

“By Faith Alone”: New Religions, Cult Experts, and the Media

by

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Abstract:

An expert in Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity has pored over the original or the earliest available texts of the religion that she strives to understand. Adherent to the religion in question or not, the expert has respectfully and objectively tried to observe its application in the lives of the faithful, in its rituals, and practices. She appreciates and can articulate how that religious tradition has impacted on the cultural milieu. She can address its evolution, its highs and its lows. While clear standards exist for identifying an authority on any of the world’s major religions, today’s media largely relies on disparate criteria in their coverage of new religions. Journalists remain largely reliant on personalities who lack appropriate academic training. The “expertise” of some of media’s main sources stems from a questionable narrative that stereotypes and marginalizes millions, denying their religiosity and assessing them based on criteria that could equally be applied to mainstream religions and, yet, for the time being, are not. Few of the individuals making inchoate, often alarmist assertions about new religious movements have any advanced academic training in religion whatsoever. Some alleged authorities cited by the press have no university-level training at all. While today’s media professionals are commendably cautious in reporting on incidents involving race, religion, or ethnicity, they lack such deference in their coverage of new religions. Today’s media leaders should come to terms with the implications of this extant dichotomy of standards.

Keywords: Anti-Cult Movement; Cult Experts; Deprogramming; New Religious Movements, *SPJ* Code of Ethics.

Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

For nearly half of a century, tensions have existed between New Religious Movements (NRMs) and what is referred to as the Anti-Cult Movement (ACM). In the United States Court systems, the NRMs have prevailed in terms of stopping most deprogramming activity. It is now illegal and those engaging in such actions risk severe civil and criminal sanctions. Nevertheless, in the “court of public opinion,” the ACM’s depictions of NRMs that justified such deprogramming activity remain largely accepted because their portrayal of NRMs was largely embraced and reinforced by the media, and that remains the case today. Since the 1970s NRMs have sought acceptance and entry into the religious mainstream. Instead they are

3rd International Academic Conference on Research in **SOCIAL SCIENCES**

10- 12 June, 2021

Berlin, Germany

still frequently portrayed in the media under a common frame of reference, i.e., “cult,” even though they have sharply different beliefs systems, practices, and lifestyles. The names of these NRMs are familiar to those who are sixty years of age or older, as well as to serious students of religion, and include the Church of Scientology, Hari Krishna, EST, Landmark Education, the Falun Gong, and Sun Myung Moon and the Unification Church with which I have had an affiliation for more than half of a century.

1.2 The Ideological Divide between the NRMs and the ACM

John Stuart Mill’s Introduction to *On Liberty* (1869) argues in favor of protections against not only “the tyranny of the magistrate” but “the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation, of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own.”¹

NRMs have faced criticism from the Anti-Cult Movement (ACM) that coalesces around the position that adherents of new religions are victims of “coercive persuasion” or “brainwashing.” ACM proponents pay special attention to social psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton’s *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* that assesses the impact of brainwashing techniques on political prisoners subjected to coercive persuasion and torture by during the Korean War.²

The ACM and the deprogrammers and “cult watchers” associated with it especially focus on Chapter 22 of *Thought Reform*. Chapter 22, entitled “Ideological Totalism,” describes conditions that arguably resemble those used by NRMs in proselytizing and in their introductory training seminars.³ Read in the context of the larger text, the parallels are far less evident, especially given that the victims of this regime were prisoners confined by “painful and constricting chains” and “direct physical brutality.”⁴ When I went through my second deprogramming, a 33-day ordeal in 1978, I was granted to read not just Chapter 22 but all of *Thought Reform* and my conclusion was that my deprogramming,⁵ where I was confined

¹ Mill, J. S., (1869). *On Liberty* 4th ed. London, UK: Longman, Roberts & Green Col [Online]. Available: https://www.econlib.org/library/Mill/mlLbty.html?chapter_num=1#book-reader.

² Lifton, R. J., (2014). *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, New ed. Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, pp. 510.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 419-437.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 67.

⁵ Marjorie Hyer. (August 14, 1981). Court Rules Rights Laws Protect Against Religious Discrimination, *Washington Post*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1981/08/14/court-rules-rights-laws-protect-against-religious-discrimination/caba88e2-4477-464a-9147-b7276acbc774/>.

