resources has resulted in an unprecedented bullying of scholars working with conjectures antithetical to the interests of these movements. Bear in mind that, for social scientists, these are interesting theoretical intimations, whereas for NRMs and ex-members involved in law suits, they are, in contrast, legal issues in which millions of dollars may be at stake. Robbins has said in this regard, “. . . it is essential for sociologists to avoid appearing to be too closely connected to NRMs. The issue here is the extrinsic one of credibility. Sociologists might be well advised to avoid any appearance of being ‘in the pocket’ of those who sometimes benefit from (and eagerly trumpet and exploit) their findings.”<sup>41</sup> I believe that much of the sociology of religion, without intending to, has somehow wound up in this pocket.

Unfortunately, instead of a community of interested scholars, there are two warring camps, each utterly convinced that the other side’s work is without merit. Neither camp agrees on a set of criteria for defining, identifying, or measuring the phenomenon. They tend not to publish in the same journals nor to cite each other’s work. Therefore, scientific dialogue cannot take place, only partisan sniping. For example, much of the debate in the courts has naturally focused on the question of who is guilty. Is an allegedly brainwashed person responsible for actions taken while under the influence of the NRM? For a scientist, concerned with determining the plausibility of the conjecture, this is not a question that would loom very large on the research agenda, at least in the early stages of investigation.<sup>42</sup> Being forced or tempted to confront issues like this early in the investigation is one way in which the offering of “expertise” within the legal system can distort the scientific process.

In order to understand how this unfortunate situation came to be, it will be useful to chart a brief chronology of events concerning NRMs in

America in the 50 years since the end of World War II. This half century can be divided into five rather distinct periods.

*1946-1964. The calm before the storm.* This was a period of minimal activity for NRMs in America. The Beats, of course, had a great interest in Zen Buddhism, but this interest was not expressed in organization or social movement building. Scientology was only beginning to establish itself and was not yet clearly identified as a religion. The Unification Church had made only a few very tentative scouting expeditions to America from Korea, where the movement was still largely based. The only major success story of this period was the Bruderhof. Coming to the USA in 1954, the Bruderhof enjoyed phenomenal success in part because, at least in the eastern United States, it was virtually the only game in town for seekers of total Christian community. This was also the heyday of the Cold War and its attendant anti-Communist hysteria. Attempts were made to frighten the American public by claiming that the Communists had discovered in brainwashing a powerful and mysterious new weapon that could rob ordinary people of their free will.<sup>43</sup> Although these claims totally distorted the foundational scholarship on brainwashing, they left a bad odor attached to the concept which lingered for long time, particularly for intellectuals who opposed McCarthyism and anti-Communist hysteria.

*1965-1969. The coming of the gurus.* Horowitz and others have pointed out that the context changed in 1965 when newly relaxed immigration laws allowed a flood of Asian gurus and their followers to come to the United States.<sup>44</sup> Since this was the peak of the counterculture in the United States, these gurus found rapid acceptance and many eager followers. The Unification Church, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), the 3HO, and the Children of God all established themselves in America during this period as did thousands of smaller communal groups of every ideological type, including an apocalyptic California group called the Manson Family. There was minimal scholarly interest in these groups and no polarization during this period. Rosabeth Kanter and I were collecting data but had not yet published. Only a handful of pioneering scholarly works were beginning to call the attention of social scientists to this new phenomenon.<sup>45</sup> Nobody was as yet talking about brainwashing with respect to NRMs.

*1970-1977. The drawing of the battle lines.* The trial of Charles Manson and his followers (including the well-publicized preparation for the trial) took up most of the year 1970 and captivated the American public.<sup>46</sup> It was the OJ trial of its day. It was at about this time that the mass media began to use brainwashing terminology to explain the behavior of young people who joined cults. It was also about this time that I published the

