

## **Establishing Mutual Ground that enables Counselling of Religious Cult Victims**

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*Verskillende modelle van berading vir verskillende tipes mishandeling word in literatuur aangedui. 'n Model vir slagoffers van geestelike mishandeling aan die hand van godsdienstige kultes is egter nog in gebreke. Alvorens hierdie slagoffers berading kan ontvang moet 'n gemeenskaplike grond gevestig word. In hierdie artikel word eerstens gepoog om aan te dui hoe godsdienstige kultes 'n ander wêreld vir hulle volgelingen skep, deur die bestaande stelsel van beïnvloeding te vervang met 'n kultestelsel en sodoende 'n verandering in die identiteit en persoonlikheid van die volgelinge teweeg te bring. Met die tot-standkoming van 'n ander identiteit en persoonlikheid word gedragsverandering bewerkstellig. In die proses word volgelingen emosioneel afhanklik van die groep en antagonisties teenoor die buitewêreld. Hierdie gedrag kompliseer die beradingsproses. In hierdie artikel word aangevoer aan dat een metode om hierdie slagoffers te bereik is deur hulle na 'n posisie te beweeg vanwaar hulle die egtheid van die kulte en die meegaande praktyke kan evalueer en bevraagteken. Die slagoffer is meer geneë om te luister na ander standpunte*

*wanneer twyfel oor die egtheid en modus operandi van die kulte bestaan. Verder word die noodsaaklikheid van 'n inklusiewe beradingsmodel in die berading van die slagoffers beredeneer.*

## **1. Introduction**

*I have new brothers and sisters now, and my real father is in heaven* – the declaration of a stern member of the Mission Church of Christ of Lester Bloomberg (Gomes, 1994:11). This declaration or similar declarations of cult members caused many parents inexpressible heartache. This declaration is normally followed by a “break up” of the individual with his/her parents, family and friends to ensure full dedication to the religious cult. Although the abovementioned declaration is referring to the “spiritual” it unfortunately has an even more radical impact on the natural world of the individual. The individual is confronted and exposed to an idealistic “perfect” world – the world of the cult, alongside his/her own “broken” world. He/she is then subtly moved through different kinds of psychological techniques and taken up in the world of the cult. The declaration of a newly found “spiritual family” that replaces the biological family indicates the level of success that a religious cult has already achieved not only in bringing about behavioural change and control, but also to ensure a total commitment to the world of the religious cult.

A religious cult is: a relatively small group of people zealously following a leader with a special gift. The group exhibits radical new so-called *Christian* religious beliefs and practices in opposition to traditional Christian beliefs. The leader and his/her followers believe that they are the final arbiters of what is or is not the truth. The group isolates itself from the outside world, exhibiting inward innovative behaviour that both differentiates and makes for conformity among group members establishing a group identity. Sophisticated techniques are utilised in order to bring about thought reform (mind control), group identity and dependence on the group (Pretorius, 2004:609).

The aim of this article then is to indicate how this behavioural change is brought about and how such victims can be reached in order to proceed with the counselling process.

Firstly, the changeover and commitment to the world of the cult will be discussed.

## **2. How the “own” world of an individual is established**

A human being is not born into this world inside a cocoon ensuring that he/she is totally isolated from all influence or any social interaction. Apart

from generic characteristics, social interaction with other people and systems form an important part in establishing a self-concept, personality and an “own “ world in which the individual lives.

## **2.1 Systems of influence and frame of reference**

Psychologists would most probably agree that both the personality of an individual as well as the situation in which he/she finds him-/herself influences his/her behaviour (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997:14). Human infants are born supremely adapted for sociability. Being unable to move themselves they depend completely on other people. When babies grow older their tendency towards sociability becomes even more apparent. They delight in the simplest competitive games with another person. In later life people are more important to us than we realise.

Individuals have their own personal idea of themselves, which is known as the *self-concept*. Psychologists have found that one of the most important aspects of how persons see themselves is how other people see them (Hayes, 2002:10 -14).

Self-concept is often thought of as having two different parts. One is the descriptive part that is just about what a person is like; tall, intelligent, sportsman and good in languages. That is known as *self-image*. The other part is the part that makes judgements on whether a person is good, bad, worthy and successful. This part of the self-concept is known as *self-esteem* (Hayes 2002:16).