3rd International Academic Conference on Research in **SOCIAL SCIENCES**

10- 12 June, 2021

Berlin, Germany

against my will for more than one month, resembled what Lifton had described far more than had my conversion experience which took place over many months and never under duress, imprisonment, or confinement.⁶

A second text that the ACM has been highly reliant upon is *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*, an interpretation of how individuals convert to NRMs. *Snapping's* authors Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman, neither of whom were credentialed in religion, psychology, or psychiatry, assert that NRMs engage in coercive persuasion in their introductory trainings through a regime that includes food and sleep deprivation, as well as an information dump of prayer, singing, and long, repetitive lectures. This “cocktail,” they explain, causes individuals to go through a sudden personally change due to an “infinitely complex convergence of physical, mental and emotional stresses” that “crest in a holographic crisis in the brain” resulting in “a whole new organization of mind and personality.”⁷

Ted Patrick, Rick Ross, and others who have engaged in deprogramming members of NRMs profess that this ACM activity provides an antidote to “cult brainwashing.” Deprogramming is said to mirror the NRM conversion process outlined by Conway and Siegelman. NRM victims of deprogrammings have been lured away from their religious communities, then held captive, subjected to deprivation of food, sleep, and forced to listen to verbal attacks on the leaders and the doctrines of their faiths until they “snap” and are allegedly freed from the NRM’s “mind-control” of them. The aim of deprogramming is to provoke “a holographic crisis in the brain,” and, once again, “a whole new organization of mind and personality.”⁸ Ted Patrick, the “father of deprogramming,” maintained that, if a person has been “programmed,” that person can be sent “to every psychiatrist in the country, it won’t do any good” unless “she is deprogrammed first” because “no psychiatrist can cure what’s wrong with her” because “they’ve taken her mind away.” Patrick’s rhetorical question at the conclusion of his book *Let Our Children Go!* is “Why don’t people understand?”⁹

Ted Patrick, a high school dropout described deprogramming at its apex in 1977 as follows:

“Deprogramming, I think, is widely misunderstood—I mean, what I do, what goes on. To read some of the accounts that have been written by reporters who

⁷I made the decision to become active with the Unification Church without having ever stayed a single day in a Church building or center.

⁷ Conway, F. and Siegelman, J., (1995). *Snapping*, 2nd ed. New York: Stillpoint Press, p. 136.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Patrick T. with Dulack, T., (1976), *Let Our Children Go!* 1st ed. New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc., p. 285.

3rd International Academic Conference on Research in
SOCIAL SCIENCES
10- 12 June, 2021
Berlin, Germany

have never witnessed a deprogramming, you would think it was a cross between the Spanish Inquisition and an orgy sponsored by the Marquis de Sade. It's nothing of the kind. Essentially, it's just talk. I talk to the victim, for as long as I have to. I don't deny that that's the catch for many people—"for as long as I have to." Yes, in some cases that means restraint. Yes, it also means the victim may not be free to leave when he wants to. When a victim is exceptionally vigorous, it may even mean a measure of restraint."¹⁰

The term "deprogramming" would imply that a person abandons the belief system that he or she had embraced. One could assume that, once liberated from whatever oppressive mind control or belief system that affected them, a person would return to "normal." However, after a deprogramming, victims often do more than simply abandon the NRM belief system that, through the deprogramming, they learned, had "distorted" their thinking. Those who, through deprogramming, abandoned their belief in a NRM do not necessarily return to the mindset that they had prior to their religious conversion. Instead, a significant number are converted to the ACM worldview or narrative, predicated on accepting that the NRM that they had previously embraced, was not a real religion and that they had been "brainwashed." *Let Our Children go!* cites examples of those successfully deprogrammed who began to support and engage in this activity themselves.¹¹ Dr. Steven Hassan, author of the *Cult of Trump*, is one of them.¹²

Those successfully deprogrammed learn that the leaders of the NRM that they had previously subscribed to were experts in the techniques of mind control that emerged during the Korean War. Dr. Hassan, one of the proponents of the position that each NRM must be scrutinized by the ACM's so-called "experts" to determine whether they are a real religion or a "dangerous cult" was a member of the Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church for a little more than two years. He claims that the "brainwashing" that he suffered while a Unification Church member had a deleterious impact on his capacity to reason and exercise good judgement. In a taped conversation that Hassan had in March 2016 with Robert Jay Lifton, he stated that, during his time in the Unification Church, he had lost much of his English and had to read Lifton's *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* using a dictionary.¹³¹⁴

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.285.

