

Misattribution and Social Control in the Children of God

STEPHEN A. KENT

ABSTRACT: This article argues that deviant religions use supposedly godly justifications for their punishment systems by establishing theologies in which members misattribute divine authority to leaders whom they relate to emotionally as to demanding parents. These misattributing theologies "sanctify" the harsh suffering that members often experience. Illustrations of the theoretical points come from texts published by the Children of God in its early period (the 1970s), supplemented by accounts given by two women who have left the group.

Intense and harsh regimentation does not drive away many members of ideological religious organizations, who may remain committed participants in their activities for years. These people may feel a profound sense of purpose as the result of participation in organizations that claim special insight into the divine. Yet as a cost of membership they may also suffer physical, sexual, psychological, and religious deprivations imposed by the groups or their leaders.¹ From members' perspectives, however, perseverance in the face of hardship is always appropriate if it is done for the greater glory of God. In this article I argue that deviant religions use supposedly godly justifications for their punishment systems by establishing theologies in which members misattribute divine authority to leaders whom they relate to emotionally as demanding parents. These misattributing theologies sanctify the often harsh sufferings that members are required to withstand.

Social scientists might argue that misattribution forms the basis of all religions, since theologies (as, for example, Feuerbach and Marx argued) can project onto the heavens qualities and conditions that actually are human. The theologies of deviant or nontraditional religions provide special evidence of such processes in contemporary society. Among the most accessible examples of misattributing process are those that occur within the deviant Christian-

Stephen A. Kent, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology of the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at academic conferences in Vancouver and Washington, D.C., and Professor Kent's research was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

based group, the Children of God (also known as COG, The Family of Love, or simply, The Family), since extensive collections of the group's writings exist from its early years (the 1970s) and some former members are willing to reflect upon their experience as members.

Begun as a Christian missionary group to young adults in southern California in the late 1960s, the Children of God grew to the size of an international organization that has survived into the early 1990s. A recent study of the group indicates that "[a]s of July, 1988, the Family claimed to have 12,390 full-time members of which 6,833 were children, most of whom were born into the Family."² Its apocalyptic, born-again messages centered around the reputed revelations of its leader, David Berg, who came to be known among his followers as Moses David, Mo, Dad, and most recently, Grandpa. In these allegedly final days before the return of Jesus, Berg announced that his followers had the responsibility of bringing Jesus's message of love into the world. One way members believed that they conveyed this message was by witnessing through literature distribution (known to the group as "litness-ing") of Berg's revelatory statements (known as *Mo Letters*). Among other controversial ways that he required members to spread the group's message was through the practice called "flirty-fishing," which involved sexual relations with potential recruits or resource providers.³ Sexual relations (claimed by the group as a manifestation of God's love) were rampant among all members, even extending to sex between some adults and children and among some children.⁴ As a social operation, the group developed an authoritarian structure, yet some people (including the leader's youngest daughter, Faithy, and his special partner and lover, Maria) have remained committed participants since the late 1960s.⁵

The social-psychological logic of participation in COG provides a dramatic example of sustained patterns of commitment despite harsh punishment. It offers some understanding of the misattributing patterns in which members operate, as a necessary framework through which to understand the effectiveness of the group's social-control and punishment systems. We can assume that thousands of COG members experienced various degrees of control and punishment, yet many of them remained within the organization even after they had suffered great restrictions and deprivation.

A comprehensive explanation of why people remained as COG members despite various punishments would have to take notice of a combination of social or structural inhibitors, such as the sense of having made an irretrievable investment, limited career options and resources, family responsibilities, group pressures, and self-assessment. Such an explanation would go well beyond the scope of this study. Still some identification of self-assessment factors in relation to punitive group actions can be made, I think, by applying insights from attribution theory to a discussion of social control in a heterodox religion. In essence, I would argue that one indicator of deviance among a range of religious groups pejoratively called "cults" is the establishment of

misattribution systems whose effects are different from both the “fundamental attribution error” prevalent in the population at large and the tendency of normative religions to restore and maintain peoples’ “beliefs, sense of control, [and] self esteem.”⁶ (The fundamental attribution error is the “tendency of attributors to overestimate dispositional factors and underestimate environmental forces in explaining behavior.”)⁷ Later in the article I present examples from COG literature and accounts of two former members to illustrate the force of this argument.