first sociological study making use of the brainwashing conjecture to explain commitment to a religious community.<sup>47</sup> During this time the first anti-cult organizations were getting started. FREECOG was founded in San Diego specifically to combat the Children of God (COG), and soon after that, in 1974, the Citizens Freedom Foundation, the first general anti-cult organization, was founded. I think it is fair to say that both the NRMs and their opponents had some victories and some defeats during this period. It was a time of maximum growth for the Unification Church and Scientology as well as some newer movements such as Guru Maharaj Ji's Divine Light Mission.<sup>48</sup> But it was also a time when deprogramming began to thrive<sup>49</sup> and not all court cases were being decided in favor of the NRM defendants. Sociologists were much in demand as expert witnesses for both sides beginning in this period. This laid the groundwork for the later hardening of positions that I have documented in this paper. It also established a very unfortunate precedent of sociologists being led by their clients rather than by their data. But during this period there was still a certain degree of tolerance toward divergent positions. In 1976, the anti-cult movement suffered a defeat when Patty Hearst's brainwashing defense was disallowed. But it took heart from the fact that in that same year, Senator Robert Dole agreed to hold hearings on the "cult problem" in Washington, D.C. A rough balance of power existed between the two sides. Only a very few sociologists, such as Irving Louis Horowitz, Amitai Etzioni and Seymour Martin Lipset<sup>50</sup> were as yet speaking openly of the danger of academic co-optation by wealthy new religious organizations.

*1978-1986. The Triumph of the Anti-Cult Movement.* All this changed on November 18, 1978 when the world was shocked by the mass suicides and murders of nearly a thousand followers of the Reverend Jim Jones at Jonestown, Guyana. In the ensuing eight years, national anti-cult organizations thrived, and the leaders of a number of major NRMs were successfully prosecuted for a variety of crimes.<sup>51</sup> Charles Dederich of Synanon, after being exposed by Richard Ofshe and his colleagues in a book for which they won the Pulitzer Prize,<sup>52</sup> pleaded no contest to a murder conspiracy charge. The Reverend Moon was found guilty of tax evasion.<sup>53</sup> Various leaders of ISKCON were charged with murder and other crimes.<sup>54</sup> The Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh was deported from the United States, and his communal headquarters in Oregon was dismantled.<sup>55</sup> During this eight year period, those sociologists who were attempting to defend the religious freedom of these highly unpopular NRMs could perhaps be forgiven for feeling themselves to be a beleaguered and totally outgunned garrison. Also during this period, sociologists were in increasing demand as expert witnesses (as both plaintiffs and defendants) in civil litigation involving complaints of brainwashing. Huge sums of money were at stake, and these witnesses

were, therefore, generously rewarded for their testimony. A few began to count these fees as a principal source of income. Unfortunately, the importance of these expert witness roles exceeded the growth of any real expertise to speak of within sociology. Although a few good studies were published,<sup>56</sup> many sociologists on both sides of the debate were seduced by events into claiming far more knowledge than they or anybody yet had.

*1987-1997. The Religophiles Strike Back.* By 1987, a substantial network of sociologists specializing in the study of NRMs, feeling that the very foundations of religious liberty and freedom of religious choice were in grave peril, had succeeded in organizing as an effective force for the critique of some of the most outrageous of the claims of the anti-cult movement.<sup>57</sup> Since some of these claims were truly outrageous, as shown by London<sup>58</sup> and others, this might have proven a valuable public service if left at that. However, by this time, many sociologists had gotten so caught up in courtroom drama that they had lost sight of their primary function: collecting data and testing hypotheses. Most of the scholarship published in this period was nothing more than cultural interpretation with the goal of deconstructing and thereby marginalizing opposing points of view.<sup>59</sup>

The single event most responsible for pushing the pro-NRM sociologists over the edge and provoking what I have called the blacklisting response was a decision by a California Supreme Court Judge Mosk (speaking for the majority) in a celebrated case known as *Molko and Leal vs. The Holy Spirit Association*:

Some highly respected authorities conclude brainwashing exists and is remarkably effective. . . . To the contrary, other authorities believe brainwashing either does not exist at all . . . or is effective only when combined with physical abuse or physical restraint. . . . We need not resolve the controversy: we need only conclude that *the existence of such differing views compels the conclusion that Molko and Leal's theory indeed raises a factual question—viz., whether or not Molko and Leal were brainwashed—which . . . precludes a grant summary judgment for the Church* [emphasis added].<sup>60</sup>

