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Childhood Familial Experiences as Antecedents of Adult Membership in New Religious Movements

A Literature Review

Sebastian Murken and Sussan Namini

ABSTRACT: Is it possible to identify specific familial patterns as antecedents of adult membership in new religious movements? Can the choice of an NRM be predicted by the childhood experiences of individuals joining such movements? This international literature review seeks to answer these questions, investigating the assumption that early family experiences affect adults' decisions to join NRMs. It includes empirical studies that have been written in English, German and French since 1970, and gives an overview of findings on childhood family structures, including parents and siblings, as well as early family relationships and atmospheres. On the whole, the studies from different countries and decades support the hypothesis that early family experiences have an impact on adult membership in NRMs. However, it seems that individuals with different early experiences are attracted to different kinds of groups. Whereas many studies found problematic family backgrounds and absent fathers in converts' biographies, suggesting a compensatory function of membership, some point to a continuation or restoration of early experiences. More interdisciplinary comparative research on NRMs is needed to gain a better understanding of the psychodynamic processes and psychological offers of different groups.

Families, especially parents, have played a pivotal role in the debate on so-called cults or new religious movements (NRMs) since it began in the early 1970s. Parents were concerned about their sons

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and daughters who left universities and promising careers to follow unfamiliar religious leaders and join their groups. After parents in the United States had voiced their concerns, networks of parents and families emerged that grew into a national movement. In many other countries, too, parental initiatives were among the first “anticult” groups. David G. Bromley and Anson Shupe note: “Although NRMs would certainly have engendered opposition from other quarters, it is unlikely that the intensity of controversy that has occurred would have transpired without the family conflict as its driving force.”¹ Even today, NRMs are accused of being not only “anti-self” and “anti-society,” but also “anti-family.”² Hence, it is not surprising that professionals and scholars from a multitude of backgrounds have paid considerable attention to the impact of an individual’s membership in an NRM on the “outside” family. They have discussed the emotional reactions of parents (and, to a lesser degree, siblings) as well as the consequences of the person’s membership for the family system and have given practical advice on how to handle the situation.³

At the same time, scholars have repeatedly questioned the widespread assumption that NRMs have a destructive impact on families. A quarter of a century ago, Brock K. Kilbourne and James T. Richardson critically asked whether there was not “a case of misattribution of cause?”⁴ and twenty years later John A. Saliba wrote: “It would, however, be naive to conceive of the new religions mainly as disrupters of family life. Joining a new movement might be an indicator that all is not well at home.”⁵ Interestingly, like the charges that are brought forward against NRMs, the assumption that difficulties in families may make (especially young) people susceptible to the offers of NRMs often seems to be more speculative than evidence-based. Frequently, authors present it as a fact without reporting much empirical evidence.⁶ In general, research on the question of family antecedents to membership in NRMs seems to be scarce and scattered.

However, during our research in the context of a large German project on adult self-chosen membership in NRMs,⁷ we realized that more studies are available than are apparent at first glance. We therefore started a systematic literature review on family antecedents to adult membership in NRMs. The purpose of the review was to compile international research data from a variety of sources to survey whether nuclear family variables of different kinds, including relationships to parents and siblings, may indeed play a predisposing role in conversion to NRMs later in life. Psychological research has shown that early family experiences have long-term effects on an individual’s life and development.⁸ Moreover, studies from psychology of religion have demonstrated that these early experiences impact adult religiosity.⁹ Thus, we assume that early family antecedents also influence an adult’s decision to join an NRM.

LITERATURE REVIEWED

Several research strategies were applied to identify literature on early family antecedents to membership in NRMs. First, a database search was conducted using (a) ATLA Religion Database, an international electronic database of the American Theological Library Association; (b) PsycINFO, an international electronic database of the American Psychological Association; and (c) PSYINDEX, a German electronic database which encompasses German and English publications of authors from German-speaking countries since 1977.¹⁰ Major bibliographies on NRMs were systematically examined,¹¹ and other literature available on membership in NRMs was screened for its relevance to the questions of the review. Moreover, sources identified through any of the search strategies were checked for further references to other relevant publications. Empirical studies written in English, German or French since 1970 were included in the review.

We focused on the question of whether early familial experiences have latent long-term effects on NRM membership later in life, and so we limited the literature considered. Findings on family systems and relationships to family members at the time individuals joined the new religious movements in their adult lives were not included, as they refer to different psychological processes (in these studies, the moment of crisis can be assumed to be much stronger than the latency effect that was the focus of this study).¹² Studies with clinical populations were not considered because of the selection bias and because psychopathology in general has been found to be related to adverse childhood experiences, which are therefore overrepresented in clinical populations.¹³ Single-case studies were excluded for methodological purposes. They are usually highly selective and do not allow conclusions to be drawn for larger samples.

As we could not expect to find a large amount of studies on the topic, we included studies on a great variety of groups in our review. We understand the term “new religious movement” (or “cult”) in a broad sense to include “borderline cases”¹⁴ such as Pentecostalism and groups like the Jehovah’s Witnesses that may be classified as “sects.”¹⁵ Following Rainer Flasche, we subsume all groups that have been formed since the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁶ This use of the term “new religious movement” also seems to be the most appropriate as the scope of the review is international, so that studies from various countries, which differ with regard to their religious situation, have been included. For example, whereas the United States has a religiously pluralistic society in which the choice of one’s religion is common, in many European countries the Protestant Churches and/or Roman Catholic Church are the established religious institutions with dominating roles in society. Traditionally, infants are baptized in the faith of their parents, and the

Table 1. Overview of Studies Included in the Review Classified by Publication Date.

