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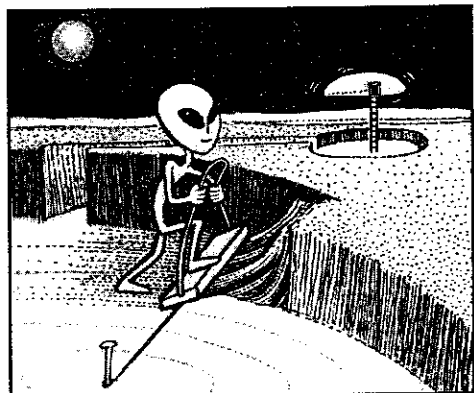
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CLARIFYING CONTENTIOUS ISSUES

A REJOINDER TO MELTON, SHUPE, AND LEWIS
STEPHEN A. KENT AND THERESA KREBS

Our SKEPTIC article (which the editor named, without either our knowledge or consent, "When Scholars Know Sin,") raised at least five issues that had direct relevance for Gordon Melton and that he could have addressed. His peculiar discussion about brainwashing—not a topic that we raised—obfuscates very important points that we made in the essay. We shall refocus the discussion back to those substantive issues, and by doing so examine the few points that Melton makes in direct response to our analysis.

First, Kent and Krebs agreed with sociologist Robert Balch's critical summation (Balch, 1996) that James Lewis and Melton's edited volume on the *Children of God/The Family* (Lewis and Melton, 1994a) disregarded the group's efforts to sanitize and manage its public image. We pointed out the group's implementation of Media Homes whose hand-picked members rehearsed answers to expected questions, and we indicated our knowledge of the group's destruction of controversial sexual material involving children. Melton boasts about both the size of his collection and his numerous visits to Family homes. He does not however, marshal any of this material to refute our statements (from Family literature, reinforced with our interviews) that Media Homes not only had question-and-answer rehearsals in preparation for researchers but also had destroyed crucial documents about the group's encouragement

and facilitation of child sexual abuse. (See Melton's own reference to two book chapters from a 1978 teen training book that The Family expunged by the early 1990s [Melton, 1994, 91].) He claims that we incorrectly state that The Family study was tied to AWARE, but he neglects to mention that seven of the 16 authors published in his co-edited book on the group were either AWARE directors or on its Academic Advisory Committee.

Second, we mentioned that several academics had spoken favorably about The Family on a public relations video that the group produced in 1994, which should have caught Melton's attention since he was among the academics who appeared on tape. He also appeared as an expert witness on behalf of The Family in a British court case (which was decided in October, 1995 and which Melton refers to in his response). Combined with his 1994 essay entitled "Sexuality and the Maturation of The Family" that appeared in his co-edited volume, we have three opportunities to compare Melton's comments within a relatively close period of time about the crucial issue of child sexual abuse.

In his 1994 essay, Melton indicated that "[a]llowed, even encouraged, behavior" in a 1979 Family publication "included nude mixed bathing, nude mixed play, self-sexual examination, experimentation and/or interplay when playing or sleeping together. Allowing children to watch adults engage in sexual

intercourse is allowable, but each case must be judged on its own merits according to the child's reaction" (Melton, 1994, 83). When he discussed the publication, *Child Brides*, Melton indicated that The Family's leader, David Berg, "suggested that those teens [aged 13 to 15] who wanted to should be allowed to marry" (Melton, 1994, 84). From 1981 to 1987, some Family homes made videos of nude women dancing, and "[i]n a few cases, at the home in Greece, minors, both teens and pre-teens, were allowed to participate in making a video" (Melton, 1994, 86). In the early 1980s, some Family members took the discussion of adults pleurably manipulating the genitals of children "as encouragement to begin doing it" (Melton, 1994, 88). Also in the mid-1980s, some teens in The Family's teen training camps "paired off and were into heavy petting short of sexual intercourse" (Melton, 1994, 90). Referring, apparently, to pre-1980s incidents, Melton indicated, "[e]arlier incidents of adults having sex with children (there were no youth) brought strong reprimands. They were plainly wrong," he added, apparently referring to such sexual contact (Melton, 1994, 91). In 1989, after "[w]omen in their late teens" found themselves working with older men, Berg's partner, Maria, threatened excommunication to anyone found in adult-teen sexual arrangements. Part of Maria's fear apparently was that "younger women are both attracted to older

men and on occasion might attempt to use their attractiveness as an entrée into power" (Melton, 1994, 91-92). By 1991, however, child abuse accusations by some former members caused The Family to issue "an even stricter policy on teenage sexual activity" (Melton, 1994, 92). At several places in the footnotes, Melton was critical of another scholar's statement that many of the contentious documents mentioned adult-child sex (Melton, 1994, 275).