¹² Hassan, S., (2019), *The Cult of Trump*, 1st ed. New York: The Free Press, pp. 196.

¹³ Steven Hassan interviews Robert Jay Lifton, MD (Part 1/3). (June 17, 2016). *You Tube*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4ZluXuYTWI>

¹⁴ I found these assertions somewhat unusual given that I have belonged to the same Church as Dr. Hassan for some fifty years and I find that I have not only kept my mastery of English (and, yes, I use a dictionary to expand my vocabulary) but also still am fluent enough in both Spanish and French to deliver University lectures in both languages.

3rd International Academic Conference on Research in
SOCIAL SCIENCES
10- 12 June, 2021
Berlin, Germany

1.3 The ACM and Religious Legitimacy

NRMs, beyond their particular worldviews, share a common interest in the United States of defending people's right to exercise their faith as per the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which cites freedom of religion first, even before freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Nevertheless, the ACM asserts that this right does not apply in the case of new religions because, as per their narrative, these are not "real" religions.

Ron Loomis, a former President of the ACM's once prominent Cult Awareness Network (CAN), sharply differentiated between established religions and "cults" even when members of established religions engage in acts of terror. In a 1996 interview with the *Hartford Courant* with writer Steve Kemper, Loomis was asked, "What is the difference between a cult and, say, Iranian Islam? Charismatic leaders who preach violence aren't limited to cults are they?" In his response, Loomis appeared to justify the motivation for violence when inspired by Iranian Islam by saying, "No, but that group has a long history in the country and their actions are motivated out of genuine political or religious ideals." Loomis did not expand on why the motivation of Islamist terror was genuine while it would not be for NRMs. Next, when asked by Kemper, "What's the difference between his (that is, Reverend Moon's) and that of the missionaries who went into Africa, Asia, and South America determined to make the entire world Christian?" Loomis responded:

"The difference is the way in which they do it. They did not use deception and coercion and manipulation."

Kemper countered, "Oh, yes, they did."¹⁵ Unlike Loomis, Kemper knew enough about Christian proselytizing to understand that, in a number of cases, there was coercion involved, including the Inquisition and the *Conquista*, for example.

John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* seems to pinpoint the real roots of Ron Loomis' obsessive bias against new religions:

There are many who consider as an injury to themselves any conduct which they have a distaste for, and resent it as an outrage to their feelings; as a religious bigot, when charged with disregarding the religious feelings of others, has been known to retort that they disregard his feelings, by persisting in their abominable worship or creed. But there is no parity between the feeling of a person for his own opinion, and the feeling of another who is offended at

¹⁵ Kemper, S, (March 24, 1996) Conversations. *Hartford Courant*. p. 128.

3rd International Academic Conference on Research in **SOCIAL SCIENCES**

10- 12 June, 2021

Berlin, Germany

his holding it; no more than between the desire of a thief to take a purse, and the desire of the right owner to keep it.¹⁶

NRMs and the ACM, these two parties, represent the “primary actors” in a conflict over principles and narratives. One can point to a variety of “secondary actors”¹⁷ in this conflict as well, including established Churches that now see that the ACM is setting dangerous precedents for further intrusions on freedom of religion. The NRMs have also received support from civil rights organizations, the American Psychological Association, as well as academic organizations and research centers that specialize in the study of religion and NRMs. However, the most important secondary actor in the ongoing struggle between NRMs and the ACM is the media. The media determines the dominant narrative on this subject, and this, in turn, influences public opinion.

2. Media Agenda Setting and Gatekeeping: Examining the Media Handling of NRMs vis-à-vis the ACM

2.1 Agenda Setting and Gatekeeping

“Agenda setting” and “gatekeeping” represent fundamental underpinnings of communication in today’s media world. The *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory* explains that “agenda setting theory,” originally formulated in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, has led to “hundreds of subsequent explorations into the ways that media and other institutions prime and frame issues and events for their audiences and therefore influence and shape public opinion, either intentionally or unintentionally” and “by seeing an issue covered in the news media—and seeing it covered repeatedly and with great emphasis—we come to share with the media the view that the issue has legitimacy and thus place it on our own agendas.”¹⁸

Related to agenda-setting is “gatekeeping” and its role is also clarified by the *Encyclopedia*:

Many media theorists argue that even when journalists intend to be objective or balanced in their coverage, they necessarily report on issues in ways that give

¹⁶ Mill, J. S., (1869), *On Liberty*, 4th Ed., London, UK: Longman, Roberts & Green Co. [Online]. Available: https://www.econlib.org/library/Mill/mlLbty.html?chapter_num=4#book-reader.

