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## **In God's Name**

### **Practising Unconditional Love to the Death**

In this article I consider some of the ways in which those with religious authority might exercise their power by persuading believers to perform actions that they (the believers) would not have dreamed of performing had not justifications been presented to them in the name of religion. There are, of course, reasons other than religion – love and money, to take but two obvious examples – that lead people to do things that they would not otherwise have done, but religion would seem to add that extra something (for good or evil) that can inspire people to believe and act with an added fervour, an extra commitment, and an extra disregard for other considerations. If we really believe that it is God who wants us to do something then we are more likely to do it (or at least feel more guilty if we do not do it) than if George or Tony or even our guru asks us to do it – unless we believe that our guru *is* God, or is the only one with a direct hotline to Him (or Her). We may even be prepared (in both the active and the passive senses of the word) to kill ourselves and others for what we have come to believe is ‘the cause’, as happened in a situation described in this article.

The term ‘brainwashing’ has frequently been resorted to in order to explain the control that religious leaders have exerted over their followers. Most scholars have argued against the use of such a term as an explanation of why people join or stay in new religious movements or ‘cults’. This is because they see it as little more than a metaphor that expresses the speaker’s distaste for the end result of a process of conversion, without actually explaining the process itself. This, however, is not to suggest that people cannot be strongly influenced by others – indeed, the whole exercise of sociology assumes that, to a greater or lesser extent, we are all affected by the social situation in which we find ourselves; we have to take others into account, consciously or unconsciously, in most of the things we do in our everyday lives (Weber 1947: 88). The problem is not usually to declare either that a person is totally free of society or that (s)he is totally controlled by it, but to assess the degree to which the position of each is negotiable as

part of an on-going process of interaction that affects both the individual and the social environment (Barker 1995a, 1995b, 2003).

However, in the 1970s, when the contemporary 'cult scare' was entering public awareness, one of the most frequent explanations of why young people joined a new religious movement was that they had been brain-washed or subjected to some sort of irresistible and irreversible mind-control technique. It was then that I decided to attempt to explore this hypothesis in a somewhat more systematic manner than was being employed by the media, the movements' opponents and/or by those, such as deprogrammers, with a financial interest in suggesting that something had been 'done to' the passive 'victim', rather than any kind of rational choice being involved in a decision by an active agent.

I had never been very impressed with rational choice as either an explanatory theory or even a very helpful descriptive tool if it is being assumed that we perform actions because they are the most efficient means to achieve a desired goal. It has always seemed to me that such an explanation must be either a tautology or wrong. Even if we knew what goals people would choose, it is obvious enough that they do not always, or even usually, use the most rational means to achieve their goals. All manner of quirks and moral and religious sentiments interfere with the most efficient means being adopted. One might suggest that infanticide is one of the most rational means of controlling population expansion, but few societies go down that road – and, once we admit all the *ceteris paribus* clauses, we have merely moved to alternative explanations, making the 'rational' element of the choice pretty well otiose.

But this does not mean that the question: 'What connection is made between means and ends?' is not an important one. When, for example, I was trying to understand why bright young people from the middle classes who had joined the Unification Church should give up 'everything' to spend long hours witnessing and fundraising on the streets, one plausible explanation was that these were achievement-oriented young people who rejected what they had come to view as the secular, materialistic rat-race of contemporary society, and that the man whom they saw as the Messiah, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, had succeeded in persuading them that there was a connection between a religious goal (bringing the Kingdom of Heaven on earth) and mundane, observable means. They could *measure* their achievement – how many dollars they fundraised and/or how many people they brought to a centre to hear their truth. The trick was that they understood there was a link between their visible actions and an invisible religious goal – and once the Unificationists had accepted that this rela-

tionship existed, it was 'rational' for them to spend long hours fundraising in the street rather than continuing their university careers – despite the fact that most other people, particularly the parents who had brought them up to be *both* idealistic *and* achievement oriented, considered their behaviour incredibly irrational.

But my main concern was to find out why the Unificationists had joined in the first place – whether they had done so freely or whether, as the media were suggesting, as a result of being subjected to irresistible and irreversible techniques. The first challenge was to 'operationalise' the concept of choice in such a way that it could empirically be recognised as being either present or absent. The definition I used for this purpose was as follows:

A choice would involve reflection (in the present), memory (of the past) and imagination (of possible futures). A person would be an active agent in deciding between two or more possible options when he could anticipate their potential existence and when, in doing so, he drew upon his previous experience and his previously formed values and interests to guide his judgement. (Barker 1984: 137.)