| <i>Author (year)</i> | <i>Country</i> | <i>NRMs studied</i> |
|---|------------------------------|--|
| Deutsch (1975) | United States | Group surrounding an American guru ("Baba") |
| Levine and Salter (1976); Levine (1978) | United States | Mixed group of nine different NRMs (ISKCON, Divine Light, 3HO, Unification Church, Foundation, Process, Jesus People, Scientology, Children of God) |
| Heirich (1977) | United States | Catholic Pentecostalism |
| Berger and Hexel (1981) | Germany | Unification Church, Ananda Marga, Divine Light Mission, Scientology |
| Ullman (1982; 1989) | United States | ISKCON, Baha'i |
| Deutsch and Miller (1983) | United States | Unification Church |
| Kuner (1983) | Germany | Children of God, Unification Church, Ananda Marga |
| Barker (1984) | Great Britain, United States | Unification Church |
| Klosinski (1985) | Germany | Neo-Sannyas Movement |
| Poling and Kenney (1986) | United States | ISKCON |
| van der Lans and Derks (1986) | Netherlands | Divine Light Mission, Neo-Sannyas Movement |
| Jacobs (1989) | United States | Mixed group of fourteen different NRMs, including charismatic Christian groups, Hindu-based groups, Buddhist groups and miscellaneous groups |
| Gering et al. (1994) | Germany | Charismatic/Pentecostal community |
| Martignetti (1998) | United States | Hindu-based guru-devotee group, Unitarian Universalist Church |
| Doktór (1993) | Poland | Psychotronic Society, Zen Buddhism, Brahma Kumaris, Raja Yoga, Rebirthing, Polish Transcendental Meditation Society, Taiji course, Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement |
| Rohmann (1999, 2000a, 2000b) | Germany | Mixed group of eighteen different NRMs, i.e., groups, Christianfundamentalist guru movements, psychocults and esoteric movements |

(continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

| <i>Author (year)</i> | <i>Country</i> | <i>NRMs studied</i> |
|--|----------------|---|
| Halama and Halamová (2005) | Slovakia | Catholic Charismatic movement |
| Saroglou et al. (2005); Buxant et al. (in press) | Belgium | Mixed group of different NRMs, i.e., ISKCON, Catholic Charismatic groups, Protestant evangelical congregations, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventist Church, miscellaneous groups of Protestant inspiration |
| Namini and Murken (forthcoming 2008) | Germany | Pentecostal parish, New Apostolic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses. |

Note: In the table and in the text of this article group names are used as they are given in the publications, although some groups changed their names over the years. For instance, the “Children of God” became “The Family”; the “Divine Light Mission” was replaced by “Elan Vital.”

individual is expected to remain true to his or her denomination. The choice of a new religion or denomination is still uncommon and contributes to some scepticism towards all religious groups differing from the major churches. Therefore, the religious groups and phenomena that are deemed deviant and controversial may differ interculturally as well as the ways in which religious groups are classified.¹⁷

Table I presents an overview of all studies that were finally included in the review with information on publication date, country and the NRMs investigated. See the bibliography of the studies at the end of this article.

FINDINGS FROM LITERATURE

For a systematic approach to the findings on early family antecedents to adult membership in NRMs, we distinguish two types of early nuclear family experiences: (a) experiences with authority figures, i.e. parents (including the family atmosphere); and (b) experiences with peers, i.e. siblings. Due to substantial differences in research designs and samples between studies, a meta-analysis in a strict sense¹⁸ is not possible. Although some of the studies aim at a more general objective for which reports about childhood conditions are only side products, these findings are nevertheless included here. Relevant results are outlined below for each study; in the conclusion, some general tendencies are highlighted and discussed.

Experiences with Parents and the Family Atmosphere

Over the years, a number of studies have been conducted on early relationships that converts had with their parents. In her study on early family antecedents of conversions to Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and Baha'i, Chana Ullman showed that in all of these individuals emotional factors prior to the conversion seem to be much more important than cognitive ones. A much higher proportion from the convert group than from the non-convert control group reported an extremely unhappy childhood and a greater number of traumatic events. Among the 40 converts, only six were classified as having had a normal or happy childhood (15 percent versus 73 percent of the control group). Nearly 80 percent of the converts—women as well as men—reported that their fathers had been either absent, passive-unavailable or actively rejecting, whereas only 23 percent of the control group did so. About one-third had no or only very little contact with their biological fathers from the ages of four or five, which was about three times higher than the norm reported for the average white American population. Altogether, converts also perceived their relationship to their mothers as having been more problematic than non-converts. Moreover, Ullman found that most reports of early traumatic incidents such as parental loss came from the ISKCON converts.¹⁹

In his study, Alexander Deutsch reported that “virtually all” of the fourteen devotees of an American guru had histories of unsatisfactory parental relationships. “In explaining their improved mental states, they would frequently contrast Baba’s attitudes and teachings and the atmosphere of their new ‘family’ with the attitudes and conduct of their parents and other authority figures.”²⁰ Deutsch and Michael J. Miller studied four women who had joined the Unification Church in their early twenties; all of them reported a disturbed family background. Three of the converts had a similar pattern in their family histories: Parents were usually distant to each other, in two cases they were divorced. The participants characterized their mothers as unaffectionate, while they regarded their fathers fondly, despite perceived shortcomings.²¹

Tommy H. Poling and J. Frank Kenney’s biographical data on thirty-two converts to ISKCON revealed that 31 percent of the devotees reported the death of a parent and another 31 percent reported parental divorce before they joined ISKCON. Apart from a “sensitive orientation,”²² which Poling and Kenney found to be characteristic of the individuals studied as well as of the group’s specific mythology, rituals, and lifestyle, the authors identified early family discord—especially the absence of the father—as a predisposing factor specific to converts to the Hare Krishna movement: “ISKCON compensates for

this loss in the person and authority of the ‘guru,’ who is viewed as the ideal father—that is, a person who is firm, understanding, knowledgeable, saintly, and experienced.”²³ Janet L. Jacobs, who studied forty former religious devotees of non-traditional religious movements with a charismatic leader and patriarchal structure, similarly emphasized the “desire to experience both the ideal family and the fathering of a protective and loving male authority figure.”²⁴ She perceived the rise and growth of such movements in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s as a compensation for social developments, suggesting that the family structure of traditional (white) middle-class families assigned men more external roles, resulting in the absence of fathers from physical and emotional care-taking of children.