¹⁷ Conflict Management, *US Online Training for OSCE including React*. [Online]. Available: <http://react.usip.org/downloads/module3.pdf>.

¹⁸ Littlejohn, S.W. and Foff, K.A. Ed. (2009). *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, (London, Sage Publications, Ltd. p. 31.

3rd International Academic Conference on Research in **SOCIAL SCIENCES**

10- 12 June, 2021

Berlin, Germany

audiences cues as to how to understand the issues, including which aspects of the issues to focus on and which to ignore. Indeed, the core task of all media gatekeepers—to determine which stories to include or exclude from a given day’s newspaper or broadcast and what to emphasize within those stories that are included—itsself frames the issues covered in their publications and programs.¹⁹

Depending on the perspective taken on an issue by a media outlet in its reporting, this has an impact on the public’s understanding so that “virtually any statement or other social cue can be interpreted” and “allow people to make sense of, or understand, the relational significance of what would otherwise be ambiguous behaviors.”²⁰

2.2 The Society of Professional Journalists and the NRM-ACM Conflict

The Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ Code of Ethics) provides guidelines on how it expects journalists to approach reporting. It asks that journalists “avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status” and calls upon journalists to “support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.” It asks that they “give voice to the voiceless.” It also instructs that journalists “distinguish between advocacy and news reporting.” Most importantly, it asks that journalists “minimize harm” and “show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage.” It further warns the members of the profession that “pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.”²¹

In spite of the SPJ Code of Ethics, the media can fail to comply with their outlined responsibilities and, as already noted, this may be intentional or unintentional. The “Tawana Brawley Rape Scandal” took place in Upstate New York more than thirty years ago.²² It left New York more cognizant than ever of sharp, enduring divisions along racial lines. Concerned black and white community leaders in New York gathered to address this under the auspices of the Eleanor Roosevelt Center at Val-Kill in Hyde Park, New York. The theme of their encounters over a three-year period was “Enhancing Racial Harmony.”²³

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 114.

²¹ “SPJ Code of Ethics,” *Society of Professional Journalists*, (September 6, 2014). [Online]., Available: <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>.

²² Winerip, M. (June 3, 2013), Revisiting a Rape Scandal That Would Have Been Monstrous if True, *The New York Times* [Online]. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/03/booming/revisiting-the-tawana-brawley-rape-scandal.html>.

²³ Ghee, J. and Spence, J., (2005), *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Hudson Valley Remembrance*, (San Francisco: Arcadia Publishing), pp. 120, 124.

3rd International Academic Conference on Research in **SOCIAL SCIENCES**

10- 12 June, 2021

Berlin, Germany

Many issues emerged from these exchanges and one of them related to racially biased press coverage. African-American civil rights leaders who participated in this dialogue expressed concern that New York newspapers made it a point to reported the racial identity of those suspected of criminal activity whenever they happened to be black.

Following the “Enhancing Racial Harmony” initiative, where my wife, as Executive Director of the Eleanor Roosevelt Center at the time, played a leadership role,²⁴ the newspaper coverage in the area changed; there was a conscientious effort to avoid reference to race on each occasion that a suspect was accused of committing a crime.

The press should be applauded for making efforts to circumvent the racial, religious, or ethnic framing of incidents. The press aspiring to follow the SPJ Code of Ethics and “minimize harm” can be said to have made progress in the effort to discourage the racial, religious, or ethnic framing of an incident and thus protect innocent. Yet, in the case of NRMs, there is the need for improvement through greater diligence.

