

How beliefs may come and go: a brief overview of a 'cult career'

For nearly two decades I have researched how and why people join minority religions, the impact on them of conversion, and what makes some of them leave. How do former members of high-demand groups – those that are socially closed and doctrinally authoritarian – understand and narrate their 'cult careers'?

JOINING

There is an affinity between what a religious group offers and those who join it. Vegetarians are likely to be drawn to groups that teach the sanctity of animal life or the importance of avoiding meat (e.g., new Hindu or Jain groups), whilst young black people might well feel an affinity for those that strongly affirm black identity (e.g., Rastafarianism or the Nation of Islam). But even within an appropriate demographic, not everybody will join, and how they do so will differ depending on the group as well as the individual.

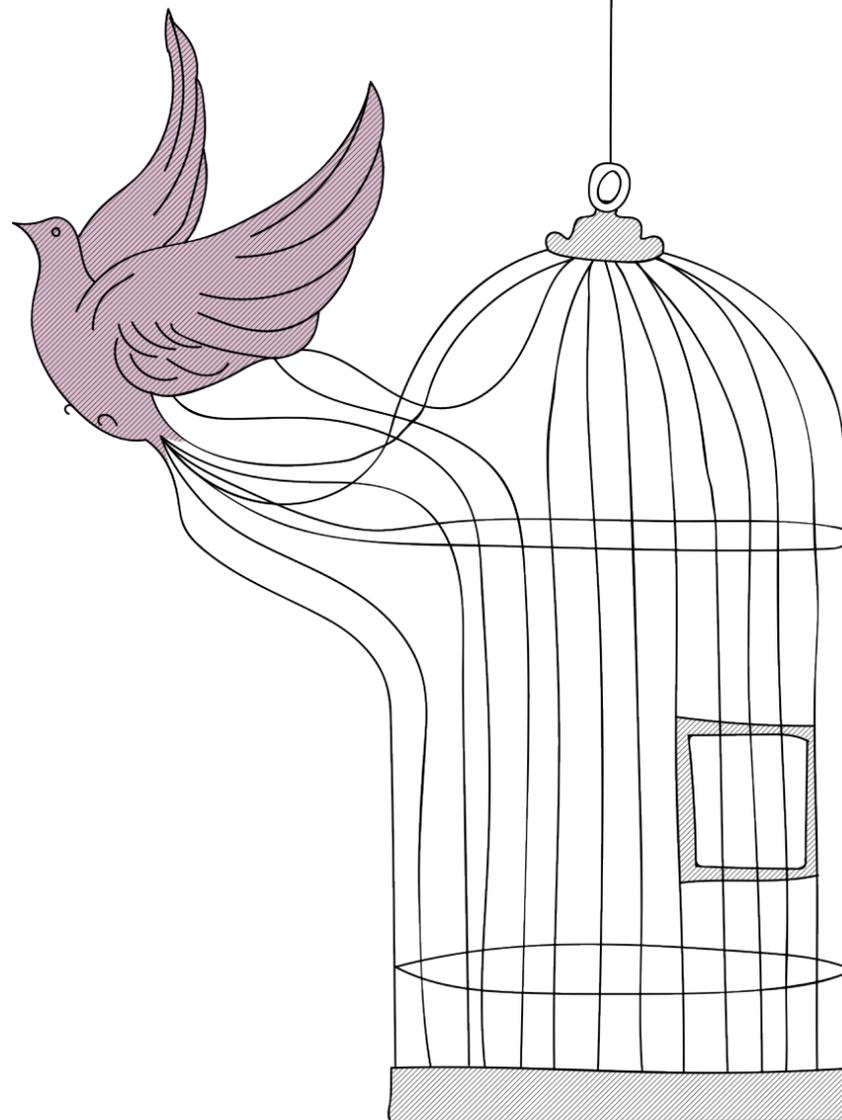
Research has shown that, rather than being defined merely by a vulnerability, those who join high-demand groups often claim to be ideologically motivated. They are attracted by messages about making the world a better place, and what role they can play in bringing it about (pull factors). Such messages are particularly powerful if they are combined with a narrative about the current state of the world and its growing moral, social and

economic impoverishment (push factors). These factors combine together to provide an account which makes a move towards the group seem like a rational choice.

The image of the group is also important. A strong leader surrounded by interesting and remarkable people is more likely to be considered charismatic and impressive. Furthermore, personal contact with one or more others when joining (either one buddy, face-time with various members, or even intense virtual contact with someone) makes for a welcoming environment. The joiner feels special and basks in the attention – this is often referred to as 'love-bombing'. A religious experience around the time of joining will likely convince the newcomer of the 'Truth' of this path.

THE 'CULT CAREER'

The excitement and fervour that come with new ideas, beliefs, and friends can make for a real and significant 'honeymoon' phase for those converts



for whom the new group and lifestyle appear a perfect fit. This phase and its duration may vary, but gradually it wanes. Converts find that they were not privy to all there was to know, and eventually a more realistic view of the group and the requirements of the lifestyle begin to emerge. Whether a convert stays or leaves depends on a number of factors, and each person has their own tipping point. Eventually things might not add up and doubts emerge, yet cognitive dissonance and wilful blindness can cover the cracks that have begun to appear. Furthermore, over time investments in the group (a spouse, children, a home life) and sacrifices (burnt bridges with old friends and family) may have been made, and these make it harder to walk away. Crucially, there may still be the belief that this group is the right one.

LEAVING

Most groups actually have a high turnover of members, with many joining and leaving. Some may stay for longer, or even for life. Although the term 'brainwashing' has been widely discredited and is not always helpful, it can occasionally work as a figure of speech for those who make a career out of their membership, and become part of the core group. In these cases the term is metaphorically understood as a social process leading to increasing levels of ideological commitment and obedience, with the beliefs of the group providing the frame through which reality is viewed. This will influence how someone weighs up and chooses between those positives that keep them engaged in the group and those adverse views about the outside world that may stop them leaving. But beliefs and frames are adjusted over time as new information comes in, and when they are no longer compelling, leaving might be the better option. Exit costs – the combination of investments and sacrifices – accumulate over a 'cult career', but even these can be overcome.

EXPLAINING WHAT HAPPENED

Post-hoc interpretations of 'what happened' depend on why and how people leave. The leaving process again changes the frame through which everything is viewed. Someone who leaves on bad terms is more likely to have a negative view, and vice versa. If the leaver's external milieu is judgemental of the group, the negative aspects of the narrative will be emphasised. Hindsight builds a new frame, where stories of victimhood or undue influence may be drawn on to explain what happened. Cases of coercive control are relatively rare compared to narratives of mind control.

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