EX-CULTISTS NEED NOT APPLY

"Now that we have returned to 'normality' and are ready to face a 9-to-5 workday, the business world is not ready to welcome us with open arms."

By Denis Collins

The young man being interviewed for a job was fidgety. The personnel manager had noticed a gap in his résumé. "You graduated from college in 1977," he said, "worked one year as an account executive, and then five years later got a part-time job as a supermarket clerk. What happened between 1978 and 1983?"

"I did a lot of social work," explained the applicant, whom we'll call Scott Bradley. "What kind?"

"I worked on a food redistribution program in California, took part in a community educational program in Hawaii, and traveled around the country raising funds to help support these programs," Scott replied, wringing his moist palms. "Sounds interesting. Whom did you do this for?"

"Several acquaintances and I got together and planned our own itinerary. We wanted to do something new and exciting. We wanted to try to do something for, you know, the betterment of humanity, that sort of stuff."
The most common way that former members seeking jobs deal with their religious past is to hide it.

"I also see that you attended a seminary and received a Diploma of Divinity from U.T.S. Your grade point average for three years was 3.89. That's fantastic! What does U.T.S. stand for? Union Theological Seminary?"

"No," Scott declared, growing more anxious. "It stands for the Unification Theological Seminary. You see, I was a Moonie for five years."

Instead of "Moonie," one might say "Hare Krishna," "Raineech," or the name of any of the other so-called cults or new religious movements. Scott Bradley didn't get the job. He went from "perfectly qualified" to "overqualified" after mentioning his religious background. His treatment is typical of the reception given a sizable number of job applicants who have been reentering the work force in the last few years. Like me, they are dropouts from the new religions that reject mainstream Christianity and began winning adherents in the 1970s.

For years, the larger society has been fretting about us, fearing that we have been brainwashed, duped, or turned into robots by fanatic religious leaders. Some of our parents hired costly deprogrammers to snatch us from the clutches of these alleged zealots and to clear our heads of all the supposed propaganda and errant beliefs.

Now that we have returned to "normality" and are ready to face a 9-to-5 workday, however, the business world is not ready to welcome us with open arms. In interviews that lure have conducted with about 30 former members of these millenial movements, I have found that the most common way former members seeking jobs deal with their religious past is to hide it.

Many of these young people are college-educated (40 percent to 60 percent, according to one sociological study) and have received valuable training during their years in their respective movements—running shops and restaurants, starting newspapers, fund-raising, managing large groups of people, handling accounts, doing legal work, and functioning daily in an antagonistic environment. When they encounter hostility in personnel offices because of their religious past, however, many revise their résumés and avoid mentioning these skills.

"You can't mention your past affiliation," says Kathy, a Moonie from 1973 to 1979, "even after having left five years ago, because you never know how the interviewer will react. Most reactions are extreme, they either hate you for having once been a member or they're intrigued and want to talk with you for hours. They won't hire you, but they'll talk with you. God forbid if you should describe your experience as a logical evolution."

"Of course," replies one former member, when asked whether she had encountered discrimination. "I interviewed for an entry-level position as a counselor. The interviewer praised my education and fieldwork experience. Then he asked me about the three years I described as 'lay missionary' on my résumé. Not wanting to hide anything, I told him I was a member of the Unification Church and explained why I left. At that point I felt that the interviewer regarded me as a strange, impaired, and psychologically drained or deranged individual, even though he had previously perceived me as an articulate, well-educated person. My present job as a probation investigator came about because I didn't admit my past membership. I told them I had traveled extensively for a few years."

There are many ways of covering a "gap" in one's résumé. Some say that they managed their own small business for a few years. Women cover their tracks by claiming that they were full-time homemakers and are now looking for a career change. It doesn't permit them to use the valuable experiences they gained while trying to create a better society, but it also doesn't make a bad impression on the interviewer. "It's a half-truth," Pamela says. "It bothers me, but it's the only way I can get my foot in the door. I would like to tell the interviewer about all of the skills I acquired as a Hare Krishna, but nobody ever believes me."