Human beings during their lifetime are also exposed to different systems that have an influence not only in establishing their personalities but also in creating their “own” world i.e. worldview, view of God and frame of reference as a whole. These systems of influence include among others an educational, political, religious, family, and cultural system. The educational system such as pre-schools, schools, colleges, universities and other institutions provide training mentally and morally. A political system refers to the different political viewpoints that individuals are exposed to. Most individuals are exposed to the teachings, precepts and doctrines of a religion or religions. An individual is furthermore exposed to family traditions within the family context. Culture also conveys certain beliefs, viewpoints about life and behaviour.

Apart from the influence of systems an individual is also interacting with other individuals. This social interaction plays an important role in the formation of personality and a frame of reference. An individual has two basic needs that are satisfied in social interactions with others. First is the need for *positive regard*. *Positive regard* refers to affection, love, trust and respect. Positive regard can further be classified as conditional positive regard and unconditional positive regard. Conditional positive regard is based on good behaviour. In other words, when a child is naughty or has

misbehaved he/she receives the message that he/she is not loved. A child who had grown up with conditional positive regard was actually being given a message that it wasn't really he/she that was loved – it was some ideal, perfect child who was never naughty. *They grow up believing that if they are not perfect nobody will like them.* They need approval from other people so much that they would not risk exploring their own interests in case other people did not like it or did not approve. Unconditional positive regard on the other hand does not depend on how the person acts. To have some kind of positive regard is a very fundamental need, which has to be satisfied. Second, an individual has the need for self-actualisation. Self-actualisation means to make real the different parts of the self, to explore and develop his/her ideas, abilities, interests and talents. This need is also a fundamental need. Without any way of developing one's abilities or skills one can become psychologically damaged (Hayes, 2002:16).

Interaction with each of these systems, social interaction with other individuals and the experience gained in the process leave certain impressions on an individual that influence and contribute in establishing a frame of reference. A frame of reference is the context, viewpoint, set of presuppositions or set of evaluative criteria within which a person's perception and thinking seem always to occur, and which constrains selectively the course and outcome of these activities (Bullock & Stallybrass, 1978:243). It is a system of standards or values usually merely implicit, underlying and to some extent controlling an action, or the expression of any attitude, belief, or idea (English & English, 1958:215).

An individual's frame of reference serves as glasses through which he/she views, understands, evaluates and interprets the world and things around him/her. The frame of reference actually enables the individual to make decisions and determine whether products, philosophies, actions and thoughts are acceptable. The frame of reference in turn not only serves as backdrop against which matters are viewed but also determines the course and outcome of actions.

In order to change an individual's personality, i.e. behaviour, outlook and thoughts one needs to influence and change that by which the personality is informed and guided – the frame of reference.

## **2.2. Personality and Identity**

A person is an individual human being who can act independently (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997:10). It is the personality of the person that enables him/her to act and behave in a certain fashion. Personality is a term resistant to definition and so broad in usage that no coherent simple statement about it can be made (Reber & Reber, 2001:525). Personality is used in various ways. It is used to describe a person's social dimension. On the other hand personality describes someone's behaviour patterns or his/her nature.

The following definitions, however, shed more light on the meaning of personality. “Personality is the constantly changing but nevertheless relatively stable organisation of all physical, psychological and spiritual characteristics of the individual which determine his/her behaviour in interaction with the context in which the individual finds himself or herself” (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997:12). Personality is a description of consistent emotional, thought, and behaviour patterns in a person (Anon, 2007:1)

Personality must not be confused with *character*. The term character has a narrower meaning and refers only to those aspects of the personality involving the person’s values, and his/her ability to behave consistently in congruence with his/her values. Personality is also not *temperament* or *nature*, terms that are used to describe the emotions of people and the way in which they express them and deal with them (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997:12). *Identity* is a person’s essential, continuous self, the internal, subjective concept of oneself as an individual (Reber & Reber, 2001:338).

For the purpose of this study however, the following definition of personality is used: personality refers to the organisation of all physical, psychological and spiritual characteristics of an individual, which determine consistent behavioural patterns when interacting with the context he/she finds himself or herself in.

In conclusion it can be said that the personality of a person is the centre that determines the type of action or behaviour in relation with the context the person is exposed to or confronted with.