2.2.1 Media Usage of the Demeaning Term “Cult”

NRM scholar J. Gordon Melton, Editor of the *Encyclopedia of American religions: A Comprehensive Study of the Major Religious Groups in the United States*, defines “cult” as follows:

"My working definition of a cult is a group that you don't like, and I say that somewhat facetiously, but at the same time, in fact, that is my working definition of a cult. It is a group that somebody doesn't like. It is a derogatory term, and I have never seen it redeemed from the derogatory connotations that it picked up in the sociological literature in the 1930s."²⁵

The *Religious Tolerance* website where Dr. Melton has contributed recommends “that the word “cult” never be used in reports, articles, essays, sermons, etc. without careful definition in advance -- and perhaps not even then.” It adds that “the negative associations linked to the word are so intense that its use will automatically lead to confusion and misunderstanding.” It recommends instead “*new religious movement*,” “*alternative religious movement*,” “*emergent religion*,” or “*faith group*” but adds that “an even better usage is to simply refer to the group by its formal name.”²⁶

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

²⁵ **Definition of Terms: Cults, Sects, Denominations, Religious Tolerance.** [Online]. Available: <http://www.religioustolerance.org/cults.htm>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

3rd International Academic Conference on Research in
SOCIAL SCIENCES
 10- 12 June, 2021
 Berlin, Germany

2.2.2 Frequency of Media Reliance on the term “Cult” to Characterize NRMs

Use of the term “cult” has been prevalent in mainstream media for more than half a century. When one does a search of the term “new religion” for the period between 1970 and 2021, on *Newspapers+ Publishers Extra*, a principal database for newspaper archiving, the term “new religion” appears 120,426 times,²⁷ while the term “cults” appears 3,596,130 times.²⁸ In examining the results of just five of the many newspapers included in the *Newspapers+Publishers Extra* database, i.e., *The Los Angeles Times*, *the New York Daily News*, *the Miami Herald*, *the Chicago Tribune*, and *the Boston Globe*, the term “cult” is used more than 250,000 times between 1970 and 2021. When one chooses the narrower term “cult leader,” one finds 151,594 matches.²⁹ Thus, even “cult leader” had a slightly greater frequency than “new religions” in the *Newspaper+* database between 1970 and 2021.

2.2.3 Media Criteria for Expertise in “Cults”

As noted, a specialist in Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity has pored over the original or the earliest available texts of the religion that she strives to understand. Adherent to the religion in question or not, the expert has respectfully and objectively tried to observe its application in the lives of the faithful, in its rituals and practices. She appreciates and can articulate how that religious tradition has impacted on the cultural milieu, both positively and adversely. She can address its evolution, its highs and lows. While such clear standards exist for identifying an authority for any of the world’s major religions, today’s media largely relies on a different set of criteria when covering new religions. The media continues to turn to personalities who lack the expected academic training to be deemed an expert. Ted Patrick, who had only nine years of formal education was described in 1981 on the front page of the *Atlanta Constitution*,³⁰ a Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper, as a “cult expert.” Top American newspapers including the *Chicago Tribune*,³¹ the *Washington Post*,³² the *Los Angeles Times*,³³ the *San Francisco*

²⁷ Search for the term for “New Religion,” *Newspapers+ Publishers Extra*, conducted on May 14, 2021, Available: https://www.newspapers.com/search/#query=%22new+religion%22&dr_year=1970-2021.

²⁸ Search for the term “Cults.” *Newspapers+ Publishers Extra*, conducted on *Newspapers+ Publishers Extra*, conducted on May 14, 2021. [Online]. Available: https://www.newspapers.com/search/#query=%22cults%22&dr_year=1970-2021.

²⁹ Search for the term “Cult Leader,” *Newspapers+ Publishers Extra*, conducted on May 14, 2021. [Online]. Available: https://www.newspapers.com/search/#query=%22cult+leader%22&dr_year=1970-2021.

³⁰ Epstein, G. and Wells, T.L. (March 17, 1981). Cult Expert consulted on Slayings. *The Atlanta Constitution*, p. 1.

³¹ Swenson, K. (March 28, 2018) ‘Extreme’ Self Help Group Leader nabbed in Mexico. *Chicago Tribune*, syndicated from the *Washington Post*, p. 10.

³² *Ibid.*

3rd International Academic Conference on Research in SOCIAL SCIENCES

10- 12 June, 2021

Berlin, Germany

Examiner,³⁴ and the *Arizona Republic*³⁵ number among the American newspapers who have referred to deprogrammer Rick Ross, who holds a high school diploma, as a “cult expert.”