Why do people join these movements in the first place? The reasons vary. Some young people get caught up in the religious fervor, which gives new meaning to their existence. Others gain strength and support from the community spirit. Still others are drawn to a movement's philosophical critique of modern secular society. As political movements petered out in the early 1970s following the tragedy at Kent State and the trouncing of George McGovern in the 1972 Presidential election, the disillusioned and disenfranchised youth sought other ways to channel their energies for the benefit of society. For those of us who still wanted to change the world, the religious view of utopia replaced the floundering political vision. The longing to experience or live for the ideal was temporarily fulfilled by our involvement in one of the new religious movements. What other organizations...
spoke about the Kingdom of God on earth, of a just society, or of creating perfect families that would usher in a "new age"?

Like any bona fide religious organization trying to make ends meet, the modern movements have become immersed in practical economics. They often hope to establish businesses that will provide the necessary income for the group's activities. Yet this is often a futuristic dream. When push comes to shove, the members grab their buckets of roses and hit the pavement. Perhaps demonstrating their humanness, many Moonies despise fund-raising. As I discovered, it is not easy waking up at 7 A.M., sharing a bathroom with 10 other members, preparing the flowers, jewelry, and other products for an hour, and getting out on the street by 9. Had the day not been filled with interesting experiences, we would have found it impossible to continue until 9 P.M. or midnight, all for "the cause." Yet we viewed it as a challenge—and, if enough people spat in our faces, a claim to martyrdom. In The Cult Experience, Gordon Melton and Robert Moore compliment the members who "find such distasteful activities as fund-raising helpful in overcoming fears of meeting strangers, engaging in conversation with them, and dealing with rejection when it is experienced."

In fact, one character trait members learn over and over again is perseverance, in the face of scorn and derision from family, friends, and strangers. In a Midwestern or Southern community, the street fund-raiser may constantly be told by traditional Christians that Sun Myung Moon (or L. Ron Hubbard, Rajneesh, or any of the other new religious leaders) is probably the Antichrist written about in the Book of Revelations. Most Christian fundamentalists are positive that members of the new religions are following the Antichrist. While selling door-to-door in Jewish neighborhoods, the members of the Unification Church hear accusations of anti-Semitism (from those who believe, mistakenly, that the church is reviving the idea of the Jews' responsibility for the death of Christ). In the more secular Northeastern cities, they are persecuted for not being selfish. Nonetheless, members manage to make their goals of $100 to $300 a day, selling a variety of products.

According to Saul Levine, a psychologist at the Sunnybrook Medical Center in Toronto who has studied the new religious groups, more than 90 percent of people who join the movements return home within two years, "and virtually all

At one firm, an Ivy Leaguer was told the company "would prefer hiring an ex-con to a former cultist."
Tom, who has a business degree, found himself pushing carts in the supermarket he once managed. Joiners eventually abandon their groups. (Statistics on membership vary widely due to the large turnover in these groups, though most sociological studies report that the groups are going through a period of stagnation in recruiting new members.) The reasons for leaving are various, yet seem to have a common thread.

Though we admire the sincerity of those who remain in the movements, many of us have come to believe that the ruling authorities have not lived up to their goals or ideals. As members, we felt that since the Kingdom of God was just around the corner, the groups' "interim ethics" (such as the end justifying the means) were acceptable. But we began to realize that spirituality was being consciously manipulated to justify deception. If the long-awaited kingdom was just around the corner, there was nothing wrong in passing yourself off as something, or someone, you weren't. Better for someone to donate S5 to a fictitious Christian youth movement than to persecute you for being a Moonie—or so the rationale went. Soliciting laws were laughed at, particularly because we believed that town officials would be grateful once the kingdom had arrived. This may seem unconscionable to the nonmember, but is it all that strange when one considers the justifications other Americans use to cheat on their income taxes?

The longer that people remain in these movements, the further the ideal of a "god-centered society" seems to move into the future. The foundations of the groups began to rock when highly experienced and respected older members (anyone in a movement for more than two years qualifies for this distinction) started formulating their own "theologies" to explain the existence of—and their preference for—some of the gray areas.