These findings from the United States are in line with some European results. Wolfgang Kuner, in a large research project in Germany, studied a variety of conditions that preceded young people’s conversion to one of three NRMs, Children of God ($n = 43$),²⁵ Unification Church ($n = 290$) or Ananda Marga ($n = 49$). He collected, among other variables, data on (early) family situations as part of the social background and found it to be an important aspect in understanding the phenomenon. He concluded that specific psychological needs, which root in early familial imprinting, find fulfillment in religious groups, and that the individual finds a religiously clothed “remake” of his or her family of origin in his or her religious group. More specifically, Kuner found that all group members reported a dominant mother and weak (often distant) father; the childrearing style emphasized subordination and dependence. Compared to the general West German population, a significantly higher number of subjects—with the exception of male members of Ananda Marga—came from incomplete families. Additionally, Kuner found differential family characteristics for the respective members of the three groups. For example, the members of the Children of God typically reported an unstable family atmosphere, and the members of the Unification Church an emotional one.²⁶ Similarly, Herbert Berger and Peter C. Hexel’s qualitative analysis of the in-depth interviews they conducted with thirty-six young members of the Unification Church, Ananda Marga, Divine Light Mission, and Scientology in Germany indicated that differences in childhood family experiences exist among the members of different NRMs. Scientology members tended to come from families that had offered little emotional warmth and security and in which functionality had dominated. The Unification Church members were comprised of two groups with family backgrounds opposite in nature: one group came from harmonious families that had offered stability by not moving house, whereas the other group had experienced many ruptures, including upbringing in an institution and death of the mother.²⁷

Another comparative study, which was conducted in the Netherlands by Jan M. van der Lans and Frans Derks, who interviewed nineteen members of the Divine Light Mission and eighteen followers (sannyasins) of Bhagwan/Osho, likewise indicated that individuals who join different groups differ with regard to family background. The authors even stated that one of the most important differences between the two patterns of pre-conversion experiences concerned childhood. Apart from differences in religious upbringing, they found that the majority of Divine Light Mission respondents described the family atmosphere in their childhood as positive, while almost half of the Bhagwan Rajneesh sannyasins perceived a negative atmosphere.²⁸ Gunther Klosinski, who interviewed twenty-five members of the Neo-Sannyas Movement in Germany, found that twenty-two (73 percent) talked about serious family or other relationship problems during adolescence. One-third reported severe problems with their fathers, six persons with their mothers, and four with both parents. They either experienced a situation of emotional deficiency or of excessively strong ties to the family/parents. Thus, Klosinski came to the conclusion that unresolved conflicts between parents and children play an important role in the conversion process.²⁹

In our own empirical study, we investigated the idea of a fit between group and individual to which some authors had pointed.³⁰ We investigated differences in early family structures between three groups of adults who were either in recent close contact with or had already become new members in a Pentecostal parish ($n = 21$), the New Apostolic Church ($n = 28$), or the Jehovah's Witnesses ($n = 22$). A comparison of the groups showed that they differed significantly with regard to loss of a parent before the age of fifteen (through death, divorce, etc.). Only 10 percent of the Pentecostal group reported a loss while 23 percent of the Jehovah's Witnesses group, and 43 percent of the New Apostolics reported a major loss. With the exception of two individuals who had lost both parents, all other persons reported the loss of the father. A look at data from the general population indicated that the rate of loss of a father in the Pentecostal group corresponded to the rate in the general German population, whereas the rate in the New Apostolic group was more than four times higher. We assumed that the extraordinarily high proportion of individuals who grew up without their biological father in the New Apostolic group could be explained by the church's specific offer of a father-oriented theology and a hierarchy with the chief apostle—a strong father figure—at the top.³¹ The assumption that differences in early relationships to fathers exist between members of different NRMs is supported by Tadeusz Doktor's study in Poland. He found differences regarding the average number of years of the father's absence as well as the proportion of individuals who reported that their fathers had not taken part in their upbringing

(e.g., 35.3 percent of participants of a Taiji group, $n = 16$; 4.8 percent of members of Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga in which women are in leading positions, $n = 21$). Doktor concluded that groups in which “the authoritative position of a spiritual leader is taken by a man who could be treated as a father figure” may offer individuals “deprived of a father in their childhood . . . a composite of reward and compensator.”³²

Coralie Buxant, Vassilis Saroglou, Stefania Casalfiore, and Louis-Léon Christians assessed attachment histories in a sample of 113 members of different NRMs in a recent study conducted in Belgium. The majority of respondents were first generation members; 25 percent were born into the group or had joined it before the age of 18. In comparison to an adult control group from the average population, the respondents reported significantly more insecure childhood attachment to their fathers, whereas no significant difference was found for childhood attachment to mothers.³³ An earlier analysis of the data, based upon three combined parental scores for secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent attachment, furnished the result that, compared against an adult control group from the average population, the NRMs’ members retrospectively reported significantly higher anxious/ambivalent as well as avoidant attachment to parents, whereas no significant difference was found for secure attachment. In combination with other findings from their study, the authors concluded that their results support the assumption that God and religion can offer compensation to individuals with early insecure relationship experiences.³⁴ Additional studies with twenty-eight individuals attending conferences on positive thinking, new spiritualities, or Asian religions, without being members of NRMs, and twenty ex-members from a variety of NRMs supported the assumption that individuals interested or involved in new forms of religiosity tend to show insecure attachment histories.³⁵