This gave rise to four main variables: (1) the individual concerned, with all his/her genetic and psychological characteristics, previous experiences and predispositions (values, hopes, fears, etc); (2) the social environment, which was one over which the Unification Church had near-complete control. It was a residential weekend seminar, which was cut off from the outside world and in which the guests had minimal opportunities to talk among themselves without a Unificationist being present. Even visits to the bathroom were likely to be accompanied. The two other variables were the alternative outcomes: (3) joining the Unification Church, or (4) returning to the wider society.

Having defined the question in these terms, the null hypothesis to be tested was that the environment alone would be responsible for the outcome – that is, the participants would, as suggested by the media and 'anti-cult' proponents of the irresistible-and-irreversible-brainwashing explanation, all end up as Unificationists. What I found, however, was that ninety per cent of the thousand-plus participants whom I studied did *not* end up as Unificationists, but returned to life outside the movement, thereby proving that the process had not been irresistible. Furthermore, the majority of those who did join went on to leave the movement of their own free will (that is, without the assistance of deprogrammers or other outside interventions), clearly demonstrating that the process, even when

it had been successful, was not irreversible. More recently, a quarter of a century later, I have found that the vast majority of the first cohort of second-generation Unificationists have left the religion their parents had joined, indicating that the movement has still not acquired a very effective means of controlling people, even those upon whom it has had the opportunity of imposing their primary socialisation. The original hypothesis has, it would seem, been unambiguously refuted.

Looking at patterns of behaviour is an essential part of sociology in that it allows us to see trends and, through comparisons, evaluate the ways in which variables are related to each other. By looking at *all* those who were subjected to the environment of a Unification workshop and seeing that the vast majority did not join (rather than by just looking at those who did join), we were able to conclude that while the workshop might have been necessary for conversions, it was not sufficient.<sup>1</sup>

The next step was to compare the joiners with the non-joiners, and both these groups with people of a similar age and background who had nothing to do with the movement, and by this method to discover some of the characteristics that might predispose someone to join the Unification Church – and some of the characteristics that might ‘protect’ others from its persuasive influence. Rather than the joiners having weak and highly suggestible characters as was sometimes assumed, it turned out that the converts were disproportionately white, middle-class youth with somewhat idealistic aspirations to make the world a better place, and they were frequently looking for a religious answer to the world’s problems.<sup>2</sup>

## A Case Study

Although the statistical comparison of different groups is an essential part of sociological methodology, we also need to look at individual cases if we want to understand a ‘cult career’. Of course, no two cases will ever be the same, but the rest of this article concentrates on a terrorist who joined a movement significantly different from the Unification Church, and whom I have got to know over the past ten years. I shall call her Amy. The ques-

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1 In fact, it was not even necessary. I have met a few Unificationists who joined after having themselves read the movement’s Scripture, *Divine Principle*, without ever attending a workshop.

2 Further details of these findings can be found in Barker 1984.

tion now to be addressed is 'How could she, a well-educated woman in her early twenties from a privileged background, come to be in prison for her role in an attempted hijacking that could well have resulted in her own death, as well as that of several innocent passengers and crew?'

An initial point that should be stressed is that, when looking at any group, even those that claim to be totally democratic, a distinction needs to be drawn between those who exercise power and those who 'go along' with whatever is being suggested. Indeed there are various finer distinctions that can be made between, say, (a) the leader who defines a goal in religious terms; (b) second-level leaders who translate the goal so that it can be achieved through secular means; (c) followers who draw up a specific plan for practical action; (d) foot soldiers who execute and/or 'go along' with the plan; and (e) followers who know little, if anything, about what is going on.<sup>3</sup> Members in each of these categories are likely to join the movement for different reasons and to have a different perception of what it is that they are doing and/or should be doing as a member. Understanding what makes the leader tick is unlikely to help us all that much in understanding how the foot soldier operates (or vice versa).

