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To Stay or To Go: Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theories

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Abstract. This article describes some psychological factors affecting whether members remain in a cult or leave.

One salient feature of cults is that often people remain in them, not primarily through physical coercion, but rather through psychological factors. This seems to be the case even or especially when external events turn against the cult, e.g., financial reversals, social opprobrium, legal difficulties, or paramilitary and military threat. These external events seem to induce an internal effect-- increased perceived homogeneity among cult members--and, incidentally, serve a similar function in maintaining the viability of political insurgency movements, other nonstate actors, and even nation-states through fostering a common cause against some shared adversity. In fact, the typical pressures put on cults by disapproving outsiders are actually nutrients supporting the growth of cult cohesion, integration, and synergy. (Or, perhaps, violating a proscription may be a distorted expression of an unconscious desire or an example of "burning off" anxiety from some long-ago traumatic violation of some primal proscription. In this way, Japanese and Chinese Christianity may have been more easily maintained through interludes of persecution than social laissez-faire.)

This article, however, focuses on two theories explicating internal psychological forces affecting how, when, and why members remain in a cult or leave it. The first is called social identity. It suggests that people tend to avoid remaining in a group that does not help foster positive social self-attributes, e.g., social status, social credibility, social attractiveness, and variants of social power. This avoidance may be especially operative when group boundaries are at least somewhat permeable and allow movement from one group to others that appear to be more socially attractive.

The second theory is called self-categorization. It suggests that people tend to remain in a group because their self-identities are significantly imbued with the group identity. The congruence of self-identity with group identity often is assumed to foster a high degree of commitment to the group and group loyalty. Threats to the group may quite literally be threats to the self as well.

Of great interest to the student of cults is that many potential interaction effects among and between external and internal psychological factors for specific situations remain to be delineated by researchers. For example, the same noxious external factors which increase homogeneity within a cult and, presumably, induce people to remain may activate social-identity processes which may induce people to leave. What takes precedence? On the other hand, self-categorization and self-identity processes may work together or in opposition. If the group remains socially attractive, the two processes would work together. If the group becomes socially unattractive, the two processes would be expected to work in opposition. Again, what would take precedence?

As the many interactions of psychological factors are delineated through empirical research, these interactions will afford vulnerability nodes for anti-cult organizations and strength nodes for pro-cult organizations. For example, a recent study on group commitment and individual mobility carried out in the Netherlands on self-categorization and social identity (Ellemers et al, 1997) depicts how values for

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

psychological variables such as perceptions of group identification, social status, and permeability between groups can be manipulated. These variables, in turn, are implicated in the reluctance to leave a group.

The term cult, like propaganda, has a favorable past and a more odious present. People who choose to remain in a cult may invite our respect or disdain. Whether we realize it or not, we all belong to something or someone with varying degrees of intensity. The cult of the cult as heaven or hell suggests more about us than we might like to think, whether we remain in light or darkness. (See Ellemers, N., Spears, R., & Doosje, B. (1997.) Sticking together or falling apart: In-group identification as a psychological determinant of group commitment versus individual mobility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 617-626; Kennedy, S.T. (1992.) Boundary management and self-differentiation: A comparison of members in a cult/religious movement with groups of students. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 53(6-A) 1799; Kristof, N.D. (April 3, 1997.) Lack of oppression hurts Christianity in Japan. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; MacHovec, F. (1991.) Cults and mental disorders. *Medical Psychotherapy: An International Journal*, 4, 27-33.) (Keywords: Control, Cult, Organization.)