The applicability of attribution theory to religion has been apparent since a seminal article on the subject appeared in 1975, even though only a few studies since then have applied the theory to explain the cognitive processes of religious group members.⁸ Actually a cluster of smaller theories rather than a single, unified-perspective⁹ attribution theory offers us understanding of how and why “people seek to make sense of their experiences . . . [and] the causes of the events they witness.”¹⁰ Borrowing insights from attribution techniques that had been identified in theories of emotion, self-perception, and motivation, Proudfoot and Shaver offer several categories of situations where attributional processes may underlie religious claims. In addition, I would argue that these same processes also may explain why people tolerate rigorous punishment regimes in religious settings.

First, Proudfoot and Shaver indicate that “at least some religious experiences are due to diffuse emotional states that are given a particular interpretation.”¹¹ Along these lines, “[i]t seems likely that religious symbols and doctrines often serve as labels for experiences of arousal which initially appear to be anomalous.”¹² Second, they realize that “[o]ne of the functions of religious doctrines and symbols is the attribution of power and responsibility for particular events to the actor or to natural or supernatural forces which are, in different degrees, beyond his [or her] control.”¹³ In this regard, “[a]ttribution theory would suggest that labelling and interpretation are fundamental to religious experience,”¹⁴ implying that religious attribution systems decree that events are supernaturally based and outside of direct human influence.

In a crucial section of their paper, one that has great importance for my interpretation of COG’s social-control techniques, Proudfoot and Shaver conclude that

Most, if not all such [religious] systems have a theodicy which enables the devotee to interpret events that are potentially discouraging as further evidence for the truth of the system, and for the efficacy of appropriate religious action. Anything negative that happens is attributed to bad karma or the forces of evil, and can be countered only by chanting, prayer, sacrifice, or exorcism.¹⁵

They may have been alluding to COG (which had connections with the Jesus movement) when they observed that “recent cults celebrating Krishna con-

sciousness, Nichiren Shoshu, astrology, the I Ching, and the Jesus movement all share the characteristic that devotees are encouraged to give up the struggle for personal meaning, values, and fulfillment and submit to a ready made system."¹⁶

Taking my cue from Proudfoot and Shaver, I argue that *attribution theory explains the social-psychological context in which people assign or attribute meaning to immediate and compensatory rewards and punishments.*¹⁷ Immediate rewards and punishments are those that allegedly will occur fairly soon in this life as against compensatory rewards and punishments—positive or negative payoffs—that individuals supposedly will accrue in an unverifiable future, in a spiritual realm or afterlife.¹⁸ Specifically, I point to the ways members internalized values that justified COG's reward and punishment system. In essence, COG established a comprehensive but deviant theological system that misattributed all sources of "good" to God and His reputed agent on earth, David Berg, while at the same time it misattributed all that is "bad" to Satan as it manifested itself in people's own supposed selfishness, doubts, and pride.

The theological misattribution system disempowered people by removing any sense of self-worth, critical doubts, or self-control, contrary to the attribution pattern that psychologists of religion usually predict for normative or mainstream religion. People, therefore, accepted punishments of all kinds, since COG's theology taught them that they were inflicted upon them by the group and its leadership in order to keep people operating within God's grace and salvational plan. While most of the examples that I provide come from former COG women, the broad dynamics of the deviant attribution process also affect men, no matter how differently they suffered the burdens of patriarchal sexism. I will return to this question of gender in the conclusion.

COG's attributional system

The basic misattributional system established by COG theology resembled, at core, many traditional Christian beliefs. "Our new life [in Jesus] is only by *Grace*, never by works, or confession sessions, or battling in the flesh with our sins. For by the *Grace* are ye saved through *faith*; and that not of *yourselves*: it is the gift of *God*: Not of works. . . ."

¹⁹ Later in the same tract Berg asserts that

You haven't got anybody's righteousness except Christ's, and He's the only One that [sic] can give it to you! Your own righteousness stinks! It's filthy menstruous rags (Is. 64: 6)! And that's all there is to that—*nothing* else, *no* other way, *no* righteousness of your own, *none* of your own good works, *none* of these can keep you saved any more than they can save you in the *first* place. *Only Jesus* can do it! He not only *saves* you, but He also does the *works* through you—

and it's *all Jesus*—none of your own damn self or your own stinking self-righteousness—*just Jesus*.²⁰

God, Berg claims, “can’t help you to save yourself, since He does not help those who think they can help themselves, but only those who know they can’t, and you can’t save yourself, no matter how much you try to get His help. . . .”²¹ In sum, COG members were to deny any sense of power or effectiveness to themselves, and instead to depend wholly upon Jesus.