The theologies that emerged out of these gray areas placed conditions on what had previously been considered evil: Individual accumulation of wealth was deemed acceptable, as long as it was spent wisely; owning your own home was permissible (keep in mind that most of these new religious movements are highly communal and socialistic in nature), as long as others in need were allowed to use it on occasion; fund-raising could be put off in order to earn one more educational degree, as long as your training would be used for the benefit of society.

Those of us who began to embrace these attitudes went through an interesting transformation. We no longer criticized middle-class desires for external goods, only the motivation for acquiring those goods and the uses to which they were put. Thus we felt that we were experiencing a purification of motives.

To other, more orthodox sect members, however, those views were anathema, and those holding them faced charges within their movements of being "revisionists." That confrontation, for many, led to the final break. Our dreams unfulfilled, our disillusionment deep, ex-members then had to come to terms with the drudgery of the society that we had rejected and wanted to change.

Many of the new religious movements require members to separate themselves from society for a set time, reflect upon the value of their lives, and then reenter society to either work for change or to help others see the light. During this period of separation, the members lose touch with the most ordinary events and practices in the larger society. When they return, they may not be able to distinguish an IRA from the IRA. Yet their time has by no means been wasted. They have spent it studying, and gaining a depth of self-discipline that otherwise might never have been developed. This approach may be nontraditional or circuitous, but it is certainly not wasteful—just different.

We were accustomed to hard work and dedication. Many of us had done fund-raising 12 to 16 hours a day, and were spat upon for our beliefs. We traveled extensively throughout America, establishing businesses to support group activities, or cooking meals for 100 people or more. We were ready to accept the reward of being offered jobs equivalent to our proven mettle. Business, however, was not ready to dole out that reward, and still isn't.

Our suspicions are first aroused when interviewers tell us to look elsewhere because we are "overqualified." The catch-22 is inescapable. A fully qualified accountant who worked six years as the chief financial officer for several Unification Church businesses has to omit these experiences from his résumé. Skills gained as a member cannot be mentioned without fear of further inquiry; if questioned, the ex-member risks revealing his or her past religious affiliation.

Since most members tithe the greater part of any earned income to their respective movements, very few people have a financial base when they leave. The lack of capital is the biggest obstacle to resuming a normal life. Many
ex-members have had extremely strained family relationships during their years in the movement, and thus are not able to ask for or accept support from their immediate families. After going through the rituals of becoming reestablished in society—including the impossible tasks of finding an affordable apartment, buying a car without any credit, getting car insurance, and establishing a career—ex-members become desperate for cash. They accept menial jobs just to get the cash flow started. At the very least, they need a bed to sleep on, a table for meals, knives and forks—all the basic necessities usually taken for granted. Now the ex-member not only has to explain his or her past religious affiliation, but also a low-paying, low-status job. Pamela, a Hare Krishna for six years, currently works at two jobs while seeking employment in the mental-health field. She’s getting along for the time being. “I learned how to pace myself while working 14-hour days trying to sell different items at airports.”

The ex-members may also be highly conscious of the need to “catch up” with former college classmates, who are often earning double or triple their salaries, have prominent positions in major companies, and are making down payments on houses in the suburbs. Such comparisons can make the millenarian depressed. “Everyone at work wants to know why a bright, educated person like me is working at such a subservient job,” one ex-member complains. “The most commonly asked question after two minutes’ worth of conversation with a stranger is, ‘What type of work do you do?’ I have to bite my lip a lot.”

Tom, with a B.S. in business management, found himself pushing carts at the supermarket that he once managed. His employer wanted him to prove his loyalty to the company, and also wanted to make sure that Tom wasn’t suffering any unfortunate aftereffects of his religious experience.

Tom’s concern for the latest debate in American foreign policy seemed out of place among the less educated clerks. Moreover, after being celibate for three years and living a self-perceived unselfish way of life, Tom says, “It took a while for me to really accept the attitudes and views of my fellow workers. The most important aspect of their lives revolved around sex and money. I took several big gambles just to find more suitable employment.”