The process to establish a frame of reference can be illustrated as below (see fig. 1)

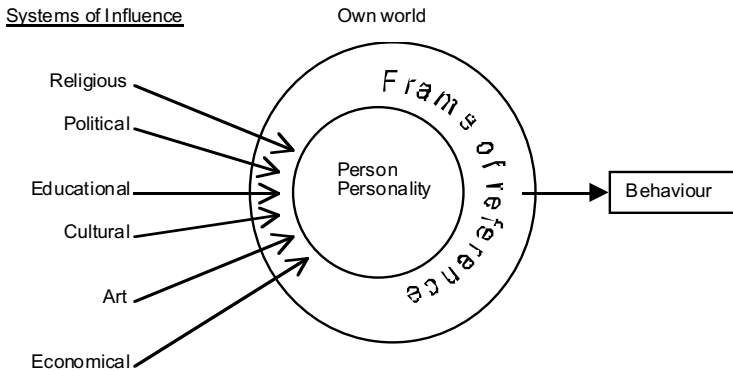


Fig. 1

In conclusion the following important observation needs to be made. Each individual is exposed to influences whether through systems, social interaction or experience. These influences are sifted and assimilated by the individual to form a particular set of values, beliefs and presuppositions that make up the world of the individual and determine his/her personality. An individual's basic need for positive regard and self-actualisation remains important throughout life. These needs also make an individual vulnerable to influence that can trigger change in behaviour.

### **3. Behaviour change and the “new” world of religious cults**

In the beginning of this article it was established that behavioural change forms an integral part of religious cults. How is this radical change in behaviour brought about?

A very important step in reaching the potential cult member is through a technique called *love bombing*. ‘Love bombing’, a powerful tool in recruitment of cult members, refers to a feigned show of affection and caring for the sole purpose of influencing behaviour and indoctrinating new members (MacHovec, 1989:82). Love bombing is a coordinated effort, usually under the direction of the leadership, that involves long-term members flooding recruits with flattery, verbal seduction, affectionate but usually nonsexual touching, and lots of attention to their every remark (Singer & Lalich, 1995:114). The important effect of love bombing is that it relaxes the individual and makes him/her more susceptible to new ideas. The individual's defences are lowered and the environment is prepared for influence.

All that is needed next in order to change the behaviour of an individual is to create a need for change. Religious cults have refined their techniques in creating a need for change. As long as an individual believes that his/her world is sufficient no need for change will be envisaged. If an individual however has reason to believe that his “own” world is lacking in certain areas he/she will be more susceptible to change.

#### **3.1 Doubt in “own” world central to behaviour change**

Religious cults create the need for change by bringing doubt in the mind of an individual about the efficiency of his/her “own” world. In other words the individual is reached through his/her need for positive regard. By displaying a kind of disapproval of the “world” of the individual doubt is created. This disapproval is mostly obtained by downplaying the sources of influences of the individual's “own” world. The shortcomings in the systems of influence, which established this world, will be highlighted. For example, the degeneration in the educational system at the hand of the new models will be indicated as a sign of the departure from the will of

God. The charge will be made that religious systems, churches, have been penetrated by worldly influences, resulting in the Word of God being watered down. The political system will be accused of failing the people because the Word of God is no longer central to the organisation and affairs of the state. The history of the individual based on the influence of these systems and social interactions with other people is therefore coloured in a dark cloud of doubt and portrayed as missing the mark.

The psychological principle that is utilised not only to create doubt but also to bring about some action is called *cognitive dissonance*. Cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual is confronted with two or more contradicting cognitions or ideas. The result is that the individual experiences discomfort (Gouws, Louw, Meyer & Plug, 1982:154). This does not mean that a difference between two cognitions creates dissonance, but rather that a difference exists between cognitions about the self and specific behaviour that nullifies that self-concept (Venter, 2004:141.). In order to obtain consonance an individual will attempt to change one or both of the cognitions (Gerard, 1992:323). An example used by Festinger (1957) may assist in elucidating the theory. A habitual smoker who learns that smoking is bad for his health will experience dissonance, because the knowledge that smoking is unhealthy is dissonant with the cognition that he continues to smoke. He can reduce the dissonance by changing his behaviour, that is, he can stop smoking, which would be consonant with the cognition that smoking is bad for one's health. Alternatively, the smoker can reduce dissonance by changing his cognition about the effect of smoking on health, and choose to believe that smoking does not have a harmful effect on health (eliminating the dissonant cognition). As a result, cognitive dissonance is created. The individual is now forced to make choices or act in order to relieve the discomfort.