Dependence upon Jesus brought with it an immediate social requirement—dependence upon God’s self-proclaimed prophet on earth, David Berg. Writing to his followers about the importance of reading his own *Mo Letters*, Berg admonished them: “You, my dear children have an appointment with me every day, and you’d better not miss it, or you’re going to be sorry! To ignore the Word of the Lord through His Prophet is to ignore the Voice of God himself, and if you’re not going to be willing to spend time listening to God’s directions, you’re not going to get far!”²² By representing himself as God’s mouthpiece, Berg was able to equate the traditional Christian virtue of “surrender to Jesus” with “surrender to Berg.”²³ All subsequent misattributions about the supposed value of leadership-inflicted punishments follow from people’s “surrender to Jesus” in the context of Berg’s self-proclaimed mediation of God’s word for the current generation.

The experience of “surrendering to Jesus” in the context of COG teachings had a dramatic effect on people, much like a typical “born again” experience characteristic of many evangelical Christian churches.²⁴ Theologically, it might be said, people received Jesus into their hearts through the sudden infusion of the Holy Spirit. In an instant, emotive, valuating, and cognitive processes became reoriented around the powerful feeling that Jesus, through death on the cross, had saved them then and there through His mercy and grace.

Psychologically, people accepted attributions that provided them with doctrines around which they could explain to themselves a wide range of emotions, thoughts, and feelings that directly affected their “meaning-belief system[s],” their “feelings of personal control and predictability,” and their “feelings of self-esteem.”²⁵ These reformulated belief systems, feelings of control, and self-esteem became the central commodities in COG’s religiously motivated social-control system.

Berg himself realized the transformative consequences for people who had “born again” experiences, and he encouraged people to undergo them. In a particular section of a 1974 *Mo Letter*, Berg wrote about how “the Holy Spirit renews your mind.” He described in theological language what consequences occur when people adopt a new attributional system with Jesus at its centre:

13. It only takes one blast of the mighty, searing power of the holy ghost to completely burn out all the Devil’s old circuits in a mighty infilling of God’s

Spirit—God's great electrical power. All you do is let the Light in, and the darkness will flee of itself!

14. Then begins the transforming, the creation of totally new circuits, responses, reactions, by the tender loving hands of the Holy Spirit, following the circuit patternry or schematic of His Word, completely rewired for His constructive purposes instead of the destructive purposes of the Enemy.²⁶

From an evangelical Christian standpoint, nothing would seem unorthodox in Berg's description of religious transformation; yet in the next section of the tract Berg made sure that *his* interpretation of Christianity would be primary.

Again in theological terms, Berg acknowledged that God would lead converts "into all truth" through the Holy Spirit, but people had to receive that Spirit:

through His Word and his Prophets as well as your individual leadings and personal revelations. But if you think you don't need the *Word* now that you all have the *Spirit*, let me tell you, Jesus said, "the words that I speak unto you, they are Spirit and they are Life."²⁷

Berg, of course, claimed to provide God's word through his *Mo Letters*, since he himself was "God's endtime prophet." After people accepted the attribution system that Berg provided through his interpretation of Christianity, they would be operating within a social psychology in which all good things—immediate and compensatory rewards—came to them through Berg's revelations of God's intentions, and all bad things—immediate and compensatory punishments—occurred through the workings of their own egos. Egos were where "the Enemy" [Satan] supposedly operated, and sinful egos revealed themselves through any opposition to Berg or his organization.

The translation of theological content into an attribution system reveals itself in letters from COG members that appeared in an internal publication entitled *The Family of Love News*, which Berg's consort, Maria, helped edit along with David and Marylou Hiebert, who have since left. The contents of this publication reveal the type of thinking that COG leadership considered acceptable among ordinary members.²⁸ Numerous accounts show how members criticized themselves either for harboring doubts about Berg or his *Mo Letters*, or for engaging in what they concluded was self-interested, selfish, or self-centered behavior.