Amy was a foot soldier who consciously participated in a terrorist act. However, despite the atrocious nature of the act of which she was a part, I do not believe that it would be helpful to dismiss her as an intrinsically evil person; nor do I believe it would be helpful to label her as a brainwashed zombie. No one pressed (nor, I believe, could they have pressed) a button instantly transforming Amy A (the idealistic but naïve young woman) into Amy B (the dangerous terrorist); and Amy C (the mature and exemplary citizen that she is today) did not suddenly become 'reset' to Amy A as the result of some miraculous deprogramming. To understand what happened it is necessary to take into account both the coming together, synchronically, of a number of particular people with particular interests in particular social environments, and, diachronically, a gradual accumulation of processes that contributed to Amy's reaching a stage where she was prepared to play her part in the hijacking.

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3 The vast majority of grass-root members of Aum Shinrikyō were totally unaware that the leadership was planning to deposit sarin gas in the Tokyo underground.

## Joining

There was nothing very dramatic about the way that Amy had come to join her group in the first place. She had not been a seeker in the sense that she had been trying out various new religions before meeting the group, nor was hers a sudden 'Road to Damascus' conversion as sometimes seems to happen (Barker 1984: 171). There were, however, a number of predisposing variables that would seem to have facilitated her joining the movement. These included (1) her psychological makeup; (2) a number of pushes from the social environment in which she was at the time; and (3) the pull of the attractions that the group appeared to be offering.

According to several criteria, Amy came from a 'good home'. However, she considered her father to be overbearing and she wanted to get away from her family but was not yet quite ready to venture out into the world. In this respect she was not unlike the young people described by Saul Levine in *Radical Departures* (1984), who wanted to get away from their parents but still sought the womb-like protection of a family. Not that Amy had been looking for a group to join, and she would have been unlikely to join most new religions. She had, however, been interested in yoga and Eastern religions, having become disillusioned with traditional religions, so when she saw an advertisement for some yoga classes she went along to try them out.

But Amy had not just wanted to meditate in a passive, navel-contemplative manner; she also had a well-developed social conscience and had been looking for some way in which she could contribute to making the world a better place. She wanted to be someone and to make her mark. Like many other young people in the 1970s, she was critical of the rat-race materialism of capitalism, but she was also critical of the dialectical materialism of communism. She discovered that the yoga classes were being given by a group that offered a combination of spirituality and caring for others, and that it was involved in running projects such as schools for orphans and providing disaster relief in third-world countries.

This commitment to improving the world and the spiritual practices seemed to Amy a perfect combination. 'The ideology fitted my way of thinking *before* joining, took it further and provided the possibility of putting it into practice – as part of an organisation rather than as an idealistic individual with no power.' She enrolled in further classes and eventually moved in to live with the group. The fact that the movement had a strict authoritarian structure, with clear guidelines and an uncompromising attitude towards its moral position might also have resonated with

her family background. Reflecting the pattern found in Levine's work, her joining as a rebellion against her father involved her moving into an environment that bore some clear similarities to the one from which she was escaping. This was not altogether surprising: in my research into the Unification Church I had found that it was often easier to see the converts as having joined their movement *because of* rather than *in spite of* their family background (Barker 1984: 210 and 1989: 95).

### **Life in the Community**

In several ways Amy's movement bore a resemblance to several other new religions that are led by a charismatic leader and have a membership made up of converts rather than those who have been born into and brought up in the movement (Barker 2004). It promoted a dichotomous world view that made a clear separation between good and bad, godly and satanic, right and wrong, truth and falsity, and them and us – part of 'them' being the converts' biological family. The imposed detachment from family and former friends resulted in Amy's coming to believe that she had nowhere but the movement to which she could turn. However, although initially she had felt that she had joined a friendly and loving community, with the passage of time she found that it was difficult to form close friendships with her new 'brothers and sisters'.<sup>4</sup> Full-time committed membership entailed celibacy, and if two people (of the same or a different sex) seemed to be forging too strong a bond they were liable to be separated by sending them to different parts of the world. Although constantly surrounded by other members, life could become very lonely within the movement. 'Everyone had their own problems and didn't want to know about yours.'

The more socially isolated the members were from each other, the easier it was for the leadership to control them. It became increasingly difficult to question and check out reality when it appeared as though her peers all agreed with the beliefs and opinions formulated by the leadership.<sup>5</sup> The

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4 It is a common feature of close-knit religious and political communities that the members refer to each other as brother or sister, with leaders frequently being referred to as Mother or Father and the group as a whole as The Family.