The college-educated often go back to school to get another degree. Since they don’t show any real income for several years back, they find it easy to get loans and scholarships. The immediate debt can be a hassle, but the new degree can be used as a springboard to begin, or resume, a career.

Many former members are forced to seek work through “temp” agencies, where they compete for jobs only with other displaced workers and are judged mostly on typing speed. Perhaps because their faith in God hasn’t diminished, they remain extremely confident that employers will recognize their talent once they’re given a chance. Thus, those employed as temps believe that their diligent work will be noticed and that they will be asked to stay on as full-time workers. Those who accept entry-level jobs in major corporations hope that their bosses will try to better utilize their skills. Getting almost any job makes former members happy, at least momentarily, since they have the first steady income they’ve had in quite a while.

But even the most experienced have difficulty
getting hired. For almost a decade, Jim, a graduate of an Ivy League university and now 35 years of age, was making more than $400 a day selling pictures and silverware door-to-door for the Church of Scientology. Leaving the group, Jim sought employment as a low- to mid-level sales manager. At one firm, he was told that the company "would prefer hiring an ex-con to a former cultist."

During my five years with the Unification Church I met at least a third of its American members. (Any report listing total membership as greater than 3,000 is simply wishful thinking on the church's part.) I knew firsthand that the psychologists, sociologists, and reporters stereotyping members as "zombies" couldn't be writing about the typical Moonie. If there was some validity to these heavily biased reports it must have been in reference to the Hare Krishnas or Scientologists—or so I rationalized at the time.

In writing this article I have found that this is not true, either. The people I interviewed who voluntarily defected from one of those groups have similar attitudes and perspectives. This was interesting in light of the fact that the dogmas taught by each group are vastly different.

Prior to his conversion to Christianity, Saint Augustine had been a member of the long-forgotten Manichaeans for nine years. Members of this fourth-century religious movement believed that Mani, their religious leader, was the "last and greatest prophet." Augustine seems to have survived his millennial experience quite well. If it's still difficult to understand why anyone would ever want to join one of "those groups," consider that in more than 4,000 years of human history no heterogeneous society has been able to establish a society in obedience to the Ten Commandments. Some people think it is still worth a try.

A study by Dr. Charles E. Norton, a psychiatrist and founder of the Norton Research and Measurement Center, compares the attitudes of members of new religious movements with those of the general populace, pastoral counseling trainees, and the psychologically disturbed. He concludes: "To my eye, the [attitudinal] patterns that emerge [from members of the new religious movements] are more suggestive of the Pilgrim fathers or other rebels or dissidents in our long religious history than they are of mental-health clients. The themes of willful, inner-directed speaking out, creativity, and religiosity run fairly strong in these groups. Dependency, selfish self-centeredness, and psychological impoverishment hardly appear at all. All the groups studied place high demands on individual members, requiring growth, discipline, communication, cooperative activity, confidence in the face of rejection, and practical skill."

There is, moreover, evidence that members of the new movements profit from their experience and are able to grow and mature as a result of it. A recent study done by Stuart A. Wright of the Center for Urban Church Studies concludes that "responses of voluntary defectors indicate that most assimilate their experiences in a constructive way and learn from them. In much the same way that individuals learn from any major social and psychological transition—whether it be a career change, a divorce, or leaving the Armed Services to reenter civilian life—one can use these past experiences, events, and perceptions to build or guide future actions, to set different goals, and to establish new convictions."

So the next time you are interviewing a well-educated, eager, and alert young man or woman for a job and discover a large gap in his or her résumé, don't assume that the applicant once served time in jail. If that person finally "confesses" to having been a member of the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, or the Krishna Consciousness Society, he or she may still be highly qualified—and, indeed, could prove to be one of the hardest workers you'll ever hire. This applicant will definitely appreciate a steady income, and will probably never again join one of those strange religious groups. One millennial experience a lifetime is enough for anyone.
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