In Late January, 1978, for example, a member confessed how difficult it had been for him always to accept the lessons that Berg taught in his *Mo Letters*. "Because I was so accustomed to doing things in my own strength and understanding, it was difficult to accept the Letters in childlike faith . . .," Zadok confessed. "When it came down to obeying something I didn't agree with, instead of really desperately crying out to God and asking Him to change my Heart, I would rationalize it in my mind: 'Oh, that's just Dad

[Berg] and he wants to do things his way,' instead of realizing it was God's way and genuinely repenting and admitting to myself I was wrong."²⁹ Another member, who had been part of Berg and Maria's personal staff, acknowledged problems among the leadership, but admitted, "I know, though, it's only the fault of our selfish selves and our own unwillingness to do what you've said to do in the [Mo] Letters."³⁰ In both cases, members attributed to "selfishness" problems that they had regarding either the content or the instructions found in COG missives. Once they returned to the acceptable COG theology, attributing to Berg the power of interpreting God's word at the cost of sacrificing their own doubting thoughts and criticisms, they claimed that their problems disappeared.

This misattribution pattern underpinned COG's punishment system, which loyal members internalized as an intimate aspect of COG's successful social control techniques. Of important significance about the internalization pattern for "a general attribution theory"³¹ is that it seemingly undermines the fundamental assumption about the role that religion plays regarding the restoration of self-esteem. *COG's punishment system depended upon the reduction of members' will and self-esteem* to the point that they placed all of their positive attributions upon "God" through the interpretations of his reputed prophet, Berg, and placed blame upon themselves for all negative occurrences and oppositional thoughts. Spilka, Shaver, and Kirkpatrick's claim that religious attributions serve to restore self-esteem clearly is not supported by an examination of the social psychology behind COG's misattributions regarding punishments.

When, for example, we view COG's attributional system concerning tragic events, we see how deviant it was in comparison with "normal, mainstream" religions. Both the deviant and normative attributional processes "1) restore cognitive coherence to the attributor's meaning-belief system, [and] 2) establish a sense of confidence that future outcomes will be satisfactory and/or controllable," as Spilka, Shaver, and Kirkpatrick claim.³² COG appears deviant, however, in relation to the psychologists' claim that religions also "3) minimize threats to self-esteem and maximize the capacity for self-enhancement."³³ COG's attributional system misattributed the cause of tragic events to individuals, as God supposedly acted justly against them because of their "sins" or related deficiencies. This attributional pattern diminished rather than enhanced self-esteem and deflected any hint of group or leadership culpability.

Personal accounts provided by two former COG members dramatically reinforce misattribution patterns that COG advocated in its publications. Karen Meyer was a member from March 1970 to June 1979, during which time an infant of hers died (on September 3, 1975) in the course of a group automobile trip across Turkey. The eight-month old baby died at night in the back of the van when she apparently crawled off the back seat where she was sleeping, lodged herself between the seat and a piece of plastic, and suffo-

cated. Because of cramped space, Meyer was at the time sleeping outside the van, in a field, but at least one adult was sleeping inside the van when the infant died.³⁴ Meyer's story exemplifies the Children of God's belief in the divine origins of at least some affective punishment at the expense of self-esteem and self-image:

[My husband] was already involved with another woman at this time, and I had been fighting it and [had been] very vocal and upset about it, and so the general consensus was that God was dealing with me. And the personal message I received from David Berg was that God had taken my child because I was an unfit mother—*this was my comfort*. And people acted like I had . . . because God had so obviously struck me, they stayed clear, because they didn't want to, you know, possibly get any—any of the aftereffects. So I was really left alone. Was not allowed to grieve.

And because we were—the baby died in Turkey, and we had to continue on to Iran. And when we got to Iran, they [other COG members] put me in a hotel room with the children, [and] wouldn't even let me go back into the colony. And by the time they were ready to let me go back into the colony, I was taken up to the upper room with the leaders, and I was basically given this message from Davig Berg and told that I'd better really pray and ask God's forgiveness 'cause He was obviously—obviously, He had it in for me.³⁵

Internalizing the charge that she was an unfit mother, Meyer later resigned her leadership position in childcare because, in her words, "I felt that if God was so obviously distraught with me that He would take a child, then I had no business trying to teach other women how to raise their children."³⁶ Unable to blame the death of her child, as she was subsequently able to do, on "negligence and the way we were living at the time,"³⁷ Meyer accepted immediate affective punishment—avoidance by other members—and immediate purposive punishment involving the charge of "selfishness" in her opposition to her husband's sexual involvement with another woman, as indicators of God's angry response to her own "spiritual" deficiencies.