5 The influence of peer pressure on an isolated individual was classically illustrated by experiments conducted by Solomon Asch (1959) in which a roomful of students all said that the second-longest of a series of lines drawn on a blackboard was the longest. In a significant number of cases the last student to be asked (who was not

special in-group language or jargon that the group employed also served to isolate the members from 'them' and to direct their thought in a specific direction. Anyone who questioned or deviated from what the leadership decreed had to be 'dealt with' in one way or another. On the rare occasions when Amy expressed any doubts she was told not to intellectualise; she must learn to surrender more completely to gain more spiritual understanding – perhaps she needed to devote more time to meditation until she saw how mistaken she had been. One of the punishments for minor misdemeanours was an extension of the time engaged in the fasting that all members were expected to undergo on a regular basis. This, together with an inadequate vegetarian diet and limited hours of sleep, undermined Amy's health to a certain extent and sometimes left her feeling physically weak.

### The Hierarchy

As was mentioned earlier, Amy's movement offered not merely a means for gaining spiritual enlightenment but also the promise of creating a much better, more just society. This goal, Amy was taught, could justify whatever means were necessary to overthrow the present bad society. The leadership was granted a special expertise, and followers were expected to be just that: followers.<sup>6</sup> As in the army and elsewhere, the rule was that even if a lower-level leader were to make a mistake, those under him should still follow, rather than each individual doing his or her own thing and, thereby, destroying the strength of the group.

The movement was led by its founder, an Oriental who wielded a charismatic authority over his followers. Unconstrained by either tradition or rules, the guru was both unpredictable and unaccountable to any other authority. Amy had not known about him when she joined, but was in-

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privity to the fact that all the others had been told to pick the second longest line) would also say the second longest was the longest, either not wanting to be the odd man out, or actually doubting the evidence of his own senses. When only one other person chose the longest line, then the 'naive' student would be far more likely also to choose the correct one.

6 Some experiments by Stanley Milgram (1974) illustrated how a significant percentage of subjects would be prepared to administer painful, in some cases apparently lethal, electric shocks to others when they were told to go ahead by an 'expert' dressed in a white coat.

troduced to him through pictures and stories related by older members. When she did meet him it was only in the presence of many other devoted followers. She soon, however, came to see him as a parent figure and created in her mind a personal relationship with him. He spoke to her, she believed, in her dreams. 'At that time I'd have followed anyone who gave me attention – made me feel important.' The interesting point here, of course, is that the guru not only paid no attention to Amy whatsoever, but was almost certainly in total ignorance of her existence.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, there was a part of Amy that disliked her guru; she told me her first impression on seeing him was how very ugly he was!

Beneath the leader there were a well-defined number of hierarchies. Some of these were related to the person's reputed spiritual development but others were less achieved than ascribed. Orientals were superior to Westerners; men were superior to women; older members were superior to younger members; celibates were superior to those who had been married. Amy soon realised that while she could achieve some 'promotion' (on her path to enlightenment) she would, nevertheless, remain of inferior status because she was a young, female Caucasian.

It was within this general culture and structure that Amy found herself at a special training centre in a remote region of South America, hoping to advance towards enlightenment – and to advance her position within the movement. Here she came under the authority of a trainer who would seem to have had not only a lust for power, but also a decidedly sadistic streak in his character. So far as Amy was concerned, her time at the training centre was one of fear, humiliation and exhaustion. The trainees were subjected to long periods of fasting; they had to engage in continuous periods of devotion that involved dancing and chanting with little sleep. Amy also found herself being sexually abused under the pretext of being taught detachment and submission, but which had the effect not only of humiliating her in her own eyes but also of inducing a state of numbness: 'In the end, I just didn't feel.' At the same time, she was in constant fear of punishment and, above all, of not passing the examinations that would lead her to the next stage in her path towards spiritual enlightenment.

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7 I have used the term 'charismatization' to describe a process whereby followers seem to conspire together to build up a picture of their leader, according him (or, occasionally, her) a special charisma which authorises him/her to have an unfettered control over all aspects of their lives (Barker 1993).