The religious cult and the solution it presents, points out the difference that exists between cognitions about the self and specific behaviour that nullifies that self-concept. In order to obtain consonance and restore the self-concept the individual accepts the view and lifestyle of the cult presented as 'pure' and novel as solution. He/she is now ready and receptive to the influential dynamics of the cult that will work behavioural change in hand.

### **3.2 Process of mind control creates the "new" world of the religious cult**

Once an individual is moved to believe that the cult is indeed presenting a solution to his broken "own" world he/she opens him- or herself up to change. The individual's "own" world i.e. attitude, personality, viewpoints, systems of influence are subtly changed through the process known as *mind control*.

Some definitions of *mind control* include: *A system of influences that disrupts an individual's identity and replaces it with a new identity* (Hassan, 1989:7); *A step-by-step process designed to break a person's independence and individuality and to substitute it with the characteristics of a pawn* (McManus & Cooper, 1984:27). Mind control is the shaping of a person's attitudes, beliefs, and personality without the person's knowledge or consent (www.FACTnet.org.:1). Mind control is a concerted effort to change a person's way of looking at the world, which will change his/her behaviour (Singer & Lalich, 1995:62). A person has been made receptive to new ideas because his/her critical faculties and ego strength have been eroded by techniques including information control, over-stimulation of the nervous system, forced confessions and ego destruction (Snow & Machaleck, 1984:178).

From the abovementioned definitions it is clear that the aim of mind control is to suppress an individual's own personality and identity (ambitions, opinions, critical thinking and ability to make decisions) and to replace it with an identity acceptable to the religious leader. An individual who develops this new identity does not think critically, is indecisive, dependent and lacks ambition, thus ensuring that the leader gains control. In this manner the individual is also made dependent on the guidance of the leader and the group.

Mind control is a progressive subtle process to establish the world of the cult and the accompanying behaviour changes. This "new" world of the cult is presented as God's way to escape from the "old" broken world.

### **3.3 Changes as a result of the establishment of the world of the cult**

The systems of influence, social interaction and experience known to the individual in his/her "own" world are replaced by the systems and social codes of interaction of the cult.

The systems of influence are replaced by a new cult culture that prescribes the actions and behaviour acceptable to the cult and, indirectly, acceptable to God. The cult hierarchy replaces the family. Each member of the cult needs to understand and adhere to the structure of authority. The cult leader is at the top of the structure followed by helpers or other leaders and then followed by the ordinary cult members. A group identity is promoted in a religious cult. The leader is believed to be a man or woman of God that leads and whom the rest must follow without question. The cult members believe that they are spiritual brothers and sisters. This bond is stronger than their biological ties. The new revelation provided to the leader replaces the old doctrines taught by the church and becomes the new religious system. This new religious system is believed to be infallible as a result of the personal "new revelation" that the leader receives directly



from God. A new way in which children should be brought up replaces the old educational system. In many cults formal educational training is not needed and is replaced by a continuous study of the "Word of God". The political system is replaced by the viewpoints of the cult about the government and the world. In most cases the world outside the cult is viewed as evil and as an enemy of the cult and his followers.

Social interaction is mostly restricted to other members of the cult seeing that ties with family and friends outside the cults are terminated in order to commit wholeheartedly to the goals of the cult. Most of this interaction aims at establishing emotional and psychological dependence on the cult. This dependence is obtained through techniques such as *confession sessions*. Through public confession sessions new members are led to reveal past and present behaviour, contacts with others, and undesirable feelings, seemingly in order to unburden themselves and become free. The member is stripped of his/her private and intimate feelings. Whatever is revealed is subsequently used to further mould the member and to make him/her feel closer to the group and estranged from non-believers. *Group pressure* is another effective means to get people to fit their behaviour to group norms. Cult leaders use the innate tendencies toward group conformity that people bring with them as a powerful tool for change. No one announces the rules but people look around them, discern what they are, and behave accordingly. For example, a number of women in a cult, without being instructed to do so, changed their clothes to dark colours, long skirts, flat heels and no make-up in order to fit in (Singer & Lalich, 1995:168). People tend to believe that the majority is always right. When confronted with information contradictory to the individual's own world-view, the reaction of the other established members is observed in order to assist in dealing with the information. The positive reaction by these established members causes new members to re-evaluate their own response. In most cases the new members believe that they must be wrong because all the other members accept the information. The pressure by the group subtly persuades the new member to accept the information.