Another account, involving a "rebellious" COG woman (whom I will call Lucy Lowe) blaming herself for the death of her baby and the illnesses of her firstborn, illustrates how COG's attribution system operated to control the lives of its members. Lowe joined in 1972 and departed in early January, 1979. The death of her child occurred on September 19, 1977. Recounting a period that Lowe described as "the worst year of my entire life,"³⁸ she explains why she misattributed the death of her hours-old infant to her resistance about participating in "flirty-fishing."

In early 1978, she and her husband visited both sets of their parents in Canada and the United States. Upon returning to Japan:

. . . that's when we had to start going out [flirty-fishing]. Like things were changing. . . . [Y]ou had to litness during the day, and at night you have to go

out to bars and try to meet people [W]hen we came back [from our North American trip], and he [Berg] told us that this was what we had to do, like, I—I—I mean, I just started turning into an emotional wreck. . . . I didn't want any part of it. But I thought, "man, I'm rebelling against God. . . ."

(Kent): And what did you think would happen if you rebelled against God?

(Lowe): That He would punish me.

(Kent): How?

(Lowe): I didn't know how. Somehow He was going to punish me, though. . . . Like I just didn't want to [flirty fish], I just wasn't into it. And I was just pregnant the second time. I was sick.³⁹

Soon Lowe's husband traveled to the northern part of the country, and she found herself distressed to discover that he was sleeping with another woman while he was there.⁴⁰ Amidst all this turmoil, her infant son became seriously ill. We pick up Lowe's account of events:

And I remember that [my son] got really sick. Like we just believed in prayer. [My son] got really sick, and he was just over one [year old] [F]or four days he couldn't even sit up. Like he just laid there. And I thought, "I'm taking him to a doctor. Like I can't stay here, 'cause no matter how hard I pray. . . ." But at the same time in the back of my mind, I'm starting to think "it's God punishing me. . . ." By [my son] being sick and that.

(Kent): . . . [Y]ou thought that God might be punishing you for not ffig [flirty fishing] by making [your son] sick?

(Lowe): Yeah.⁴¹

In Lowe's mind, these were indications of God's punishments directed against her.

After a barrage of long, painful, and inconclusive medical tests, Lowe was packing up her and her son's belongings in order to leave the hospital when suddenly her son "stood up in the bed, and he fell over the edge of the bed, and he hit his head on the *cement* floor, really hard. And I just—like all this is getting too much for me to handle [laughs]."⁴² Cautioned by her doctor's instruction to watch for vomiting that might indicate head injuries, Lowe took her son home. There he became violently ill.

During this period of terrible stress and worry, her husband returned home. "And he told me, 'Look . . . , you have to accept this [flirty fishing]. This [series of medical problems with their son] is God's will now. Like this is what God is telling us. And you have to accept it.'"⁴³

After additional medical attention, Lowe's son recovered, but her husband maintained pressure on her, trying to force her to accept as fact that her son's medical problems were punishments from God about her resistance to flirty fishing and extramarital sexual affairs. Apparently COG leadership transferred them to northern Japan, where, Lowe recalled, "I was a wreck. And I remember [that my husband] slapped my face really hard. . . . And he said, 'you're murmuring against God. . . . You're going against God's will. . . . [Y]ou've just got to smarten up.'"⁴⁴

Her will and self-esteem finally broke, and she acknowledged "God's requirement" to flirty fish, when the child to whom she had given birth died in a matter of hours.

I thought that was God's punishment. . . . That was God trying to show me how—how much it hurt Him to lose one of His children. Because I was being so selfish that I wouldn't do anything to save these people [through recruiting by flirty-fishing]. That's what God was doing to me. And that—that just broke me. Like it just . . . after that I didn't care. It just broke everything in me.⁴⁶

Lowe's painful story reveals how members misattributed medical problems to God's "just" retribution for selfish disobedience, and also shows how close associates—in this case, Lowe's husband—reinforced this attribution interpretation through immediate physical, purposive, and effective punishments in their efforts to obtain conformity to Berg's doctrines.