Ross justifies his expertise *sans études* based on having been certified as an expert witness on “cults” in some State courts as well as in the federal court system. Ross is surely cognizant of the fact that “expert witnesses” on NRMs may be validated one day and unvalidated at a later date. The late Margaret Singer, who, unlike Ross, was, a trained psychologist and a person whom Ross cites, was first recognized and latter barred in 1988 from serving as an expert witness by the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia because her methodologies in researching new religions had been questioned by both the Board of Social and Ethical Responsibility of the American Psychological Association and by the American Sociological Association. Dr. Singer sued twice to reverse the Court of Appeals’ decision challenging her expertise. Both of her appeals ended in failure.³⁶

2.2.3 Media Empathetic Portrayal of a Deprogrammer

In spite of challenges to Ross’ credibility over the years, gatekeepers of CBS *48 Hours* went ahead in 1998 with broadcasting “The Deprogramming.” The program highlighted the work of Rick Ross and portrayed it in a largely favorable light. CBS did not mention Rick Ross’ lack of academic or professional credentials. To its credit, CBS did briefly interview Dean Kelley of the National Council of Churches who was outspoken in his opposition to deprogramming, characterizing it as “spiritual gang rape.” Kelley charged that if someone had actually found a way to manipulate people with mind-control, he questioned why their focus would be on small, peripheral religious groups rather than an entire country or even the world.

In “The Deprogramming,” CBS supportively portrayed Ross’ handling of “Aaron,” who was detained when he was a 14-year old minor. While Aaron distanced himself from the group that he had been involved with almost overnight in this program, CBS failed to report that most deprogrammings detained not minors but legal adults against their will. In its coverage, CBS could also have mentioned that many deprogrammings fail. In an article

³³ Sahagun, L. FBI’s (March 16, 1993) Tactics seen not weakening Sect’s Resolve. *Los Angeles Times*, p. 10,.

³⁴ Hampton, A. and Dineen, J. (June 4, 2003) ‘Natura’ School Planned, *San Francisco Examiner*, p. 5,.

³⁵ Ross, R., (March 26, 1994) What made the Cult hold out? Insanity? Stupidity? Maybe Mind Control. *Arizona Republic*, p. B6.

³⁶ Maloney, H.N. (February 16, 2016), Letter to Members of the Knesset, {Online}. Available: <https://www.eifrf-articles.org/attachment/652294/>.

3rd International Academic Conference on Research in **SOCIAL SCIENCES**

10- 12 June, 2021

Berlin, Germany

which appeared on April 20, 1977 in the *Washington Post*, Megha Devis Krishna, a 24-year old woman, a member of Krishna Consciousness, related how, under the pretense of an invitation to a wedding shower hosted by her family, she was lured into a deprogramming and detained against her will.

In her interview with the *Post*, Megha explained that she “pretended to be converted” to the ACM position “in order to leave and return to her temple and her fiance.” Megha had been confined for three days in “a room with the windows nailed.” *The Post* reported that “her mother had secured a conservatorship order from Montgomery County Circuit Court Judge Richard R. Latham” but that Megha had not been notified of the hearing and “there had been no psychiatric examination or adversary hearing in open court.” The conservatorship was awarded based on a presumption “of guilt,” meaning that if Megha was a member of Hari Krishna, she necessarily was not of sound mind. She relates that the deprogrammers that detained her spent their three days shouting at her and burned her “sacred prayer beads” in front of her. She described her ordeal as follows:

“I was treated exactly like a prisoner. It reminded me of what it must feel like in the Iron Curtain Communist countries, where freedom of thought is so limited³⁷”

The person who suffered the longest known involuntary detainment is Mr. Toru Goto who was held for more than twelve years in Japan before finally being permitted to return to the Unification Church.³⁸

Failed deprogrammings were not rare; Ted Patrick faced jail time because of charges filed by victims who managed to escape.³⁹ The ACM’s Cult Awareness Network itself was forced into declaring bankruptcy because of lawsuits⁴⁰ filed by victims of deprogrammings who, at the opportune moment, escaped and returned to the religious organizations from which they had been extricated by force. Mr. Rick Ross on his website makes clear that he can no longer do

³⁷ Hyer, M., (April 20, 1977). “Deprogramming Failure.” *Washington Post*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1977/04/20/deprogramming-failure/374ddd0-1eef-448e-b989-210b59a32988/>.

³⁸ “Japan: Change of religion, kidnapping and confinement for over 12 years: A Japanese wins an important lawsuit.” (June 23, 2017). International Institute for Religious Freedom. [Online] Available: <https://iirf.eu/news/archiv/japan-change-of-religion-kidnapping-and-confinement-for-over-12-years-a-japanese-wins-an-important-lawsuit/>

³⁹ Patrick, T., *Let Our Children Go!* (1976), p. 278.