It is important to understand exactly what signal this ruling sent to those sociologists of religion who had allied themselves against what they perceived as the anti-cult menace to religious liberty. To obtain a summary judgment against allegations of brainwashing, it was not enough to mount a convincing argument or even an argument that had convinced an overwhelming majority of social scientists.<sup>61</sup> Even a single contrarian research finding, if not discredited by the discipline, would be enough to turn the issue into “a factual question,” thus necessitating a trial and thus risking that “emotionality” would triumph over “reason” in the rendering of justice. From this, more than anything, arose the

blacklisting mentality echoing the words quoted earlier, in a different context, from the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals: “co-existence is a myth and neutrality is impossible. . . . anyone who is not fighting [anti-cultism] is helping [anti-cultism].” No longer was there even a pretense of the disinterested search for truth.

The stock-in-trade of blacklisting campaigns is reputational degradation, and the immediate result of Judge Mosk’s ruling in the Molko and Leal case was a vigorous two-pronged attack on the reputations of (a) NRM apostates and (b) scholars who were not prepared to disavow the brainwashing conjecture. Just as in the Hollywood blacklisting campaign, the attacks were, for the most part, not directly aimed at specific persons but instead at classes of persons. Since many NRM apostates were sources of evidence about brainwashing, a tendentious campaign was begun to define the apostate role as one whose accounts were inherently unreliable.<sup>62</sup> Instead of letting the issue of the reliability of apostate accounts be settled empirically, an attempt was made to settle it definitionally. The following definition of apostasy offered by David Bromley is an example of how this has been done: “Apostasy may be defined in preliminary fashion as a role that is constructed when an organization is in a state of high tension with its surrounding environment and that involves an individual exiting the organization *to form an alliance with an oppositional coalition* [emphasis added].”<sup>63</sup> This strange sort of definition has the function of allowing statements by any and all apostates critical of their former groups to be more easily discredited. By *definition*, they are all now following the ideological line of some opposing group, usually an anti-cult organization.<sup>64</sup>

The reputational attack on scholars was also carried out indirectly for the most part. The principal weapon came in the form of *Amicus Curie* briefs filed with the United States Supreme Court (to which the Molko & Leal case had been appealed) by the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the American Sociological Association (ASA) as well as by a number of independent scholars. This strategy attempted to split off good brainwashing research<sup>65</sup> done in prison camps and other coercive environments from what they labeled bunkum brainwashing research<sup>66</sup> done in NRMs. Other NRM research such as my own that could not so easily be discredited was simply ignored. Note the wording of the *Amicus* brief: “There is, furthermore, *no evidence* to suggest that anything can substitute for physical coercion in the process of ‘coercive persuasion’ [earlier defined as synonymous with brainwashing]. To the contrary, *all available research* refutes any such claim [emphasis added].”<sup>67</sup> Note the strained and strange haste to declare the sort of closure that is rarely achieved in any branch of sociology in an area that was only beginning to be explored.

The *Amicus* brief nevertheless enjoyed clear sailing through the SSSR. In the APA and the ASA things got a little sticky. Both organizations first signed onto the brief and then were forced to withdraw it when some members of each organization protested. In 1989, an executive officer of the ASA simply signed the brief on behalf of the entire ASA and sent it off to the Supreme Court (as if the ASA had formally approved it) before it was ever seen by the Council. He later admitted that he had made an honest mistake and that he thought he had discussed the brief with the Council. His notes, however, showed no record of such discussion. The haste and secrecy in which such mistakes could be made is another indicator of the blacklisting climate that prevailed at the time. Had they not been blocked, these briefs would have put the major professional organizations representing sociologists and psychologists in the United States on public record making the outrageous claim that the concept of brainwashing had been so thoroughly discredited by a definitive body of research that no further research on this subject was necessary.

In the 1990s the anti-cult movement continued to wane in influence while the influence of those who took a hard line against the investigation of brainwashing and the credibility of apostate accounts continued to grow. The SSSR, to its credit, did begin to moderate its position somewhat. At its November 1990 meeting, it passed the following more moderately worded resolution:

This association considers that there is insufficient research to permit informed, responsible scholars to reach a consensus on the nature and effects of nonphysical coercion and control. It further asserts that one should not automatically equate the techniques involved in the process of physical coercion and control with those of nonphysical coercion and control. In addition to critical review of existing knowledge, further appropriately designed research is necessary to enable scholarly consensus about this issue.