It would seem that her trainer was a past master at manipulating the aspirations, strengths and weaknesses of those over whom he was in control to the advantage of both the movement's and his own ends. One girl was encouraged to kill herself as a revolutionary gesture, the trainer helpfully writing the leaflets that were distributed at the time of her death. Others were spurred on to take part in demonstrations and an attempted assassination.

There was a slightly older member of the group of trainees who had attained a higher position in the spiritual hierarchy than Amy and, although not one of the movement's leaders, belonged to a more active category than Amy. She had been an ardent communist, but had undergone a politically radical change when she joined the group, becoming an equally ardent anti-communist. It would seem, however, that this had not amounted to any radical psychological change. To use Amy's phrase, 'she took herself with her'; she would appear to have been what Eric Hoffer (1951) has termed the True Believer. She was determined to fight for the cause and her enthusiasms were undiminished just because the goals she now championed were, in some ways at least, diametrically opposed to those that she had previously espoused. It was she who, with the trainer's encouragement, thought up the scheme to hijack a plane to bring attention to the cause. The plan was that the plane would be forced to land behind the Iron Curtain, when the team leader would commit suicide on the runway. Amy's role was to be an innocent bystander who would write a report of what had happened. She did, however, smuggle an inflammable substance onto the plane in a juice bottle as a potential Molotov cocktail.

Luckily for everyone concerned, the plan failed and the conspirators were overwhelmed shortly after the plane had taken off. It was acknowledged that Amy had played a minor role and she consequently served considerably less time in prison than her co-conspirators.<sup>8</sup> When she was released she felt that she had nowhere else to go and so, despite having considerable misgivings about the movement, she returned to it, still hoping to pursue her path to enlightenment, although not under the instruction of her previous trainer who had been removed from his post. Eventually, however, she managed to forge a close relationship with another disillusioned member and together they managed to escape. It took them some time to get the group out of their system and to create a life that would fill

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8 She was given six months for aiding and abetting, most of which she had already spent on remand by the time she was sentenced.

the gap left by the movement which, they continued to acknowledge, had some very positive aspects.

### *Ich kann nicht anders*

There was a point just before the hijacking at which Amy was actually told by a member of the movement who was of superior status to herself, not to take part; but, she told me, by then she felt that it was too late – she had ‘gone too far to stop’; there was no longer a way out – although physically all she had to do was obey the instruction to abort the enterprise.

It might be argued that Amy’s conviction that she just *had* to proceed showed that she had been well and truly brainwashed, and it would certainly seem that her mind had been ‘bent’, if not completely controlled. She had reached a stage in a process of submitting to a religious authority where it would have been extremely difficult for her to extract herself from the influence of the situation. And, of course, she *did* go ahead. We might, however, be in danger of resorting to a dubious kind of hindsight if we were to conclude that, merely because she did it, she *had* to – any more than saying that the one person in nine who converted to the Unification Church had to do so. It is possible that there was still something about Amy herself that prevented her from opting out at the last minute. She still wanted her moment of glory, and admitted this quite freely. People, she said, were going to listen and take notice of her once she explained what the movement had done because of its idealistic beliefs. In other words, the movement (in the persons of the trainer and the team leader) was taking advantage, consciously or unconsciously, of something ‘inside’ Amy.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the circular *petitio principii* that Amy could not have done otherwise because she undoubtedly *did* do what she did cannot be countered – except to point out that it does beg the question. I am, however, resorting to my earlier definition of choice by suggesting that it was not

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9 The extent to which the trainer’s manipulation of those in his charge reflected the movement’s policy and culture cannot be explored in detail here. Suffice it to say that he was given a position of authority that he undoubtedly abused. When his superiors learned of some of the things that he had done in over-stepping his authority, they first chastised him and then, when his behaviour did not change, they removed him from his post. Amy heard later, however, that he had been reinstated and had returned to some of his earlier practices.

*only* the social situation that was the independent variable – there was still something of Amy functioning, albeit at a very diminished level and under a considerable amount of influence from her co-conspirators, and if we want to understand what led Amy to that final phase of the process, we should not close our eyes to the possibility that there was just a bit of her that was positively collaborating.