⁴⁰ Adelle M. Banks, (June 22, 1996). Cult Awareness Network files under Chapter 7 of bankruptcy code. *Religion News Service*. [Online]. Available: <https://religionnews.com/1996/06/22/news-story-cult-awareness-network-files-under-chapter-7-of-bankruptcy-code/>

3rd International Academic Conference on Research in **SOCIAL SCIENCES**

10- 12 June, 2021

Berlin, Germany

deprogrammings because of the huge legal and financial repercussions of his failed deprogrammings.⁴¹

The media's reliance on the ACM narrative on NRMs, nevertheless, continues into the present time. On August 18, 2020, an episode on A & E's History Channel "America's Book of Secret" hosted Rick Ross on a program entitled "Cults, Hate Groups, and Secret Societies."

On December 2020 CESNUR (Center for the Study of New Religions) registered its concerns about the program in a letter to Bob Chapek, CEO of the Disney Channel. CESNUR was joined in their denunciation of the program's bigoted approach by ten other NGOs, including two with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The letter highlighted concerns that, under the rubric of "cults, hate groups, and secret societies," Disney had lumped "together Freemasonry, the Illuminati, the Ku Klux Klan, the American Nazi Party, the Osho Rajneesh movement, the Branch Davidians, Heaven's Gate, Jim Jones' Peoples Temple and the Church of Scientology."

CESNUR and the related NGOs criticized Disney stating, "it is a well-known hate speech technique to lump together disrelated groups that have no connection, then claim they are all similar, and all bad" adding that "what purports to be factual legitimate content on the History Channel only presents superficial platitudes on Waco, Jonestown, Rajneeshpuram, or Heaven's Gate—all subjects on which serious scholarly literature exists, including in-depth investigations of the reasons behind the events depicted."

CESNUR further observed that "irresponsible TV programs like this had convinced that the Scientology religion was an intolerant form of evil." It adds that "in 2019, a Taiwanese Scientologist, Yeh Chih-Jen (1994-2019) was stabbed to death in Sydney, Australia, by a teenager who had been persuaded that his mother was in danger because she was participating in Scientology activities there."⁴²

2.2.4 Media, "Cult Experts, and Waco 1993

In a May 7, 1993 editorial that appeared in the *Poughkeepsie Journal*, I argued that the Branch Davidians under David Koresh had been subjected to a "mass deprogramming." Deprogrammer Rick Ross served as a core advisor to the US Department of the Treasury's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) and to the US Department of Justice's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) at Waco and the impasse tragically resulted in seventy-five deaths, including babies and young children.

⁴¹ Rick Ross, Intervention, Cult Education Institute, [Online]. Available: https://culteducation.com/prep_faq.html#Success%20Rate.

⁴² Why Is A&E's History Channel Spreading Conspiracy Theories and Attacking Religious Liberty? An Open Letter to Bob Chapek. (October 28, 2020), CESNUR, Center for Studies on New Religions. [Online]. Available: <https://www.cesnur.org/2020/disney-and-a-e-history-channel.htm>.

3rd International Academic Conference on Research in **SOCIAL SCIENCES**

10- 12 June, 2021

Berlin, Germany

My *Journal* Commentary pointed out that “instead of relying on the recommendations of trained religious scholars, the FBI opted for a deprogramming *en masse* of the Branch Davidians” using typical deprogramming techniques including depriving “Koresh and his followers of food, supplies and sleep,” exposing them repeatedly to “flashing lights, and blaring Tibetan chants and music and squealing rabbits.” The FBI agent in charge wanted Koresh’s followers “to think for themselves,”⁴³ a common phrase employed by deprogrammers. They opted for such a confrontive approach because they wanted to persuade “David Koresh’s followers that their leader was a thief, a liar, a child molester and a profanity spouting conman.”^{44,45}

Following the Waco debacle, Nancy T. Ammerman, one of the academics commissioned after the raid by the United States Department of Justice and the United States Department of the Treasury to assess how things were handled by the ATF and the FBI, prepared and submitted a written report and addendum to both the Department of Justice and the Department of the Treasury. Ammerman had been afforded the opportunity to conduct interviews with several of the key figures in the standoff, including FBI Agent Pete Smerick, one of the two special agents in charge of the Waco operation. Ammerman was particularly critical of the ATF and the FBI for not having paid sufficient attention to religious scholars who had made themselves available to shed light on theological implications of the faceoff with the Branch Davidians.