Perhaps this is an indication that the historical high-water mark for both cult and anti-cult hysteria has already passed. In personal conversations with people representing a variety of “extreme” points of view, I have perceived that a sense of moderation is starting to reassert itself although it still has a long way to go.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR RAPPROCHEMENT**

In this paper, I have tried to document how a regrettable polarization has come to exist in the way sociologists of religion study and think about NRMs. I hope I have been clear in indicating that there are no real villains in this little intellectual drama but rather a shameful loss of perspective on both sides. Each side has found a way (for the most part

sincerely) to claim underdog status, and each side has thus felt entitled to eschew moderation in attacks on the position of the “enemy.” This has left the discipline hobbled in research situations calling for the ability to see, in religious movements, instances of *both* courageous fidelity in the pursuit of an unpopular religious calling *and* widespread corruption in the cynical or fanatical use of social-psychological techniques of extreme persuasion to block exits and to minimize the probability that highly committed members will feel able to blow the whistle or even to just say good-bye. Jonestown, Waco, The Solar Temple, and Heaven’s Gate are merely the most well known recent charismatic religious movements which, although they differ from each other in many ways, are similar in exhibiting clearly the need for a sociology that is willing to look at both sides of this picture. In the absence of such a clear-sighted sociology, we have, I think, been pathetically incapable of providing useful guidance in dealing with such tragedies while they are unfolding or plausible explanations of them after the fact.

In my opinion the two most important ways in which the sociology of religion could encourage the trend toward moderation in this field are the encouragement of disinterested empirical research and the encouragement of financial disclosure.

With regard to the former, many rumors continue to circulate to this day concerning the difficulty that proponents of the brainwashing conjecture have encountered in getting papers accepted in sociology of religion journals, annual volumes, and annual meetings. Although none of these rumors has been unambiguously substantiated by me at this writing, the very fact that so many rumors of this sort are in circulation is testimony to the chilling effect that a blacklist, even in its waning days, can have on freedom to choose a research direction, particularly for young scholars.<sup>68</sup> One young post-doc told me that she “would have to be crazy” to undertake a research project that might result in finding that brainwashing was being used in a particular religious community until she had tenure. Such concerns make it all the more difficult to ever resolve these matters on scientific terms.

Social scientists seeking to debunk the brainwashing conjecture have often spoken as if extensive research has already been done on the behavior of cult participants and as if definitive conclusions could now be formed. And, indeed, there has been a great deal published concerning cults in the past ten years. However, a close examination of this vast quantity of writings shows that it is based upon a very skimpy body of actual data. Most of the best research that has been done consists of ethnographic monographs on single NRMs, and all of this remains to be synthesized. The few epidemiological or other comparative and quantitative studies have most often been based upon small sample sizes and unrepresentative samples.<sup>69</sup> I also think some researchers have been naive in underestimating the ability of cults to put a favorable spin

on research findings by “helping” social science investigators get in touch with subjects to be interviewed. At the other end of the spectrum, samples based upon psychiatric outpatient lists are similarly biased.

With regard to finances, a major obstacle toward the sort of progress desired is the cloud of secrecy that surrounds the funding of research on NRMs. The sociology of religion can no longer avoid the unpleasant ethical question of how to deal with the large sums of money being pumped into the field by the religious groups being studied and, to a lesser extent, by their opponents. Whether in the form of subvention of research expenses, subvention of publications, opportunities to sponsor and attend conferences, or direct fees for services, this money is not insignificant, and its influence on research findings and positions taken on scholarly disputes is largely unknown. It is time to recognize that this is an issue of a whole different ethical magnitude from that of taking research funding from the Methodists to find out why the collection baskets are not coming back as heavy as they used to. I know there will be great resistance to opening this can of worms, but I do not think there is any choice. This is an issue that is slowly but surely building toward a public scandal. It would be far better to deal with it ourselves within the discipline than to have others expose it. I am not implying that it is necessarily wrong to accept funding from interested parties, whether pro or anti, but I do think there needs to be some more public accounting of where the money is coming from and what safeguards have been taken to assure that this money is not interfering with scientific objectivity.<sup>70</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 121.