As these (often understated) observations stand, and without analyzing the doctrines themselves, Melton's comments about child sexual abuse might appear to support his claim that he is among those who "have gone on to write some of the most damning of critiques of various groups...when it seemed called for." Indeed, regarding the British court trial, Judge Ward indicated, "[w]hen cross-examined [Melton] felt able to go further than he had in his written report and his evidence was clear and unequivocal namely that he was in no doubt at all that oral or manual masturbation and full sexual intercourse had occurred between child and adult [sic] within The Family and that the incidence of this having occurred was higher in The Family than outside it." He also "did not shrink from expressing his horror at the excessive punishments meted out to the children." The judge indicated that, despite Melton's "reputation for being a defender of small religious groups and a defender of the freedom of religion," he found Melton "to be independent and objective..." (Ward, 1995, 217).

With these observations about Melton's findings in mind, it is exceedingly difficult to understand how he could have made the statements about The Family that he provided on the group's public relations video—a production entitled *Insight: Experts Comment on The Family and Other New Religious Movements*. He pronounced, for example, that Family members "have a very positive view of sexuality. This is something that mainstream, particularly liberal Protestants, articulate but rarely act upon, and The

Family has been the one group that we know of that doctrinally fit[s] into mainstream Christianity that's tried to act upon its ideas of positive sexuality—ideas that have gotten them in trouble at various times and places" (The Family, 1994). Speaking specifically about The Family's children—including teens who presumably had been both targets and participants in The Family's sexual activities—Melton concluded, "I think The Family teenagers compare with certainly the best of what we're turning out in mainstream society today. They are alert to what's going on in the world. They've been given a strong, loving environment within which to grow up in [sic]. They are aware, trained in terms of their formal education. They have had the benefit of living in a drug-free environment, and they've had the benefit of giving—been given a fairly strong moral code, so that they have something to face life as an adult" (The Family, 1994).

In light of what Melton knew about the group, these statements about positive sexuality, a strong moral code, and a loving environment are extraordinary. Melton objects to the fact that some critics label him and others as "cult apologists"—a term, by the way, that we did not use. With these kinds of inconsistencies, however, in his own work, it is easy to see from where the label comes. Claiming dismissively (as Melton does) this "apologist" charge as a personal attack is to avoid the more logical conclusion—Melton has brought the pejorative label upon himself.

Let us move quickly through a few other points. While we reinforce the criticisms that Balch and Langdon (1998) levelled against Lewis and Melton's Church Universal and Triumphant study (1994b), Melton tries to credit it with "a wholesale transformation of the church's organization." Almost certainly, however, that transformation is attributable to factors having nothing to do with Lewis and Melton's book (see Church Universal and Triumphant [CUT], 1997, 6). CUT suffered a financial crisis in the mid-1990s (*Billings Gazette*, 1997; Church Universal and Triumphant [CUT], 1997, 16), and recently the

organization's leader announced that she (allegedly) is suffering from Alzheimer's disease (*New York Times*, 1998).

As a fourth issue, we pointed out that Melton had been involved with an identified Scientology public relations front group called APRL. Melton, however, never responded to this issue, so we will say no more about it. Fifth and finally, we challenged the wisdom of Melton's efforts to help Scientology keep secret its upper level doctrines, and on this issue Melton said a great deal.

Melton should not doubt our academic interest in these documents, since the confidential ones relating to supposedly secret (but actually widely known) doctrines (see Kaufman, 1972, 157-164) likely shed light on crucial issues involving ideology and (possibly) claims about physical healing. (Melton insists, by the way, that all of the currently circulating confidential material had been stolen from Scientology, but he must realize that some of these same documents could have entered private hands in the late 1960s, when people signed out the confidential "Operating Thetan" documents and took them home [Kaufman, 1972, 161].) Essential to acknowledge, however, is that many of Scientology's confidential documents have nothing to do with its members' belief in a supposedly sacred realm. Instead, some documents outline the operation of its forced labour and reindoctrination program for members—the Rehabilitation Project Force (RPF). Melton is familiar with this program, since he heard Kent present an academic paper on it in 1997 (Kent, 1997a).

The RPF apparently operates in at least four American locations, as well as at sites in the United Kingdom and Denmark. Its combination of forcible confinement, physical and social maltreatment, forced confessions, and intense ideological study makes it a classic "brainwashing" program. Moreover, its operation raises serious issues about human rights abuses, and Kent has spoken about these issues to German parliamentary officials in 1997 (Kent, 1997b). (Extraordinarily, James Lewis managed to twist my discussions about

these alleged human rights abuses into "preaching my pseudoscientific gospel of hatred against minority religions.")