Dr. Ammerman observed in the September 10 addendum that she submitted to the Department of Justice and the Department of the Treasury that Mr. Rick Ross was “closely involved with both the ATF and the FBI” and had provided them and the Waco newspaper with information that he had on the Branch Davidians. Ammerman concluded that Ross clearly had “the most extensive access to both agencies of any person on the ‘cult expert’ list, and he was apparently listened to more attentively.” Ammerman learned that “Ross recommended that agents attempt to publicly humiliate Koresh, hoping to drive a wedge between him and his followers” and her report notes that such “embarrassment tactics were indeed tried.”

⁴³ One of Mr. Hassan’s books is entitled *Releasing the Bonds: Empowering People to Think for Themselves*.

⁴⁴ Ward, T. J., (May 7, 1993). In Waco FBI relied on wrong Experts. *Poughkeepsie Journal*. [Online]. Available: https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping_id=58959505&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXV CJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOjExNDUzOTkwNSwiaWF0IjoxNTk5NjcwMjE4LCJleHAI0jE1OTk3NTY2MTh9.5WoGeXtcqWfX4pgvCpEAcqG 2uBZycDRO9AzZ00YA6M

⁴⁵ Ward, T.J., (April 15, 2021/) A Diagnostic that America does not need. *Journal of Unification Studies* vol. XXI, [Online]. Available: <https://www.journals.uts.edu/volume-xxi-2020/327-a-diagnostic-that-america-does-not-need>.

3rd International Academic Conference on Research in **SOCIAL SCIENCES**

10- 12 June, 2021

Berlin, Germany

Agent Pete Smerick and Agent Mark Young, the FBI special agents in charge at Waco, wrote a March 8 memo to superiors in Washington that it had “been speculated that Koresh’s religious beliefs are nothing more than a con, in order to get power, money, women, etc., and that a strong show of force (tanks, APC's, weapons, etc.) will crumble that resolve, causing him to surrender.” The agents did not detail where such speculation originated.

Ammerman criticized the government reliance on Ross, observing that “although these people often call themselves ‘cult experts,’ they are certainly not recognized as such by the academic community” and that, “at the very least, Mr. Ross and any ex-members he was associated with should have been seen as questionable sources of information” and Ammerman added that FBI agents observed that Ross had “a personal hatred for all religious cults and would willingly aid law enforcement in an attempt to ‘destroy a cult.’”

She concluded her September 10 Addendum to the US Department of Justice and Department of the Treasury by observing:

“Both the seriousness with which agents treated Ross and the lack of seriousness with which they treated various theologians demonstrate again the inability of agents on the scene to make informed judgements about the information to which they had access and their inability to seek out better information. It also demonstrates the preference given to anti-cult psychological tactics over strategies that would meet the group on grounds that took faith seriously.”⁴⁶

3. Conclusion

Can one assert that a relationship exists with the way that Federal Law Enforcement Agents viewed NRMs and the way that NRMs have been portrayed not only by deprogrammers but by the printed press that refer to NRMs as “cults” and loosely ascribe expertise to people who, as Ammerman explains, are “certainly not recognized as such by the academic community.” What impact is there from TV programming such as “48 Hours” and Disney’s History Channel that trumpets the ACM narrative and its demeaning ways of referring to NRMs? In reporting on NRMs and the ACM, media outlets should “minimize

⁴⁶ Ammerman, N.T., (September 10, 1993). Report to the Justice and Treasury Departments regarding Law Enforcement Interaction with the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. *Open BU*. [Online]. Available: <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/14>.

3rd International Academic Conference on Research in **SOCIAL SCIENCES**

10- 12 June, 2021

Berlin, Germany

harm” and assess with respect and objectivity.. The media should not continue to place its “thumb on the scale” and intentionally or unintentionally lend support to the ACM.

In her report to the U.S. Department of Justice and Department of the Treasury on Waco, Dr. Nancy Ammerman recommended that the government seek “help in locating experts and in evaluating the credentials of volunteer ‘experts,’” by turning to “the American Sociological Association, the American Psychological Association, the Association for the Sociology of Religion, of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.”⁴⁷ Indeed, that would also seem to be sound advice not just for the FBI and the BATF but also for representatives of the media who ascribe to the SPJ Code of Ethics and commitment to “minimize harm.”

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⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

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Berlin, Germany

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10- 12 June, 2021

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