<sup>2</sup> All these and others are conjectures that have been proposed for explaining the dramatic changes that individuals go through when caught up in charismatic movements. These conjectures, only mentioned here by way of introduction, will be discussed in Part Two of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> To some extent, they have also tended to publish in clinical psychology journals where support for their point of view is a bit stronger.

<sup>4</sup> Several people on each side of this debate have told me, in personal communications, not only that they disagree with, but that they hate or despise certain members of the other camp.

<sup>5</sup> Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge. *A Theory of Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Lawrence R. Iannaccone, “Sacrifice and Stigma: Reducing Free-Riding in Cults, Communes, and Other Collectives,” *Journal of Political Economy* 100 (1992): 271-291.

- <sup>6</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).
- <sup>7</sup> If the evidence in all cases was fabricated, it was done with remarkable consistency over time. I have returned to talk with all of these people and they all have stuck to their stories over periods of time as long as twenty years.
- <sup>8</sup> Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*; Edgar Schein and C.H. Barker, *Coercive Persuasion* (New York: Norton, 1961).
- <sup>9</sup> Lee Ross and Richard. E. Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).
- <sup>10</sup> Robert Feldman, *Social Psychology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 35.
- <sup>11</sup> Janet Jacobs, *Divine Disenchantment: Deconverting from New Religions* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 40n.
- <sup>12</sup> This Shiite sect, operating out of a headquarters fortress in Tabaristan near the south coast of the Caspian Sea, terrorized the Islamic world for over 150 years by training agents to carry out often suicidal missions of assassination. The agents were trained using hashish (from which both the sect and the English word "assassin" get their names) to give them a glimpse of paradise and to make them impatient to get there. Cf. Colin McEvedy, *Atlas of Medieval History* (London: Penguin, 1981), 62.
- <sup>13</sup> Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*.
- <sup>14</sup> Even when a closely bonded married couple joins a cult as a family, the brainwashing process, at some point, separates the two people from each other, psychologically if not always physically.
- <sup>15</sup> Benjamin D Zablocki, *The Joyful Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
- <sup>16</sup> Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*.
- <sup>17</sup> Throughout this paper, I have used the term *brainwashing* to describe a process that has gone by many names in the scientific and popular literature. This process has been called *thought reform* (Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*); *menticide* (Joost Meerloo, *The Rape of the Mind* [New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1956]); *coercive persuasion* (Edgar Schein and C.H. Barker, *Coercive Persuasion* [New York: Norton, 1961]); *mind rape* (Meerloo, *The Rape of the Mind*); and *debility, dependency, and dread* (I.E. Farber, H.F. Harlow, and L. J. West, "Brainwashing, Conditioning, and DDD [Debility, Dependency, and Dread]," *Sociometry* 20 [1957]: 271-285). Singer has preferred to use the longer phrase *systematic manipulation of psychological and social influence* (Margaret Singer, "Group Psychodynamics," *Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy*, ed. R. Berkow [Rahway, NJ: Merck Sharpe & Dohme Research Laboratories, 1987]). All of these terms are roughly synonymous. I have chosen to use the term *brainwashing* because it has the widest public recognition. It may also be the most misunderstood of all these terms, but I see that as an advantage, since using the term impels us to face these misunderstandings head-on instead of avoiding them with linguistic sleights of hand.
- <sup>18</sup> Harvey Cox, quoted in: Gene G. James, "Brainwashing: The Myth and the Actuality," *Thought* 61 (1986): 254.
- <sup>19</sup> Perry London, "Deposition in the Case of the United States Versus Fishman" (Northern District of California: United States District Court, 1990), 4.
- <sup>20</sup> James A. Beckford, *Cult Controversies: The Societal Response to the New Religious Movements* (London: Tavistock, 1985), 204.
- <sup>21</sup> James T. Richardson and Brock Kilbourne, "Classical and Contemporary Applications of Brainwashing Models: A Comparison and Critique," in *The Brainwashing/Deprogramming Controversy: Sociological, Psychological, Legal, and Historical Perspectives*, ed. David G. Bromley and James T. Richardson (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1983), 8.
- <sup>22</sup> Thomas Robbins, *Cults, Converts, and Charisma: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1988), 200.
- <sup>23</sup> Richardson and Kilbourne, "Classical and Contemporary Applications of Brainwashing Models," 31.