Looking at the findings described so far, the assumption that problematic family backgrounds promote membership in NRMs can be corroborated by research findings. However, as some of the comparative studies already suggested, findings and interpretations are not unequivocal and some contradictory results have to be considered as well. With regard to retrospective perceptions of parental authority, C. Anthony Martignetti did not find any statistically significant differences between individuals in a Hindu-based guru-devotee relationship, individuals belonging to a non-hierarchical Unitarian Universalist church, and a non-religious group.³⁶ In their study of conversion accounts published in an internal bulletin of the Catholic Charismatic movement in Bratislava, Slovakia, Peter Halama and Júlia Halamová found that in nine out of the thirty accounts people spoke about their family backgrounds: four reported a positive and five reported a negative emotional framework. The authors concluded that their findings “give no support to a prevalence of intensive family stress

during childhood and adolescence among converts.³⁷ Saul V. Levine and Nancy E. Salter studied 106 members of nine different groups. Most of their subjects came from “fairly stable backgrounds”; seventy-one of the members came from intact families, the parents of twenty-three had divorced, and eight had lost a parent through death.³⁸ Eileen Barker in her study on the process of becoming a member of the Unification Church came to the conclusion “that Moonies do *not* tend to come from poor or obviously unhappy home backgrounds.” However, she found some differences between the Moonies and the control group: 13 percent of the parents of the Moonies versus 8 percent of the parents of the control group had separated before the individuals’ age of 21. Consequently, 15 percent of the Moonies versus 5 percent of the controls had a step-parent. More individuals of the control group had mothers who worked when they were children.³⁹ Dieter Rohmann, in a German questionnaire study, surveyed family members and/or friends ($n = 110$) who had sought advice because one or more family members/friends had joined a “cult,” that is, a group from one of the following categories: a Christian fundamentalist group, a guru movement, or a psychic cult/esoteric group. He concluded that people who join “cults” do not come from divorced families or “broken homes” more frequently. However, he found that a dysfunctional family background, for example, a family situation characterized by conflict and disharmony, was reported for 89 percent of the cases. In a comparative analysis he found that individuals who had joined psychic cults or esoteric movements more often than the other two groups came from divorced families and had experienced strained family situations, whereas members of guru movements rarely reported difficult family backgrounds. Those who had joined a Christian fundamentalist group had more often grown up in families in which personal problems or emotions were hardly discussed.⁴⁰

Siblings

So far, the role of siblings and birth order as a predisposing factor for later membership in NRMs has been given less attention. In the following, we will review some scattered findings from American and German studies. With regard to size of sibling group, the findings are quite homogenous. In most studies, converts to NRMs report coming from relatively large families. Kuner found that, compared to the general West German population, the subjects of all three groups came from families with a disproportionately large number of children: 43 percent of members of the Children of God, 45 percent of members of the Unification Church, and 33 percent of members of Ananda Marga came from families with four or more siblings, whereas only 8 percent of the general population did.⁴¹ Of the 106 members of nine different

groups studied by Levine and Salter, six (5.7 percent) were only children, whereas 70 percent came from families with three or more children.⁴² These figures correspond roughly to the findings of Rohmann's German study. Only 2.7 percent of the members were single children, 34.6 percent had one sibling, and 62.7 percent at least two siblings.⁴³ In another German project, Ralf Gering, Nils Grübel, Claudia Haydt, Günter Kehrer, Istvan Keul, and Frank Starz studied members of a newly established Pentecostal community ($n = 52$). Although slightly more than 70 percent of the respondents were aged less than 30 years, and hence, born in a time of decreasing family size, to the surprise of the authors nearly one-third came from families with more than three children.⁴⁴ In Berger and Hexel's study, 11 percent of members of the NRMs studied were single children, 31 percent had one brother or sister, 25 percent two, and 34 percent three or more siblings.⁴⁵

Data from our own recent study in Germany are only partly in line with previous findings. Whereas 68 percent of the Jehovah's Witnesses group had two or more siblings, 64 percent of the New Apostolic group grew up as a single child or with only one sibling. We interpreted this difference in the context of the groups' theologies and religious practices. Jehovah's Witnesses devalue the importance of the individual and seem to require a heightened ability to subordinate oneself to a dogmatic theology plus a strict weekly schedule. A capability to adapt to peers is needed when Bible studies and proselytizing activities are done together with other believers.⁴⁶

With regard to birth order rank, the findings are less homogenous. Whereas Levine and Salter found that merely eighteen (17 percent) of their 106 subjects were single or first-born children,⁴⁷ in Rohmann's sample 37.3 percent were first-born or single children, 27.2 percent middle children, and 35.5 percent youngest children.⁴⁸

Berger and Hexel found that among those members who had brothers and sisters, 25 percent were the eldest child, 44 percent the youngest, and 31 percent in between.⁴⁹ In a study on "Spirit-baptized" converts to Catholic Pentecostalism ($n = 152$), Max Heirich found "a surprisingly high proportion" of middle siblings among the converts and relatively few eldest children in devout households. However, when he compared the converts' group to a Catholic control group the two groups hardly differed.⁵⁰ Kuner found that male members of the Children of God and female members of the Unification Church were the first child more often than expected by chance. On the other hand, female members of the Children of God and Ananda Marga as well as male members of the Unification Church and Ananda Marga were more often the middle child.⁵¹ When drawing a composite picture of the typical ISKCON devotee on the basis of their research, Poling and Kenney concluded: "He is a member of a large family and is typically the middle child."⁵² Rohmann, on the other hand, found that first-borns

were overrepresented in the group of guru movements.⁵³ Our own data yielded no statistically significant differences between the three NRM groups. However, descriptive analyses showed some trends: 53 percent of the New Apostolics studied were the eldest or a single child, whereas 52 percent of the Pentecostal group members grew up as the youngest child. In consideration of Sulloway's work on birth order, we suggest that eldest and single children are attracted to the New Apostolic Church as it offers a more conservative religiosity than the other groups (in the German context) as well as more possibilities for ambitious and achievement-oriented men. In contrast, later-borns may be more open towards Pentecostal religiosity as it offers more new experiences.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