Another way in which our understanding of the sense of inevitability that Amy felt might be enhanced by recognising that there are other situations when we might feel the odds are overpoweringly against our ‘going along’ with the expectations of others, or indeed, ourselves. At the risk of seeming to trivialise the situation, when Amy told me of how she felt she had no longer a way out I was reminded of Susan, who told me that she went ahead with her marriage because, her mother having made all the arrangements and she and her fiancé having received scores of presents from all their friends and relations, she just could not go against their expectations. She had acquiesced for too long and it was just too late. I was also reminded of another, again very different situation – that of Martin Luther when he declared *Ich kann nicht anders* (I can do no other) at the Diet of Worms, 1521. But many people might think that he was being brave and making a stand just because he *could* have done other. We might also remember that history can provide us with innumerable examples of martyrs who have faced burning at the stake and various other horrible deaths rather than renounce their faith. In recent times there were the Jehovah’s Witnesses who were prepared to be killed in Nazi concentration camps rather than submit to the demands of the regime (King 1982).

On several occasions I have come across people who would seem to have been completely under the spell of a guru or leader, or utterly submissive to the group. There has seemed, however, to be a point beyond which they will not go – though that point may not seem entirely ‘rational’ to outsiders. There was, for example, a young woman who had let her baby die because her husband, the leader of a fundamentalist Christian group, told her it was God’s will that she should only breast-feed her baby, although she knew she was unable to provide the needed nourishment. The baby eventually died of starvation to the mother’s deep distress. She, like Amy, had felt that in the circumstances she could not do anything about the situation, yet she also told me that when she was ordered by the group to carry the dead body of the baby round above her head in a ritual, she refused, saying that she just could not believe God would want that. In another instance, a young man who had appeared to be completely under the control of his guru, to the extent that he was physically abusing other

members of the group, including his brother, at the guru's command, told me that when he was instructed that he could not wear sandals because God did not like those sandals, he had decided that this was ridiculous and, shortly afterwards, he left the group. Returning to Amy's movement, although the trainer was able to persuade Amy and her fellow believers to carry out several deadly actions, when he had suggested that they should throw one of the group into a fire when she was causing problems, they had refused to do so.

It has not been argued that group pressure might not become irresistible and irreversible under certain conditions for certain individuals. It has been argued that group pressure can be extremely effective. Individuals can be induced to perform actions that they would have strenuously resisted had they not been led along a certain path by those to whom they have accorded (a religious) authority over them. It has, however, also been suggested that it is possible, even in extreme circumstances, that some element of choice may yet remain open to the individual – though whether he or she will decide to exert that choice is a question that may only become apparent after the event. In other words, even when the situation seems as though it is having a well-nigh irresistible effect on the individual, the individual may still, at least in some of the cases I have examined, be capable of resisting the pressure.

## **Concluding Remarks**

My limited conclusion is that it is possible to recognise a series of predispositions, values, hopes, fears, actions, reactions, interactions, structures and processes that can contribute to our understanding of how individuals can find themselves on a path that leads, not inevitably, but understandably, to an outcome that is not only one that they would not have chosen at the start of their journey, but one that would seem to be diametrically opposed to their starting position.

Because each individual *is* an individual, starting from different positions, it is not a path that all would follow should they find themselves at the starting point – some will follow different directions from the start or later along the journey. None the less, one can discern bundles of characteristics that predispose certain people to follow certain paths; and one can observe patterns of behaviour that tend to lead to certain outcomes. One can also observe that the pressures of certain situations may be resisted at one time but be persuasive at another time.

The fact that these processes can be recognised might mean that they become more negotiable. To say the least, it might alert us to a greater awareness than resorting to simplistic labelling of terrorists or people involved in other kinds of religious confrontations as being either intrinsically evil people or as passive robots who have been subjected to irresistible or irreversible brainwashing or mind control techniques. Our understanding of how such things come to pass can be increased only by a meticulous charting of a series of journeys from A to B to C to D, recognising the progress of the individual and his/her relationship to the social environment at each stage in the journey, discovering how the individual *and* the social situation *and* the relationship between them changes as a continuous process.

In short, there is not one straight path to conflict and another to compromise or accommodation; but the journeys to either outcome are not entirely idiosyncratic. Others have travelled recognisably similar paths before and will travel them again – paths along which, in God's name, many have learned to practice unconditional love to the death.

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