Indeed, Lowe's interpretation of God's retribution fits well within recognizable patterns of misattribution identified in the social psychology of victimization.

. . . [P]eople are impelled, possibly by habit and certainly by a strongly felt need, to perceive what happens to themselves and others in their world as manifestations of a "just world." This perception is maintained by interpreting all non-trivial events as not only understandable or controllable, but as evidence that everything ultimately turns out for the best. At times, this requires that the person find or invent reasons why seemingly innocent victims are inflicted with deprivation and suffering.⁴⁶

Within COG's theologically woven misattribution system, Lowe's self-blame for her child's death allowed her to give meaning to a tragedy even if by doing so she felt psychologically broken and spiritually responsible.

Like these two COG women, though perhaps unlike their husbands, many COG men apparently became jealous of their spouses' sexual involvements with other partners. Berg specifically wrote to these men in a 1976 tract entitled "The Men Who Play God," in which he discussed their "FF Blues."⁴⁷ In the tract he argued that their jealousy came from both their selfishness and the Devil, but that they were to elevate their emotional pain to the level of religious sacrifice:

27. So fellows remember that when you get the FF blues or that little ache down in your heart, with all those Devil's lies: "Well, maybe she's learning to love *him* more than *me*."—She *does* have to fall in love with him *temporarily*, and she sometimes *does* have to temporarily give *him* more of her time than *you*, because he's her *baby*, and babies *often* come between husbands and wives! . . .

30. But now you know how God felt when He had to send the Lord to die for us! He had to watch Him die on the cross and turn his *back* on Him while He was dying to save others, like sometimes we *men* have to do to our *wives*!⁴⁸

In short, Berg instructed COG men to attribute to the Devil what likely were appropriate feelings of jealousy and transform them into feelings of Christian self-sacrifice for the well-being of a new spiritual baby.

Images of family misattribution

Thus far I have critically expanded Proudfoot and Shaver's observations about attribution in religious contexts by arguing that COG worked with a deviant attribution pattern. In this deviant pattern, the group rewarded members for believing, on the one hand, that sources of good resided outside of themselves (God, as mediated through Berg's teachings), and on the other hand, that sources of negativity or bad resided in forces within themselves (from Satan, and manifested as doubts or resistance to those teachings). Consequently, COG's punishment system operated largely to deter people from cultivating any internal doubts about Berg's directives, and the group members' attributions interpreted unfortunate and tragic events in the lives of doctrinal deviants as indications of God's just wrath. Since this pattern of misattribution disempowered people, I must conclude that it differs dramatically from the typical notion of "normal" religion, that it enhances feelings of self-worth rather than diminishes them.

The misattribution patterns and consequences that this article identifies have implications for research far beyond the Children of God, since they also provide a theoretical context for a number of disparate facts that observers have noted over the years about recently prominent nontraditional religions. Among the consistent observations is that many deviant group leaders (in addition to religious figures in the Catholic and Anglican traditions) assume familial titles. COG members call Berg "Dad" or "Grandpa"; Unificationists (Moonies) refer to their leader as Father, and Jim Jones's doomed adherents also called him by the paternal name. Moon's wife is called "Mother," and Elizabeth Claire Prophet refers to herself as "Mother" in many of her group's publications. As a partial explanation for this gathering of familial imagery around deviant religious leaders, I suggest that many groups establish ideological and social-control systems in which members misattribute divine powers to their leaders, and then receive affective rewards and punishments from them in a manner analogous to power-imbalanced "parent-child" relationships. Members disempower themselves by relating to group authority figures as children relate to demanding parents.⁴⁹

Support for this suggestion comes from Arthur S. Parsons's analysis of "social control in the Unification Church,"⁵⁰ which almost certainly parallels the social psychology of COG members. The basis of this control within Unificationism was the Moonies' dependence upon "emotional rewards from father figures and the Church as a whole."⁵¹ Because of members' emotional dependence upon these hierarchically based emotional rewards, "they become, like

children in the personalized family, vulnerable to the threat, even if implicit or induced on the basis of self-doubt, of withdrawal of emotional support by their central figures. . . ."⁵² In essence, Moonies operate in a misattribution system in which they empower themselves by obeying "the Church, Moon, and God,"⁵³ and at the same time they disempower themselves by limiting their emotional rewards to those provided by the hierarchical Church context in which they live.