<sup>24</sup> Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 77-128; Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 129-56.

<sup>25</sup> An epistemological refutation would consist of showing that the supposed theory was not really a scientific theory at all in that it failed to meet the all-important scientific criterion of disprovability.

<sup>26</sup> An empirical refutation would consist of a marshaling of evidence that contradicts or at least fails to support the theory. A thorough empirical refutation would be based on several such studies, each of which had been replicated several times.

<sup>27</sup> To be fair, it must be said that scholars associated with the anti-cult movement have often been equally condemnatory of research that has anything good to say about NRMs. The poor disinterested scholar tends to get it from both directions. However, I dwell here chiefly on the abuses of those who defend cultic influence processes because by and large they hold most of the positions of authority within the institutional framework of the sociology of religion.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 127.

<sup>29</sup> This quote was taken from an email message in 1989 that was sent out to an extensive list of recipients. I was one of the recipients on the mistaken belief that I would be sympathetic to the ideas expressed. Even though the email message has been widely distributed and is famous throughout the discipline, I see no need to embarrass the author by citing his name.

<sup>30</sup> Zablocki, *The Joyful Community*; Benjamin D. Zablocki, *Alienation and Charisma: A Study of Contemporary American Communes* (New York: Free Press, 1980); Benjamin D. Zablocki, "Rational Models of Charismatic Influence," in *Social Theory and Social Policy: Essays in Honor of James S. Coleman*, eds. Aage B. Sorensen and Seymour Spilerman (Westport, CN: Praeger, 1993), 73-91.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Ofshe, N. Eisenberg, R. Coughlin, G. Dolinajec, K. Gerson, and A. Johnson, "Social Structure and Social Control in Synanon," *Voluntary Action Research* 3 (1974): 67-76; Richard Ofshe, "Coercive Persuasion and Attitude Change," in *The Encyclopedia of Sociology*, eds. Edgar Borgatta and Marie Borgatta (New York: MacMillan, 1992), 212-24; Richard Ofshe, "Synanon: The People Business," in *The New Religious Consciousness*, eds. Charles Glock and Robert Bellah, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 116-37; Richard Ofshe and Margaret Singer, "Attacks on Peripheral versus Central Elements of Self and the Impact of Thought Reform Techniques," *Cultic Studies* 3, no. 1 (1986): 3-24.

<sup>32</sup> Marybeth Ayella, "Insane Therapy: Case Study of the Social Organization of a Psychotherapy Cult," (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1985); Marybeth Ayella, "'They Must Be Crazy': Some of the Difficulties in Researching 'Cults,'" *American Behavioral Scientist* 33, no. 5 (1990): 562-77.

<sup>33</sup> Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: The New Psychology of Modern Persuasion* (New York: William Morrow, 1984); Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: How and Why People Agree to Things* (New York: Quill, 1985); Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence, Science and Practice* (Glenview, IL: Scott Foreman, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> Amy Siskind, "Two Utopian Communities in the United States: The Oneida Community and the Sullivan Institute/Fourth Wall Community" (Ph.D. diss., The New School for Social Research, 1990).

<sup>35</sup> Roy Wallis, *The Road to Total Freedom: A Sociological Analysis of Scientology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

<sup>36</sup> Philip Zimbardo and Susan Anderson, "Understanding Mind Control: Exotic and Mundane Mental Manipulations," in *Recovery From Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse*, ed. Michael D. Langone (New York: Norton, 1993), 104-25.

