

RETURNING TO REALITY: SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE JOURNEY BACK

Christian Szurko, DialogCentre UK

I would like to thank FECRIS for this opportunity to speak to you. I am happy to be in Poland at last. The first time I was due to visit Warsaw, Pope John Paul II decided to come the same week, and my visa was cancelled. I have waited a long time to be here.

I suppose you all have seen the synopsis of this little presentation, so you know that I will be giving an overview of some ways I have developed to help members and emerging ex-members to reconsider their involvement in an abusive sect and to recover.

One note before I begin. For the sake of brevity, I will use the masculine pronouns throughout, but all aspects of this paper apply equally to members, ex-members and counsellors of either gender.

Introduction

The re-evaluation process consists, broadly, of enabling someone involved in an authoritarian movement or sect to reconsider their commitment to the group of which he has been a member, to look at it from a broader perspective that includes facts which may not be available from within the group, and to decide whether or not continued involvement in that group is in his best interest. During this process he also will consider the group's effect on his life in general and on his relationships in particular. It must always be an open question in the mind of the counsellor, whether the member progresses on to leaving their sect and begins rehabilitation, or whether he returns to the group. The primary goal and the priority in the re-evaluation stage must be to enable the member to make a free and informed decision.

With this in view, I believe that informed consent should be gained from the group-member in all cases before the re-evaluation process begins. Where there is any possibility of uncertainty about the individual's willingness or later feelings, I sometimes have gone so far as to ask the member to confirm his consent in writing, in exchange for a written undertaking from me as to my responsibilities towards him. Regardless of the form of consent, I think it is important that the counsellee should understand and agree to the nature and approximate duration of the re-evaluation process and to any other necessary arrangements.

If the member lives within the sect's own housing, it may be necessary to arrange suitable accommodation to provide a neutral and unstressful setting where re-evaluation may take place. Often this is best accomplished in the home of a sympathetic family who will be personally supportive but otherwise uninvolved. Such a setting has been found to minimize the disorientation, isolation and vulnerability experienced by people who are re-evaluating their allegiance to a spiritual or other path.

Re-evaluation Procedure: A 10-Stage Analysis of Assisted Activities

Following is a list of ten helpful activities or aspects of re-evaluation and rehabilitation that so often are at the heart of the decision whether to leave their group and then proceed through recovery. I refer to these as “assisted activities” because although some people work through these activities alone either by choice or by necessity, many find that at least some of them can be done more effectively with help, and some activities can prove very difficult to do unassisted.

It should be noted that these are not in a hard and fast order of importance or sequence, but they usually divide into two groups, the first three leading up to a decision to leave the group, the following seven addressing how to follow through with that decision.

1. Talk through the original circumstances and grounds of the ex-member’s commitment;
2. Evaluate with him the quality and results of his commitment, including the effects of membership upon his self-image, upon the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of his idealism and his quest for spiritual realization, upon the health of his relationships, and upon the fulfillment of his potential;
3. Let him decide whether he will continue his membership or terminate it;

then if he chooses to leave,
4. Consider with him how the sect’s teachings may have distorted his self-image and other areas his perception of reality, and plan steps to undo any harm;
5. Help him to re-examine his world view, moral values, spiritual, religious or philosophical concerns and other perceived needs as the ex-member asks about these areas;
6. Point him toward planning for the immediate future; that is, as appropriate, help him to arrange living accommodation, seek interim income from social services or other sources, make job applications, and arrange a family reconciliation where that is possible and desirable;
7. Examine the past with him, including the time he spent in his movement, with a view to extracting lessons for future use; for example, help him to recognize any potential job skills or skills gained which may help him dealing with people, and so on;
8. Encourage him to select and follow through with education or occupational training as appropriate;
9. Discuss other desirable training; for example, driving lessons, sports, hobbies;
10. Help him to carry out progressive stages of personal rehabilitation if needed, including graduated exposure to stress, refining his decision-making skills, pursuing necessary medical and legal help, helping out in his accommodation where that is relevant, and gradual resumption of personal responsibility in all other areas.

The list has certain limitations. First, the word “stage” is not meant to indicate that the processes involved are separate, with each one ending before the next begins. They are interdependent and often simultaneous. For example, talking about aspects of recruitment, life within the group and the reasons for disillusionment and departure, is likely to be on-going for most of the rehabilitation period. Also, the sequence is flexible:

what is listed as number 5 here may occur only much later in any depth, or it may be need to be done immediately. Despite these qualifications, it is useful to distinguish these processes in order to facilitate discussion and understanding of the kinds of needs which the member may have.

Second, not everyone will have needs corresponding to all of these activities. Some of the processes I describe refer to the more extreme cases with which I have been involved over the years, whereas not every individual requires every form of assistance. What I show here is only one pattern, frequently observed, which indicates the ten most basic forms of assistance and how they may interact.

Third, although the assistance processes are being shown in a graphical representation that is reasonably typical of their relationship in time, there is no scale implied, nor any explicit measure of duration indicated either for individual processes or for the whole rehabilitation procedure. Thus, it is not uncommon for ex-members to find that they are still dealing with aspects of their emergence some time after they leave. All of these limitations on describing rehabilitation arise essentially from the fact that each sect-member is unique, and needs to be treated at all times as an individual.