The repeated adherence of the rules, instructions and rituals of the cult together with the observance of the older cult members that are established in the cult world assist in bringing about the change in behaviour. The controlled environment of the cult also speeds up the behavioural change.

Once the process of mind control has taken affect the individual has already redefined his/her life as part of the cult dedicated to God and has internalised this new life through the teachings and techniques of the group. An individual does not view him- or herself as an individual but as a full-blood cult member and part of the bigger group of followers, the so-called "chosen people of God". A cult member is completely committed to the group and the leader.

### **3.4 New personality and cult identity**

As a result of the introduction of different systems of influence, social interactions and experience in the world of the cult, a new or double personality and identity is formed. A different organisation of physical, psychological and spiritual characteristics according to the cult precepts has taken place. Thus the behaviour in interaction with a different context occurs. The radical change in the behaviour of an individual can thus be explained at the hand of the exposure to the “new” world of the cult with its radical doctrine and prescriptions.

Commitment to the life of the cult also has an impact on the individual’s subjective concept of him- or herself as an individual, his/her identity. Members of a cult view themselves as part of the selected few of God that belong to the cult. A reevaluation of the self-concept occurs and the individual redefines him- or herself. The “old” self that lived in a broken world is replaced with a “new” self as part of the true selected people of God. In order to do justice to the “new” self (also referred to as the *cult identity*) the individual lives strictly according to the precepts and prescriptions of the cult, not according to his/her own ideas or beliefs.

Both the new personality and new identity are not replacing the old personality and identity but must rather be viewed as a double personality and identity that suppress the old personality and identity.

Important to note is that the religious cult also utilises the two basic needs referred to earlier, namely positive regard and self-actualisation. One technique used to keep the “new” or cult identity in place is called a *reward and punishment system*. When a member obediently follows the prescriptions of the cult he/she will be rewarded; if not he/she will be punished. This system enforces a strong dependence of a conditional positive regard. An individual has no assurance of his/her salvation. It is dependent on his/her obedience to the prescriptions of the cult. The need for self-actualisation, which refers to the exploration of the self and development of his/her ideas, abilities, interests and talents, is suppressed. Instead, all own ambitions, hobbies and interests must make room for cult practices and goals. Individuals are told that they must sacrifice that which is dear to them in order to confirm their commitment. This suppressive action by the individual progressively establishes a dependence on the group resulting in psychological damage.

### **3.5 Mind set of the cult member**

The individual is taken up in the religious cult and finds him- or herself in a “new” world. He/she has taken on a new superficial prescribed personality and identity according to which he/she behaves, acts and reacts. His/her behaviour has changed radically and ties with family, friends and support structures outside the cult have been cut. The world

outside the world of the cult is an evil world from which God has saved him/her. There is no chance of returning to this evil world, thus all onslaughts from outside must be resisted. All accusations of being deceived, being in a cult must be rejected and interpreted as an attempt from the devil to pull him/her away from God. The world of the cult is "pure" and the world outside "black". He/she must at all cost resist and stay true to the cult. The cult member thus finds him- or herself in total emotional and psychological isolation as a result of the cult's subtle suggestions about the outside world.

The isolation of a cult member is strengthened by an antagonistic attitude that strongly discourages any contact with anybody that does not belong to his/her group. This is the hurdle that must be overcome in reaching the victim of a religious cult.

#### **4. Preparation for counselling of victims of religious cults**

Different models are proposed in literature for different kinds of abuse. A victim of a religious cult displays certain characteristics that must be taken into account in order to ensure effective counselling. What sets this spiritual abuse apart from other abuse is the subtleness and belief amongst members that it is acceptable as an offer unto God.

##### ***4.1 Spiritual abuse in religious cults***

Most people are unaware of the effect and damage of spiritual abuse in religious cults. Spiritual abuse in religious cults is underestimated mostly because of the abstractness/invisibility thereof. Differing from other types of abuse such as physical abuse and sexual abuse, spiritual abuse is not that visible to the untrained eye. Spiritual abuse nonetheless inflicts serious wounds to the psyche of a person that impact on his/her total life. Spiritual abuse has a devastating effect on people. In many cases the wound is so deep that the wounded person cannot trust even a legitimate spiritual authority again (Henke, 2006:3).