An extensive literature review confirmed the impression that rather little systematic research on early family antecedents of adult membership in NRMs is available and that findings are scattered. Within the past 36 years, we could identify only nineteen research projects with relevant data to be included in the review.⁵⁵ Over the years, however, there has been a continuous international interest in the topic. As is shown by the two most recent European studies, the topic even seems to be one of very current interest in the field of psychology of religion.⁵⁶

Although it is difficult to draw general conclusions since the studies reviewed differ in place, time, sample, and research design, they support the notion that early family experiences have an effect on adult membership in NRMs. Many of the studies seem to confirm the widespread assumption that membership in NRMs offers some kind of compensation for individuals with problematic family backgrounds and absent fathers. Thus, they are attracted by groups that have a strong father-oriented theology or emphasize the community and offer a strong male authority figure (e.g., ISKCON, Unification Church, New Apostolic Church) and seem to promise the ideal family or ideal father.⁵⁷ In a similar way, individuals with absent mothers may be attracted to groups with mother-figures and mother-oriented theologies. Due to the small proportion of groups with women in leading positions this question still needs to be investigated. Some studies, however, suggest that the characteristics of NRMs may not necessarily serve a compensatory function. For individuals who grew up in stable families, NRMs may offer a corresponding environment and be experienced as a continuation or restoration of the early conditions.⁵⁸ The large number of siblings found in many of the studies may also be understood in the sense of a correspondence between early family group experiences and religious group experiences.

Although similar early experiences seem to predispose individuals for adult membership in different new religious groups—which is plausible as many of them share certain structural and theological characteristics—the review at the same time shows that generalizations are problematic. A number of comparative studies indicate that differences in early family experiences route seekers to membership in different groups.⁵⁹ These results suggest that individual needs arising from specific early family experiences may be fulfilled especially well by distinct characteristics of particular religious groups. It seems that neither the characteristics of the person, nor the features of the religious group alone can sufficiently explain the membership process, but that the interaction—more precisely, the fit—between the person and the group is important.

Moreover, if individuals with similar early family experiences choose different groups, the underlying psychodynamic processes may differ. Some individuals with unhappy family backgrounds may find a solution for their inner conflicts in a group that offers an ideal family, whereas others may prefer an NRM with a therapeutic offer or a high emphasis on individualism. Some may choose a group that offers an emotional relationship with a religious figure or a very personal father-like God concept; others may choose a cognition-based faith or a more impersonal God. Therefore, the role of the father, which is obviously of major importance, must be better understood. Although Freud has often been criticized for his view of religion, his early assumption that religion provides people with an “exalted father”⁶⁰ seems plausible for at least some of the cases, thus encouraging researchers to pay more attention to psychoanalytical and other developmental theories.

There are, however, some limitations to the conclusions drawn above that have to be mentioned. The studies included in the review are of quite different quality, sample size and research design. Some include a control group, others do not. Some have more objective measures for childhood experiences, others use their personal judgement. The quality of personal recollection is sometimes questionable.⁶¹ Nevertheless, since this is all the material we have at the present, we have to draw at least preliminary conclusions and try to validate them in further research. Ideally, a systematic research agenda will be developed and applied in the future.⁶²

Following the paradigm of a person-religion fit model, more interdisciplinary comparative research is needed in order to come to a better understanding of what different NRMs offer their members, to assess the importance of group dynamics versus theologies, and to be able to explore more deeply these questions and psychological dynamics. As long as researchers continue to treat members of different NRMs in an undifferentiated way, that is, as one group, they run the risk of overlooking important pieces of the larger picture.

ENDNOTES

¹ David G. Bromley and Anson Shupe, "Public Reaction against New Religious Movements," in *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Report of the American Psychiatric Association*, ed. Marc Galanter (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1989), 305–34, quote on 314. For a discussion of the role of parents in the cult debate see also J. Gordon Melton, "Anti-cultists in the United States: An Historical Perspective," in *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, ed. Bryan Wilson and Jamie Cresswell (London: Routledge, 1999), 213–33; and Elisabeth Arweck, *Researching New Religious Movements: Responses and Redefinitions* (London: Routledge, 2006), for example 41–45.

² John A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 2003), 32–35.

³ See, for example, Eileen Barker, *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1989), 87–123; David V. Barrett, *The New Believers* (New York: Cassell & Co, 2001), 40–46; Michael D. Langone, "Cult Involvement: Suggestions for Concerned Parents and Professionals," *Cultic Studies Journal* 2 (1985): 148–68.

⁴ Brock K. Kilbourne and James T. Richardson, "Cults versus Families: A Case of Misattribution of Cause?" *Marriage and Family Review* 4 (1981): 81–100.

⁵ Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements*, 82.

⁶ Although three out of the nine factors John M. Curtis and Mimi J. Curtis, "Factors Related to Susceptibility and Recruitment by Cults," *Psychological Reports* 73 (1993): 451–60, assume to make individuals susceptible to "cults" are family-related—(a) "tenuous, deteriorated, or nonexistent family relations and social support systems," (b) "history of severe child abuse or neglect," and (c) "exposure to idiosyncratic or eccentric family patterns"—the authors do not cite any empirical study on family antecedents to membership in a "cult." Beth Robinson, Ellen M. Frye, and Loretta J. Bradley, "Cult Affiliation and Disaffiliation: Implications for Counseling," *Counseling and Values* 41 (1997): 166–73, state that "several family dynamics have been correlated with a tendency to affiliate with a cult group" (167), but rely on rather old literature (dating back to 1958) and hardly cite any empirical study on the matter. See also Mark I. Sirkin and Bruce A. Grellong, "Cult versus Non-Cult Jewish Families: Factors Influencing Conversion," *Cultic Studies Journal* 5 (1988): 2–22: "Data from families are scarce in the cult literature" (5).