None of the human rights commissions and groups that commented on Germany's response to Scientology knew about the RPF. Nor did the Board of Social and Ethical Responsibility for Psychology (BSERP) of the American Psychological Association (APA) when, in 1987, it rejected a final report on mind control theories as applied to 'new religions' prepared by the Task Force on Deceptive and Indirect Methods of Persuasion and Control (DIMPAC). The memorandum forwarded to members of DIMPAC stated that the BSERP "does not believe that we have sufficient information available to guide us in taking a position on this issue" (APA, 1987)—a crucial admission that Melton omitted in his summary of the brainwashing debate in the social sciences. Viewed in this context, an effort by a researcher to introduce new material into the scholarly arena should have been a welcome event. Apparently, however, it was not a welcome event to Melton, who prevented Kent from presenting such material in a conference that Melton's Institute for the Study of American Religion (ISAR) co-sponsored with the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) in late 1996.

The conference's "call for papers" (ISAR/CESNUR, 1996) indicated that one theme was "violence in the life of new religions." Kent submitted an abstract entitled "Brainwashing' and Membership Maintenance: Confinement Systems in Two Nontraditional Religions," to Melton and stated that he would examine "physical, psychological, and socio-emotional punishments in confined or guarded camps" (Kent, 1996a). In a highly unusual response, Melton faxed back to Kent a page-long set of comments about brainwashing, and concluded them with the statement, "[y]our paper should anticipate such objections and you should be prepared for these to be raised in the discussion period" (Melton, 1993 [sic: 1996]). Kent replied with a note indicating that he was "conversant with the existing academic litera-

ture on the subject," and assured Melton that his "presentation will fit within appropriate social scientific parameters. In any case, you may find it most economical to respond to the completed paper so that you can see how I use data to unfold and support my argument" (Kent, 1996b). Only when Kent contacted Melton again shortly before the conference did he learn that Melton had omitted him from the program without notifying him that he had done so.

Melton concludes his piece indicating that "it is a pity" that Kent (supposedly) has attended only one discussion about "new religions" at the American Academy of Religion, when it is really a pity that Melton conveniently forgot that Kent actually has participated in three of them! Kent's impression from these discussions is that other colleagues also share his concerns about the objectivity of some of Melton's work. These concerns only will increase with Melton's recent announcement (in his response) that "finances for the [CUT] study were received before the study was launched," since he should have provided and elaborated upon this funding in the published study. This admission, coupled with actions such as endorsing controversial organizations like The Family, casts shadows over what often is impressive scholarship.

Rather than focusing and furthering this debate, Andy Shupe's response inflates it, and we regret that we must spend so much time correcting his overstatements and outright mistakes. We did not say that he is "stupid" (and we certainly do not think so), and we did not say that he is "somehow in bed, or in the pockets, of cults." Indeed, Krebs remains grateful to Shupe for his inclusion of her article in his edited volume on clergy malfeasance (Krebs, 1998). Her findings, however, about a religious organization's attempts to manipulate and control information about clergy pedophilia interested her in analogous information control processes among alternative religions, which culminated (in co-authorship with Kent) in articles in *SKEPTIC* (Kent and Krebs, 1998b) and the more tradi-

tionally academic *Nova Religio* (1998a).

We did say that the trust Shupe put in Scientist, lawyer, and unindicted co-conspirator Kendrick Moxon was "unwise" (Kent and Krebs, 1998b, 42) and "may have been misplaced" (41). We also raised questions about the quality of his information-sources about CAN, and we raised questions about whether he had expertise concerning CAN during the time of the Jason Scott kidnapping incident in 1991. For reasons that only he knows, Shupe did not address these issues in his response. Nor did he speak about his association with AWARE—an organization directed by a person who lied about his credentials, and whose ruse fooled Shupe. (See *Scott v. Ross et al.*, 1995a, 134.)

These questions are legitimate ones—some of which, presumably, were behind a district court judge's query to CAN's counsel about why it had not objected during the trial to any of Shupe's testimony. Failure to have done so seems to have been a significant strategic error on the part of CAN's counsel. Indeed, during the trial but when the jury was out of the room, the district court judge expressed curiosity regarding "why there were no objections to Dr. Shupe's testimony" by CAN's attorneys. The judge stated, "[a]bout 90 percent of what I heard there [in Shupe's testimony] I would have sustained objections to" (*Scott v. Ross, et. al.*, 1995b, 54; see *Scott v. Ross, et. al.*, 1998, 3223-3224). In other words, had CAN's counsel objected to Shupe's answers, then the district judge may have struck most of them.