- <sup>37</sup> David Oshinsky, *A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy* (New York: The Free Press, 1983).
- <sup>38</sup> Zablocki, *Alienation and Charisma*.
- <sup>39</sup> Robbins, *Cults, Converts, and Charisma*, 203.
- <sup>40</sup> Irving Louis Horowitz, *Science, Sin and Scholarship: The Politics of Reverend Moon and the Unification Church* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978).
- <sup>41</sup> Robbins, *Cults, Converts, and Charisma*, 200.
- <sup>42</sup> It might be helpful to science, in this regard, to make a clear distinction between brainwashing and actionable brainwashing. Not all cases in which the social-psychological process of brainwashing might be demonstrated are necessarily deserving of compensation. If we could separate these two issues, it might help those who feel that the cults are being subjected to inquisition by lawsuit to acknowledge evidence of brainwashing without feeling that they were thereby acknowledging the cult's culpability.
- <sup>43</sup> Edward Hunter, *Brainwashing in Red China: The Calculated Destruction of Men's Minds* (New York: Vanguard, 1956).
- <sup>44</sup> Horowitz, *Science, Sin and Scholarship*.
- <sup>45</sup> John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965): 862-875; John Lofland, *Doomsday Cult: A Study of Conversion, Proselytization and Maintenance of Faith* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966); Lewis Yablonsky, *The Tunnel Back* (New York: Macmillan, 1965); Thomas Robbins, "Eastern Mysticism and the Resocialization of Drug Users: The Meher Baba Cult," *Sociological Analysis* 38 (1969): 281-303.
- <sup>46</sup> Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry, *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Murders* (New York: Norton, 1974).
- <sup>47</sup> Zablocki, *The Joyful Community*. Interestingly, at this time there were nothing but positive reviews for this treatment within sociology. A number of other sociologists writing in this period saw in my use of the brainwashing conjecture a model of how to understand NRMs (James Richardson, Mary Harder, and Robert B. Simmonds, "Thought Reform and the Jesus Movement," *Youth and Society* 4 [1972]: 185-202).
- <sup>48</sup> James V. Downton, Jr., *Sacred Journeys: The Conversion of Young Americans to Divine Light Mission* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).
- <sup>49</sup> Ted Patrick had begun to deprogram abductees of the Children of God in San Diego in 1971. By 1976, when he published his book, *Let Our Children Go*, deprogramming had become a well-established profession enjoying a certain degree of immunity in its brushes with the law: John LeMoult, "Deprogramming Members of Religious Sects," *Fordham Law Review* 46 (1978): 599-640.
- <sup>50</sup> Horowitz, *Science, Sin and Scholarship*.
- <sup>51</sup> The Cult Awareness Network (CAN) was founded in 1978 as was the American Family Foundation, an organization for clinical professionals engaged in anti-cult activity.
- <sup>52</sup> Dave Mitchell, Cathy Mitchell, and Richard Ofshe, *The Light on Synanon* (New York: Seaview Books, 1980).
- <sup>53</sup> Joel Fetzer, *Selective Prosecution of Religiously Motivated Offenders in America* (Lewiston, ME: Edwin Mellen, 1989).
- <sup>54</sup> Some were later convicted. Cf. John Hubner, and Lindsey Gruson, *Monkey On A Stick: Murder, Madness and the Hare Krishnas* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988).
- <sup>55</sup> Lewis F. Carter, *Charisma and Control in Rajneeshpuram: The Role of Shared Values in the Creation of a Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- <sup>56</sup> For example: Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984); Marc Galanter and Peter Buckley, "Psychological Consequences of Charismatic Religious Experience and Meditation," in *The Brainwashing/Deprogramming Controversy*, eds. David Bromley and James Richardson (New York: Edwin Mellon, 1983), 194-204; Janet Jacobs, "The Economy of Love in Religious Commitment: The Deconversion

of Women from Nontraditional Religious Movements," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23, no. 2 (1984): 155-171; Stuart A. Wright, "Post-Involvement Attitudes of Voluntary Defectors from Controversial New Religious Movements," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23, no. 2 (1984): 172-182; Trudy Solomon, "Integrating the 'Moonie' Experience: A Survey of Ex-Members of the Unification Church," in *In Gods We Trust*, eds. Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1981).

<sup>37</sup> This critique was exhibited not only in courts of law but increasingly in the mass media where the demand for "experts" had also increased.

<sup>38</sup> Perry London, "Deposition in the Case of the United States Versus Fishman," (Northern District of California: United States District Court, 1990).