Notes on the 10 “Stages”

Now I would like to consider a few points concerning the application of each of these ten points, for the sake of clarification and perhaps to stimulate further discussion during the conference.

1. This first step, however it comes about, is the opportunity to find out what the group means to that particular member or ex-member, and how he decided to join. Knowing this makes it possible to talk to the person in front of me, and not to a generic “sect-member”. That will make any help I give more precise.
2. This second step requires genuine empathy combined with a degree of clinical precision. It is not easy for an active member (or even some ex-members) to admit that his relationships with family members or friends have been broken or that his career options have been damaged because of his allegiance to what he believed would be a panacea for all the troubles in his life. By establishing a wholesome relationship with the member or ex-member and making it clear that whatever he says will not be used against him, it can become safe for him to face any difficulties honestly and openly, allowing him to reconsider the rôle of the sect in his life.
3. This third stage can be the hardest but it depends upon the first two stages being carried out with integrity and care. If they are, everyone can have confidence in the outcome no matter what the member decides. First, if stages one and two are done well, the member will know that even if he is not ready to leave his group now, there is an open door for him to the outside world if he changes his mind. Second, he may even feel that he has an ongoing contact with a sympathetic outsider. If so, it may be that although he remains in the sect for a time, he will use that person as an outside point of reference if things within the group become dangerous. I indicate this on the graphic with an hour glass.
4. This step usually relates to those who decide to leave their group, but on some occasions I have found it possible to offer effective counselling and help to an

active member concerning this stage, which has later been the beginning of a complete cycle of re-evaluation and rehabilitation.

5. This is a big topic. It is easy to skip this step and often it is more comfortable to do so. In my opinion it is one of the important services I can offer an emerging ex-member which lies at the heart of taking his autonomy seriously. I cannot be the one to decide if he should continue his “spiritual quest” or take a step back from religion or become an atheist. If I ignore this “elephant in the room”, he may conclude that I consider spiritual and ideological questions a worthless interest on his part and never talk about it with me.

A number of undesirable consequences may result from this. He may go away from the work we do together feeling that a part of himself, that is, his spiritual curiosity, is a “bad” thing, and go on blaming himself for getting involvd in the sect. Or he may decide to pursue this interest anyway, but without having any more idea of how to protect himself from abuse than he did the first time. If he does continue to be a “seeker”, he may feel too embarrassed to talk about it with anyone. This will make him more vulnerable to further abuse than if we had talked together about things like testing truth claims, examining evidence and evaluating leaders and their followers. He may also be less willing to discuss other areas of his life where he still needs assistance, or even give up rehabilitating himself altogether. Most important to the rehabilitation process, he may feel uncomfortable about being completely honest in re-evaluating the importance of his beliefs to the time he spent in the sect, lest he appear foolish or naïve.

All things considered, I believe I can serve an ex-member’s needs better by letting him feel that his interest in his spirituality or his antipathy towards it are acceptable topics for conversation.

6. This is a simple matter of practicality. Not everyone needs the same kind of help here, but for those recruited when very young and for those who were born into their sect, this step can be vital. (Of course, for those born into the sect, reconciliation with the family is usually not possible, and instead the emphasis must fall on learning to live with active disapproval and rejection.)
7. I have found it helpful to encourage an ex-member to realize that despite what was done to him in the sect, he was able to adapt and learn things that now he will be able to use to build his future on the outside. It can be difficult where some sects are concerned, but I find it usually is worth talking it through with an ex-member and helping him to “take back” aspects of his past.
8. It is painfully easy for someone who leaves a sect to become stuck in the rôle of the eternal ex-member. Sometimes we ourselves are responsible for encouraging this! But if we are to guide someone to walk away from his time in a sect and to build a fulfilling future, we must encourage him to pursue whatever education or other training appeals to him.
9. Most of the destructive groups we all deal with have a tendency to “swallow up” their members in everlasting work for the leader and the sect. it may not be obvious to an emerging ex-member that since he has rejected the teacher and the teaching, he is now free to reject the group’s priorities too. Hobbies are no

longer a “waste of time”, sports are no longer “distractions from God’s work”. It usually takes little prompting to get a newly emerging member to recall or discover leisure interests and pursue them.

10. This tends to be important mainly for the most damaged, most institutionalized ex-members. I have had cases where emerging members were so frightened of even the most ordinary tasks that it was necessary to provide strong encouragement and support in order to enable them to do simple things, such as doing their own shopping, making an appointment with a doctor or sitting at a meal with the people providing their accommodation. Of course it would have been possible simply to leave them to struggle through these things on their own, but I have found such occasions to be useful opportunities to help ex-members to see for themselves that once they rejected the teachings of their sect, the implications of those teachings, including induced phobias and other disabling reactions to the outside world, were invalid.

That is an outline of voluntary re-evaluation and rehabilitation as I have offered it since the 1980s. I share it here not because it is unusual or new or different but because it lists some signposts along the journey back to reality from the world of totalitarian and abusive groups.

Thank you.