Shupe's inattention to detail in his response to our analysis in *SKEPTIC* led him to explain how, presumably, an article of his on Germany's (alleged) discrimination against celebrities wound up in Scientology's public relations and attack magazine, *Freedom*. This article, however, is not the one that we mentioned! In two *Freedom* publications, Shupe's photo appears next to an article that discusses alleged "cult experts" whose expertise he disputes (Shupe, [1994/1995?], 1995). While both of the publications that we cited include the statement "[r]eprinted by permission,"

neither identifies the originating source nor from whom *Freedom* received permission to reprint. Perhaps Shupe is unaware that this article appeared in two issues of *Freedom* publications, yet we are very clear about them in our SKEPTIC article.

Serious issues exist with Shupe's statements about Kent and his research. Kent's published works about satanism, for example, that appeared in a highly respected, Anglo-American academic journal, *Religion*, is cautious and balanced, in stark contrast to Shupe's allusions to it. In the first of three articles, Kent wrote, "[w]ithout, of course, definitive independent confirmation of ritual abuse stories I cannot make a scientific claim that such accounts accurately represent abusive events" (Kent, 1993b, 231). Likewise, Kent concluded his third article with the caution, "[c]areful research, balanced discussions, and thoughtful presentations of evidence are the only techniques that advance scientific enterprises. We must keep these principles in mind during the debates about satanic ritual abuse.... Not only are fundamental social and scientific issues at stake, but also people's lives are affected profoundly by our conclusions" (Kent, 1994, 371-372). Especially after Shupe's response to our initial article, we hope that he takes this caution to heart in his forthcoming book on the anti-cult controversy.

Shupe should rethink the implications of Kent's co-presentation of a paper with a person (Joe Szimhart) who formerly had performed some forcible 'deprogrammings,' since Kent worked with Szimhart on the paper specifically *because he had renounced those practices* and was involved in the "voluntary exit counselling" movement, about which academics know very little. Rather than endorsing violent or illegal deprogrammings, Szimhart and Kent's paper described in part how voluntary exit counselling had become the dominant paradigm within the "countercult" movement (Szimhart and Kent, 1996).

Moreover, once again Shupe got basic facts wrong about a crucial court case in which Szimhart had been involved. In 1993,

Szimhart faced charges over his involvement in a "failed deprogramming" of a Church Universal and Triumphant member. Contrary to Shupe's incorrect statement that Szimhart "narrowly escaped a prison sentence for kidnapping and assault simply on a legal technicality," the press reported at the time that "[t]he jury in a kidnapping trial here [in Boise, Idaho] found two of the defendants, Kenneth Paolini and Joseph Szimhart not guilty of aiding and abetting a second degree kidnapping.... The jury decided not to find any of them guilty of a lesser charge of false imprisonment, a misdemeanor, which it had the option to do" (Dvorak, 1993). A subsequent press report revealed that "[t]he 12-person jury that found two of three religious deprogrammers innocent of kidnapping charges in Boise, Idaho, last week did so because they eventually came to believe that what the deprogrammers did was right.... [I]n the end, the jury believed that while Paolini and Szimhart may have broken the law, it was probably necessary in this case" (Dvorak and Ronnow, 1993). While we do not want readers to believe that Kent and Krebs necessarily hold this position about forcible deprogramming, Shupe erred when he wrote about what had occurred to a person with whom Kent had worked as co-presenter at an academic conference.

Concerning yet another factual error, we specifically and publicly challenge Shupe to provide the SKEPTIC editor either with copies of "Canadian newspapers [that] have questioned [Kent's] credibility as any kind of expert" or to retract and apologize. We doubt that Shupe will accept the challenge, since no such questioning by any Canadian newspaper about Kent has ever taken place—unless Shupe considers Scientology's *Freedom* publication a legitimate newspaper! In June, 1998, two Canadian newspapers (in Edmonton and Toronto) carried a 16-page *Freedom* insert that had a two-page attack specifically targeting Kent. Scientology seemed particularly upset about Kent's persistent discussion about alleged human rights abuses in the organization's forced labour and re-indocri-

nation programs called the RPF (which we have mentioned earlier in our response to Melton; see also Kent, 1997b). (Both newspapers subsequently printed a correction or apology indicating that they were not aware of any factual foundation for Scientology's allegations [*The Edmonton Examiner*, 1998; *The Globe and Mail*, 1998].) When a newspaper queried Kent's place of employment about any possible response the educational institution might have been contemplating regarding Scientology's attack, the University of Alberta Vice-President (Academic) responded, "I guess people will just have to judge the reputation of the Church of Scientology versus Stephen Kent and the University of Alberta. I'm not terribly concerned about the outcome" (in Rusnell, 1998). Neither are we terribly concerned about the outcome of our public challenge to Shupe.