⁷ The authors gratefully acknowledge the German Volkswagen Foundation's funding of the multi-method, longitudinal German research project entitled "Self-chosen Membership in New Religious Movements: Psychosocial Motives and Consequences" (May 2002 – September 2007).

⁸ For example, Mary Dozier, K. Chase Stovall, and Kathleen E. Albus, "Attachment and Psychopathology in Adulthood," in *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, ed. Jude Cassidy and Phillip Shaver (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 497–519; Ulrich T. Egle, Jochen Hardt, Ralf Nickel, Bernd Kappis, and Sven O. Hoffmann, "Früher Stress und Langzeitfolgen für die Gesundheit - Wissenschaftlicher Erkenntnisstand und Forschungsdesiderate" [Long-Term Effects of Adverse Childhood Experience - Actual Evidence and Needs for Research], *Zeitschrift für Psychosomatische Medizin*

und Psychotherapie 48 (2002): 411–34; Frank J. Sulloway, *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

⁹ For example, Alex Bierman, “The Effects of Childhood Maltreatment on Adult Religiosity and Spirituality: Rejecting God the Father Because of Abusive Fathers?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44 (2005): 349–59; Ian T. Birky and Samuel Ball, “Parental Trait Influence on God as an Object Representation,” *Journal of Psychology* 122 (1988): 133–37; Pehr Granqvist and Lee A. Kirkpatrick, “Religious Conversion and Perceived Childhood Attachment: A Meta-Analysis,” *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 14 (2004): 223–50.

¹⁰ The following combinations of search terms and their German equivalents respectively were used: (family* or parent* or mother* or father* or sibling* or brother* or sister* or birth order) and (cult or cults or cultic or new religion* or sect or sects or sectarian or alternative religion* or guru or charismatic* or Hare Krishna or ISKCON or Jehovah* or Pentecostal* or Scientology* or Unification Church* or Moon or Bhagwan or Rajneesh or Osho or sannyas* or neo-sannyas*). Due to the huge number of possible NRMs, separate terms were included in the database search only for those groups on which, to the authors’ knowledge, a certain amount of research has been done. A last literature search was conducted in January 2006.

¹¹ Elisabeth Arweck and Peter B. Clarke, *New Religious Movements in Western Europe: An Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997); James A. Beckford and James T. Richardson, “A Bibliography of Social Scientific Studies of New Religious Movements,” *Social Compass* 30 (1983): 111–35; Diane Choquette, *New Religious Movements in the United States and Canada: A Critical Assessment and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985); John A. Saliba, *Psychiatry and the Cults: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987); John A. Saliba, *Social Science and the Cults: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990).

¹² For example, Neil Maron, “Family Environment as a Factor in Vulnerability to Cult Involvement,” *Cultic Studies Journal* 5 (1988): 23–43; Florence W. Kaslow and Lita Linzer Schwartz, “Vulnerability and Invulnerability to the Cults: An Assessment of Family Dynamics, Functioning, and Values,” in *Marital and Family Therapy: New Perspectives in Theory, Research and Practice*, ed. Dennis A. Bagarozzi, Anthony P. Jurich, and Robert W. Jackson (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1983), 165–90; Sirkin and Grellong, “Cult versus Non-Cult Jewish Families”; Marjory Fisher Zerlin, “The Pied Piper Phenomenon: Family Systems and Vulnerability to Cults,” in *Scientific Research and New Religions: Divergent Perspectives*, ed. Brock K. Kilbourne (San Francisco: American Association for the Advancement of Science, Pacific Division, 1985), 160–73.

¹³ Dozier, Stovall, and Albus, “Attachment and Psychopathology”; Egle, Hardt, Nickel, Kappis, and Hoffmann, “Früher Stress.” Of course we do not neglect the possibility that psychopathology may attract persons to NRMs, but that would be another question.

¹⁴ George D. Chryssides, *Exploring New Religions* (London: Cassell, 1999), 22.

¹⁵ Whereas Chryssides, *Exploring New Religions*, 77–119, includes Jehovah’s Witnesses in his chapter on “The Old New Religions,” Stephen J. Hunt, *Alternative Religions: A Sociological Introduction* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003), 42,

classifies Jehovah's Witnesses as a sect. Differences in classifying groups can be explained by the fact that "'sect' and 'cult' are overlapping concepts," as Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements*, 10, points out, for which, according to Chryssides, *Exploring New Religions*, 7, "there is no consistent, agreed sociological definition."

¹⁶ Rainer Flasche, "Neue Religionen" [New Religions], in *Die Religionen der Gegenwart: Geschichte und Glauben*, ed. Peter Antes (München: C. H. Beck, 1996), 280–98, see 282. Additionally, many of the "old new religions" remain controversial. See Chryssides, *Exploring New Religions*, 77. For a discussion of the term "new religion" or "new religious movement" see, for example, Eileen Barker, "What Are We Studying?" *Nova Religio* 8, no. 1 (July 2004): 88–102; Chryssides, *Exploring New Religions*, 4–23; J. Gordon Melton, "Toward a Definition of 'New Religion,'" *Nova Religio* 8, no. 1 (July 2004): 73–87.

¹⁷ For example, Europeans usually do not distinguish between "sects" and "cults." Instead, they include both kinds of groups under the pejorative terms "sect," "secta" (Spanish), "secte" (French), "Sekte" (German), and "setta" (Italian). See Melton, "Toward a Definition of 'New Religion,'" 74. For the role of and reactions to NRMs in different countries worldwide, see *Nova Religio* 4, no. 2 (April 2001). For an early discussion of differences in societal reactions to NRMs, see James A. Beckford, "The 'Cult-Problem' in Five Countries: The Social Construction of Religious Controversy," in *Of Gods and Men: New Religious Movements in the West. Proceedings of the 1981 Annual Conference of the British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group*, ed. Eileen Barker (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1983), 195–214.