According to Damiani (2002:45-46), Henke (2006:3-4), Johnson & VanVonderen (1991:41-50) and Langone (1993:238-239), the following effects of spiritual abuse of victims who left religious cults have been recorded: all victims experience a deep, at times suicidal depression as a result of the collapse of the entire belief system they had wholeheartedly committed to. Another symptom is rage at the responsible leaders. A sense of purposelessness and disconnection from life coupled with an unbearable loneliness, isolation and alienation ensues. Victims may experience a fear of losing their salvation because they have left the group. Most victims become distrustful of any kind of authority especially religious leadership. Victims experience the feeling that nobody

understands their specific situation and they fear that they will go crazy. This feeling causes the battered follower to pull back even into isolation. Embarrassment at having been stupid enough to be abused and even to have participated in recruiting other followers, is common. Many victims who gave up careers and possessions, face frustration and a dismal career track and financial future. Some victims are trapped in a marriage as a result of matchmaking by the leader. Some victims have been sexually abused. Other victims have repeated nightmares and others experience dissociation. Victims develop a distorted image of God. Victims have a distorted self-image of themselves as Christians. Some may have difficulty with the concept of grace. Most victims have difficulty with admitting that they have been abused.

From the abovementioned effects of abuse it seems clear that victims of religious cults pose a challenge to the counsellor. Two hurdles in reaching the victims of religious cults are trust and antagonism.

#### **4.2 Addressing the double identity**

At the core of the mistrust and antagonism against any person outside the cult is the change in identity and personality. As identified earlier in this article the individual that belongs to a religious cult possesses a double identity, the identity supplied by the cult. As a result he/she views him- or herself in a manner prescribed to him/her by the cult and acts accordingly. One of the characteristics of the cult identity is that it displays an *elite mentality*. The elite mentality stems from the fact that they believe that they are the only true “called people of God”. They are therefore the only ones that have access via their leader to the truth and thus possess all answers. As a result of the elite mentality present in religious cults, the members are antagonistic to all other churches or people outside their group. No one outside the group has the truth and thus they are doing nothing more than poisoning the world with their false doctrine. Followers are warned against the deceit present in other churches and doctrines in opposition to that of the group (Zukeran, 2006:3).

As a result of this elite mentality, cult members display an antagonism towards outsiders. This antagonism is manifested in rudeness, refusal to listen to an outsider and the “shutting-off” technique – that is, they shut off in their minds and although they face you they do not take in anything. Followers are taught to suppress criticism against the cult or leader seeing that he is God’s anointed and the Bible forbids that “God’s anointed be touched”. The hidden motive is that questions, dissent or open discussion cannot be tolerated seeing that the religious system is not based on the truth (Henke, 2006:2). Therefore all criticism is viewed as attacks from the enemy and thus invalid. This antagonistic approach is further justified by placing emphasis on the godly sanctioning of the leader hearing directly from God.

While functioning in the modus of the cult identity a person does not think critically, is indecisive, dependent and lacks ambition, thus ensuring that the leader gains control. This cult identity in actual fact refers to a group identity that exhibits inward innovative behaviour that both differentiates and makes for conformity among group members.

The soul source for action is the leader(s). This total dependence on the guidance of the leader not only leads to indecisiveness on the side of the followers but also makes him/her fearful to listen to other ideas. All information in the cult must either come from or be approved by the leader. Obedience to the instructions and guidance of the leader is enforced by the feedback of the leader. Feedback will either be in the form of a compliment – thus a reward for good behaviour, or the cult member will be reprimanded – thus be punished for disobedience. The type of punishment can range from excommunication by other members, to curses on him or his family, to total abandonment by God and to death. The barometer for action and behaviour of a cult member is self-esteem – he/she judges him- or herself against the feedback of the cult leader. The feedback more importantly motivates the follower to even more behave according to the cult identity, which he/she believes holds the key to being successful and acceptable to the leader and eventually to God.

In order to reach the cult member a way must be found to bypass the cult identity.

### ***4.3 Approach to reach the cult victim***

The approach needed to reach the cult victim is to find a way to make contact with the “own” identity and personality. The victim must be reached on the level of his/her “own” suppressed personality that displays ambitions, own opinions, critical thinking and ability to make decisions. The individual’s “own” personality does not act antagonistic or distrustful and is thus more open for other ideas. The best way to reach the victim is to reverse the process that took place when the victim was moved to join the cult, namely through doubting his/her own world. Doubt in the world and authenticity of the religious cult must be established to reach the victim and open him/her up to other ideas.