<sup>39</sup> Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins, "Religious Totalism, Violence, and Exemplary Dualism: Beyond the Extrinsic Model," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 7, no. 3 (1995): 10-50; Dick Anthony, "Religious Movements and Brainwashing Litigation: Evaluating Key Testimony," in *In Gods We Trust*, eds. Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1990); Thomas Robbins and Roland Robertson, "Studying Religion Today: Controversiality and 'Objectivity' in the Sociology of Religion," *Religion* 21 (1991): 319-337; J. Gordon Melton, "Another Look at New Religions," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527 (1993): 97-112; James R. Lewis, "Self-Fulfilling Stereotypes, the Anticult Movement, and the Waco Confrontation," in *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, ed. Stuart A. Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>60</sup> *Molko and Leal v. Holy Spirit Association* (Sacramento: California Supreme Court, 1988), 1109-10.

<sup>61</sup> The reason that such a summary dismissal of complaints was thought to be so important was the widespread belief among sociologists at that time that juries (and lower court judges) could not be trusted to provide justice in brainwashing cases. The very words "brainwashing" and "cult" were thought to be so inflammatory to the sensibilities of average jurors (and ordinary judge) as to practically assure findings in favor of the plaintiff.

<sup>62</sup> Benjamin Zablocki, "Reliability and Validity of Apostate Accounts in the Study of Religious Communities" (paper presented at the Association for the Sociology of Religion, New York, N.Y., August, 1996). David G. Bromley, "Religious Disaffiliation: A Neglected Social Process," in *Falling From the Faith: Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy*, ed. David G. Bromley (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988), 9-25.

<sup>63</sup> David G. Bromley, "The Social Construction of Religious Apostasy," in *The Politics of Religious Apostasy*, ed. David G. Bromley (New York: Praeger, 1997), 4.

<sup>64</sup> Even scholars who took a strong anti-brainwashing position were not immune from attack if they dared to utilize research designs calling for interviews with both current members of NRMs and apostates. James A. Beckford was dismayed by the prevailing climate of opinion that seemed to assert that "if you are not with us, you're against us": "One might have thought that professional sociologists did not need to be reminded that having an academic interest in a certain group of people does not necessarily supply any degree of personal support for their cause. Unfortunately, however, some of the 'professional' response to my work indicates that I am taken to be an anti-cultist because of my interest in ex-Moonies. . . . I am therefore obliged to preface the following chapter with an express denial of the charge that my interest in apostates' and critics' accounts of the UC evinces any personal antipathy on my part toward this particular NRM or, indeed, any others" (*Cult Controversies*, 46).

<sup>65</sup> Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*; Schein and Barker, *Coercive Persuasion*.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Ofshe and Margaret Singer, "Attacks on Peripheral versus Central Elements of Self and the Impact of Thought Reform Techniques," *Cultic Studies* 3, no. 1 (1986): 3-24; Margaret Thaler Singer, *Cults in Our Midst* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995); Ronald Enroth, "The Seduction Syndrome," in *Cults in Context: Readings in the Study of New Religious Movements*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1996).

<sup>67</sup> *Amicus Curie Brief* by the American Sociological Association to United States Supreme Court (1989) page 11.

<sup>68</sup> I have had instances of this sort of barrier being lifted against me so I am personally confident that at least some of the stories by others are correct. However, confidentiality issues prevent me from saying more about these instances at this time.

<sup>69</sup> For example Stuart A. Wright, *Leaving Cults: The Dynamics of Defection*, ed. S.D. Gaede, SSRC Monograph Series Vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1987).

<sup>70</sup> Since it would be hypocritical to suggest that others do what I am not willing to do myself, let me give here a brief accounting of my own funding. Full details are available upon request. I have never taken any fees for serving as an expert witness either on the side of a NRM or on the side of any individual plaintiff or organized opposition group. In fact, I have always refused invitations to serve as an expert, whether paid or unpaid, for either side. All of my research funding (approximately \$960,000) has come from U. S. government agencies (NIMH, NSF, NIDA), from the Russell Sage Foundation, and from the universities on whose faculties I have served (UC-Berkeley, California Institute of Technology, Columbia University, and Rutgers University). I have accepted research funding from no other source. No publication of mine has ever received subvention from any source. I have had my expenses paid to two conferences, one sponsored by the Unification Church and one by a group of anti-cult scholars.