¹⁸ For example, John E. Hunter and Frank L. Schmidt, *Methods of Meta-Analysis: Correcting Error and Bias in Research Findings* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2004).

¹⁹ Chana Ullman, "Cognitive and Emotional Antecedents of Religious Conversion," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 43 (1982): 183–92; Chana Ullman, *The Transformed Self: The Psychology of Religious Conversion* (New York: Plenum Press, 1989).

²⁰ Alexander Deutsch, "Observations on a Sidewalk Ashram," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 32 (1975): 166–75, quote on 168.

²¹ Alexander Deutsch and Michael J. Miller, "A Clinical Study of Four Unification Church Members," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 140 (1983): 767–70.

²² An individual has a "sensate orientation" when he or she is receptive to concrete, sensory stimuli. ISKCON can be said to have a sensate orientation insofar as it emphasizes sensory religious symbols and practices such as the use of beads, incense, the consumption of food, chanting and dancing. Tommy H. Poling and J. Frank Kenney, *The Hare Krishna Character Type: A Study of the Sensate Personality* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986).

²³ Poling and Kenney, *Hare Krishna Character Type*, 156.

²⁴ Janet L. Jacobs, *Divine Disenchantment: Deconverting from New Religions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 5.

²⁵ "N" is the statistical abbreviation for number of individuals studied.

²⁶ Wolfgang Kuner, *Soziogenese der Mitgliedschaft in drei Neuen Religiösen Bewegungen* [Sociogenesis of membership in three new religious movements] (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1983).

²⁷ Herbert Berger and Peter C. Hexel, *Ursachen und Wirkungen gesellschaftlicher Verweigerung junger Menschen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der 'Jugendreligionen'* (Bd. 1) [Causes and effects of young people's refusal of society under special consideration of the 'youth religions' (vol. 1)] (Wien: European Center for Social Welfare and Research, 1981).

²⁸ Jan M. van der Lans and Frans Derks, "Premies versus Sannyasins," *Update: A Quarterly Journal on New Religious Movements* 10, no. 2 (1986): 19–27.

²⁹ Gunther Klosinski, *Warum Bhagwan? Auf der Suche nach Heimat, Geborgenheit und Liebe* [Why Bhagwan? In search of home, security, and love] (München: Kösel, 1985).

³⁰ Especially Kuner, *Soziogenese*, Poling and Kenney, *Hare Krishna Character Type*, van der Lans and Derks, "Premies versus Sannyasins."

³¹ Sussan Namini and Sebastian Murken, "Familial Antecedents and the Choice of a New Religious Movement: Which Person in Which Religious Group?" forthcoming in *Nova Religio* 11, no. 3 (February 2008).

³² Tadeusz Doktór, "New Religious Movements in Poland and the Stark-Bainbridge Theory of Religion," *Temenos* 29 (1993): 37–45, quote on 43.

³³ Coralie Buxant, Vassilis Saroglou, Stefania Casalfiore, and Louis-Léon Christians, "Cognitive and Emotional Characteristics of New Religious Movement Members: New Questions and Data on the Mental Health Issue," *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* (in press).

³⁴ Vassilis Saroglou, Louis-Léon Christians, Coralie Buxant, and Stefania Casalfiore, *Mouvements religieux contestés: Psychologie, droit et politiques de précaution* [Controversial religious movements: Psychology, law, and politics of precaution] (Gent: Academia Press, 2005). It is to be noted that, from an attachment-theoretical perspective, the religious compensation of early attachment insecurities (*compensation hypothesis*) is only one way in which religion may function in adult life. Some support is also available for the *correspondence hypothesis*, which predicts that the security or insecurity of an individual's early attachment experience directly (i.e., in the form of continuity) instead of inversely influences adult religiosity. See Lee A. Kirkpatrick, "An Attachment-Theory Approach to the Psychology of Religion," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 2 (1992): 3–28; Lee A. Kirkpatrick, *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005).

³⁵ Saroglou, Christians, Buxant, and Casalfiore, *Mouvements religieux contestés*. The authors also replicated their study with a sample of 238 Jehovah's Witnesses and found different patterns of childhood attachment in this group. We do not report them here because the sample contained an even higher proportion of individuals who had been socialized in the group (37 percent) than the mixed sample of NRM members. As Sebastian Murken discussed in "Soziale und psychische Auswirkungen der Mitgliedschaft in neuen religiösen Bewegungen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der sozialen Integration und psychischen Gesundheit" [Social and psychic consequences of membership in new religious movements with special consideration of social integration and mental health], in *Neue religiöse und ideologische Gemeinschaften und Psychogruppen. Forschungsprojekte und Gutachten der Enquete-Kommission 'Sogenannte Sekten und Psychogruppen,'* ed. Deutscher Bundestag Enquete-Kommission (Hamm: Hoheneck, 1998), 297–354, the psychological and psychodynamic situation of

individuals who converted to NRMs is not comparable to the situation of socialized members.

³⁶ C. Anthony Martignetti, "Gurus and Devotees: Guides or Gods? Pathology or Faith?" *Pastoral Psychology* 47 (1998): 127–44.

³⁷ Peter Halama and Júlia Halamová, "Process of Religious Conversion in the Catholic Charismatic Movement: A Qualitative Analysis," *Archiv für Religionspsychologie* 27 (2005): 69–91, quote on 86. However, the authors' conclusion has to be treated with caution because the study did not include any non-convert control group.

³⁸ Saul V. Levine and Nancy E. Salter, "Youth and Contemporary Religious Movements: Psychosocial Findings," *Canadian Psychiatric Association Journal* 21 (1976): 411–20, quote on 414. See also Saul V. Levine, "Youth and Religious Cults: A Societal and Clinical Dilemma," *Adolescent Psychiatry* 6 (1978): 75–89.