The “own” personality can be reached in the following ways:

- (1) First and foremost a friendship and trust relationship with the victim must be established. Be honest, open and professional in your motives with the victim. Assure the victim that he/she will make his/her own decisions and will not be forced into any action or practice they do not approve of. The feeling of belonging that the cult member experienced in the cult and among his/her fellow members needs to be established. The cult member needs to feel that he/she is loved, respected and worthy. Instead of the artificial

love bombing of the cult, genuine love and attention must be given to the cult member.

(2) Relate to the pleasant experiences in the “own” world of the victims. This is an attempt to reaffirm that his/her “own” world is not bad and does have value. Although cult members are taught to suppress the bad past they still long for pleasant experiences in that life. Concentrate on pleasant experiences.

(3) Counteract the teachings of the cult about the rejection of the cult by the outside world by showing interest in the cult, its practices and its teaching.

Once a friendship and trust relationship is established the following approach can be taken to move the cult member to verify the authenticity of the practices and teachings of the cult:

Religious cults are not only a phenomenon in the rest of the world but also South Africa. When working with a victim of a cult one must refrain from referring to the cult of the victim. Referring to the cult of the victim will result in the victim having his/her “defences up”, thus acting or behaving in the “cult identity”.

The way to avoid this situation is to rather refer to another cult that displays the same characteristics. In this manner the victim does not view it as a personal attack and is more open to listen and able to draw parallels with his/her own cult. The purpose of the referral to another cult is to bring doubt in the mind of the victim with regard to his own cult’s claims and authenticity. An example: most religious cults claim to be the only “true chosen people of God” or claim that their leader is the “only true prophet of God”. When a victim is confronted with the fact that another religious cult also claims to be the “only true chosen people” or has the “only true prophet of God” it triggers his/her mental faculties. Questions such as how it is possible that another cult can make the same claim and who is presenting the truth and who is lying, sows a seed of doubt about the authenticity of the cult.

Once the authenticity of the cult is found to be questionable and its aims are exposed, the process to address each of the aspects of spiritual abuse as indicated above may begin.

#### ***4.4 Road to healing the victim of a religious cult***

Once the victim is opened for counselling the process of counselling can assume. The road to the emotional, physical and psychological healing of a victim of a religious cult is long and sometimes difficult as a result of the wounds inflicted by the cult. Very important in this process is to explain the process of entrapment. A victim of a religious cult has been deceived. This deception however is different. The victim has actually deceived him- or herself as a result of the subtle process of mind control, which

makes one believe that involvement was one's own free choice. To assimilate the fact that the cult has actually succeeded in trapping a victim to the level where he/she gave up everything in order to serve the aims of the cult is difficult. The cult member is not only left with distrust in his/her own ability to discern but also with guilt about the pain he/she caused others. This aspect must also be taken into account and treated with sensitivity in order to restore his/her own ability to make responsible decisions and assimilate the feelings of guilt. The approach in the counselling process is a holistic process and include physical, emotional and psychological counselling. Ex- members of cults are very cautious to get involved in any religious practice.

## **5. Conclusion**

Many innocent people from all walks of life fall prey to religious cults, mostly because of their seemingly "pure" outer appearance. Individuals' eagerness to be involved in the "work of God" and the seemingly ideal opportunity that a religious cult presents to fulfil this eagerness, result in their commitment to a cult. Religious cults make use of unethical methods to involve and control their followers. This control over their followers causes deep spiritual wounds.

Not many ministers seem to have knowledge of the functioning and techniques of religious cults. As a result the ministers are not equipped to deal with a victim of a religious cult or their families. A proper understanding of the process followed by religious cults will not only give insight into their functioning but also in how to approach victims of cults.

An understanding is needed of the double identity and personality that is formed by cults (which causes the cult member to act in a mode that is difficult to approach and to reach). This mode in which he/she acts distrustfully of everyone and displays an antagonism, must be sidestepped in order to reach him/her.

The motive of reaching the cult member is not to entrap him/her into another abusive system. It aims rather to create the opportunity not only to test the teachings, practices and authenticity of the cult, but also to take note of other possibilities.

The final decision rests with the individual and no unethical techniques should be involved in obtaining this goal. Once the preparation for the counselling process has taken effect the process to address the different aspects of spiritual abuse can take place.

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