Their "loving obedience to leaders"⁵⁴ suggests that they attribute powers to their superiors that they deny to themselves, but from "the emotional grace resulting from unity with a superior," Moonies receive various kinds of affective and bodily rewards along with purposive punishments. As one member told Parsons, "I started to experience emotionally, spiritually, physically the feeling of a child."⁵⁵

In another analogous context, we should note that the early name of Berg's group, the *Children of God*, suggests the same pattern of childlike dependence upon the leader—a dependence epitomized by both a song and tract that were popular in the early COG communities—"Ya Gotta Be a Baby." In one version of the tract carrying this title, Berg taught that:

As I used to tell my own natural children when they were little: "God is our Father in Heaven and we are his children on earth. We've all been naughty and deserve a spanking, haven't we?—But Jesus, our Big Brother, loved us and the Father so much that he knew the spanking would hurt us both, so He offered to take it for us!"⁵⁶

Moreover, Berg's youngest daughter, Faith(y), captured the logic of childlike obedience that members were to cultivate in a tract that she wrote in 1973:

Just like when we were little kids, sometimes it's hard to obey, and do what you're told, just because God said it. Mo used to say, "You don't have to understand why, just do it because I said to do it." Well, he's probably still screaming that today. "You leaders *don't have to understand why, just do it because the Lord told me to tell you to do it!*"⁵⁷

In other words, COG members, and especially their leaders, were required to obey God, through Berg, in a manner like that of children who obey their parents blindly or forcibly.

Since one implication of the misattribution system that this study describes involves the disempowerment of people by both childlike self-images and group-sanctioned immediate and compensatory punishment (especially against members who doubt or challenge leadership), it is not surprising that the healing rituals that Janet Jacobs observed among female victims of abuse in deviant religions involved techniques of "empowerment and transformation."⁵⁸ Her earlier work identified how, "[a]s the thoughts and actions of the female followers [in several non-traditional religions] become inseparable from the group identity, a submissive self-image also becomes inseparable

from the goals of spiritual growth."⁵⁹ Part of that submission involved the misattribution of divinity to male charismatic leaders, which translated into either the immediate physical and emotional reward (or in some cases, punishment) of having sexual relations with him, often in the context of the compensatory "promise of enlightenment" coming much closer to fulfillment.⁶⁰ This and other obligatory behavior disempowered women in part by binding them in what I would call a misattribution system in which they "became the subject of denigration and humiliation in the course of their religious affiliation with the movement."⁶¹ Indeed, because of the child-like dependence that these women seemed to feel toward their leaders, sexual involvement between female followers and male spiritual mentors may be said to share elements characteristic of incest violation.

Jacobs's work suggests that the attribution systems may differ for men and women in many nontraditional religions, with women often experiencing a double disempowerment. This double disempowerment relates to their submissiveness to the group itself, which they share with men, combined with their own female submissiveness to paternalistic men or male leaders. Often these men claim to have achieved higher spirituality at the same time that they pressure women into the most inappropriate sexual activity. Jacobs may well be correct here and future research will undoubtedly bring refinements of understanding along gender lines to the social-psychological dynamics that we have identified.

On a broader issue, awareness on the part of researchers concerning COG members' patterns of theologically based misattribution may cast light on the contentious issue about the scientific validity of former members' accounts concerning their group involvement. While some researchers minimize or even dismiss the accuracy of these accounts, labeling them "atrocities tales,"⁶² the examples I have cited in this study surely suggest that former members' tales may not so easily be thrust aside. The insightfulness of their accounts stems from their present status as outsiders, which allows them to recall and interpret the meanings of their behavior without social or psychological constraints of a misattributing "theological" system of belief and practice. Group members, who necessarily operate within such misattributing and often demeaning systems, have clearly only the most limited range of interpretation open to them, while former members can recount their previous misattribution patterns and contrast them within new and far more trustworthy interpretive frameworks.

References

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61. Jacobs, "The Economy of Love in Religious Commitment," p. 163.
62. See, for example, Bromley, D.; Shupe, A., and Ventimiglia, J.C.; "The Role of Anecdotal Atrocities in the Social Construction of Evil," pp. 139-160 in *The Brainwashing/Deprogramming Controversy*. Edited by D. Bromley and J.T. Richardson, Lewiston, New York, Edwin Mellon Press.