³⁹ Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), quote on 196.

⁴⁰ Dieter Rohmann, *Ein Kult für alle Fälle: Eine empirische Studie zum Thema 'Mögliche Prädisposition einer Sekten-, Kultmitgliedschaft'* [A cult for all cases: An empirical study on the topic of 'potential predispositions for sect, cult membership'] (Bern: Edition Soziothek, 2000); Dieter Rohmann, "Mögliche Prädisposition einer Sekten-/Kultmitgliedschaft. Zusammenfassung einer empirischen Studie" [Potential predispositions for sect, cult membership. Summary of an empirical study], *Report Psychologie* 24 (1999): 764–65; Dieter Rohmann, "Jeder hat seinen Kult" [Everybody has his own cult], *Psychologie Heute* 27, no.8 (2000): 48–51.

⁴¹ Kuner, *Soziogenese*, 227.

⁴² Levine and Salter, "Youth and Contemporary Religious Movements"; Levine, "Youth and Religious Cults."

⁴³ Rohmann, *Ein Kult für alle Fälle*.

⁴⁴ Ralf Gering, Nils Grübel, Claudia Haydt, Günter Kehrler, Istvan Keul, and Frank Starz, "'Mancherlei Gaben und ein Geist?' Eine charismatisch-evangelikale Gemeinde in Tübingen" ['Various gifts and one spirit?' A charismatic-evangelical parish in Tuebingen], *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 2 (1994): 23–47.

⁴⁵ Berger and Hexel, *Ursachen und Wirkungen*.

⁴⁶ Namini and Murken, "Familial Antecedents and the Choice of a New Religious Movement."

⁴⁷ Levine and Salter, "Youth and Contemporary Religious Movements"; Levine, "Youth and Religious Cults."

⁴⁸ Rohmann, *Ein Kult für alle Fälle*.

⁴⁹ Berger and Hexel, *Ursachen und Wirkungen*.

⁵⁰ Max Heirich, "Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories about Religious Conversion," *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (1977): 653–80, quote on 664.

⁵¹ Kuner, *Soziogenese*.

⁵² Poling and Kenney, *Hare Krishna Character Type*, 146.

⁵³ Rohmann, *Ein Kult für alle Fälle*; Rohmann, "Mögliche Prädisposition"; Rohmann, "Jeder hat seinen Kult."

⁵⁴ Namini and Murken, “Familial Antecedents and the Choice of a New Religious Movement”; Sulloway, *Born to Rebel*.

⁵⁵ The authors appreciate all references to further relevant studies that have not been identified and included in this review.

⁵⁶ Namini and Murken, “Familial Antecedents and the Choice of a New Religious Movement”; Buxant, Saroglou, Casalfiore, and Christians, “Cognitive and Emotional Characteristics.” This current interest can at least partly be ascribed to the attention given to the attachment-theoretical approach to religion in the last few years. See Kirkpatrick, *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion*; Pehr Granqvist, “On the Relation between Secular and Divine Relationships: An Emerging Attachment Perspective and a Critique of the ‘Depth’ Approaches,” *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 16 (2006): 1–18.

⁵⁷ For example, Berger and Hexel, *Ursachen und Wirkungen*; Namini and Murken, “Familial Antecedents and the Choice of a New Religious Movement”; Poling and Kenney, *Hare Krishna Character Type*; Deutsch, “Observations on a Sidewalk Ashram.”

⁵⁸ For example, Barker, *Making of a Moonie*, 210 (italics by the author):

This does not mean that people become Moonies *in spite of* a happy family background; they are, I believe, quite liable to join *because of* one. That is to say, in so far as Moonies are looking for the warmth and affection of a secure family life, this is unlikely to be because they have never known one; they are far more likely to be hoping to return to one.

However, the difficulty of deciding whether a process of compensation or correspondence is going on becomes obvious when Barker seamlessly continues:

They are not likely to be turning to the Reverend and Mrs Moon as “True Parents” because they have never known parents whom they respected and loved; they are much more likely to be responding to the idea that those who are in the “parental position” can legitimately claim respect and obedience because they have grown up respecting their own parents (perhaps so much so that they were particularly disillusioned or disoriented when they recognized that their parents, like other human beings, have certain frailties and are not entirely omniscient.)

See also, Berger and Hexel, *Ursachen und Wirkungen*.

⁵⁹ For example, Dóktór, “New Religious Movements in Poland”; Kuner, *Soziogenese*; Namini and Murken, “Familial Antecedents and the Choice of a New Religious Movement”; van der Lans and Derks, “Premies versus Sannyasins.”

⁶⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, Standard Edition, vol. 13 (London: Hogarth Press, 1913).

⁶¹ Although it can be assumed that data on structural aspects of family life, such as loss of a parent and number of siblings, is unlikely to be distorted, the appraisal of early relationships may be influenced by the participants’ religious development. On the one hand, highly Christian subjects could be influenced by the biblical command to “honor father and mother.” On the other hand, sociologists who research conversion narratives assert that converts tend to devalue their pasts. We agree, however, with other authors that retrospective

accounts of converts are not less reliable than those used in other social science contexts and that they offer valuable sources of information, especially if prospective data are not available. See, for example, Robin D. Perrin and Armand L. Mauss, "Strictly speaking. . . : Kelley's Quandary and the Vineyard Christian Fellowship," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32 (1993): 125–35; and Brian J. Zinnbauer and Kenneth I. Pargament, "Spiritual Conversion: A Study of Religious Change among College Students," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37 (1998): 161–80.

⁶² See Susan Pitchford, Christopher Bader, and Rodney Stark, "Doing Field Studies of Religious Movements: An Agenda," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40 (2001): 379–92.

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