James Lewis' attempt to "set the record straight" contributes little to the contentious issues we raise in our SKEPTIC analysis. Most of what he attributes to us are statements that we simply did not make. We analyze Lewis' scholarship in the context of arguing "that, on crucial social issues, controversial religious groups have courted researchers in order to enhance their public images, and some social scientists have participated in these efforts at the expense both of legitimate endeavors to advance knowledge according to accepted scientific standards of objectivity and of due attention to the use of their scientific expertise" (Kent and Krebs, 1998b: 36). Lewis' evasive response to our analysis only reinforces our conclusion that his advocacy on behalf of alternative religious groups at times has compromised his scholarly judgement.

Let us be clear about what we *did not say*. We did not accuse Lewis or others of "directly or indirectly accepting funds from certain minority religions." However, his co-editor, Gordon Melton, told SKEPTIC readers about receiving "finances" for their study of Church Universal and Triumphant. We neither accuse Lewis (or any other researchers) of being "cult apologist[s]" nor do we claim that Kent is a "victim of a 'cult conspiracy.'" (Indeed,

throughout our analysis we avoid use of pejorative labels against either individuals or groups.) Moreover, we did not conclude that "Scientology, The Family[,] and so forth are terrible groups like the KKK or the mafia that merit social censure." These are Lewis' words, not ours. Nor did we "misrepresent [Lewis] and [his] work" or his credentials. We specifically state that he had falsely identified himself as "James R. Lewis, Ph.D." when interfering with the publication of Kent's article on David Berg in 1993, and he only discusses his attendance at "more than one graduate institution" (about which we knew, since we had communicated with university officials at two institutions). He does not identify from which institution he received a doctorate, nor when he received it, since he certainly did not have one prior to or during 1993.

In the context of Lewis' credentials, we discussed his pre-publication intervention against one of Kent's peer-reviewed articles to the editors of *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*—an intervention he made *without having read the article itself* (Kent and Krebs, 1998b, 37). The investigation (conducted by the publication's co-editors) into his claims revealed no basis for Lewis' "concerns and allegations" (Lynn, 1993). Only the publisher himself can say what, if any, role Lewis' intervention had in blocking publication of Kent's article. Lewis' unwarranted intervention, however, merits examination on its own, especially when placed in the context of other advocacy positions he has taken for controversial religions. Even now, Lewis continues his advocacy of the Children of God/The Family by implying that Kent received Family material stolen from the Philippines. Because of the questionable circumstances under which former members removed material (and in which Kent played no role whatsoever), he has avoided using or owning any of that information. He (and the University of Alberta Library collection that he oversees) have obtained their Family sources from legitimate donations. He and others have used these sources to substantiate statements made by former members.

It is true (as Lewis claims) that Kent received material directly from The Family in 1989. Lewis neglects to mention, however, that Kent *purchased the documents with his own money*. Moreover, Lewis wrongly states, "Prof. Kent never composed a paper on the counterculture," since Kent already had published two articles on the topic before he received the material from The Family (Kent, 1987; 1988, revised reprint in 1992), and a third article after the material arrived (Kent, 1993a).

Returning to the larger question about compromised scholarship, SKEPTIC readers will want to know about another major incident (not involving The Family) in which Lewis' research and/or judgement was seriously flawed. In the introduction to his co-edited volume on Church Universal and Triumphant, Lewis prophetically stated, "[m]any scholars of stigmatized religions, myself included, have a secret fear that they will one day examine a controversial religious group, give it a clean bill of health, and later discover that they had defended the People's Temple, or worse" (in Lewis and Melton, 1994b, viii). His secret fear came true when he defended Aum Shinri Kyo.

Following Aum's March 20, 1995, Tokyo subway sarin gas attack (and another poison gas incident in 1994 that killed seven people), Lewis and three other Americans (including Melton) traveled to Japan on tickets that Aum had purchased for them. After spending three days interviewing Aum leaders and others, Lewis told a gathering of Japanese reporters that "the cult could not have produced the rare poison gas, sarin, used in both mass murder cases. Lewis said the American group determined this from photos and documents provided by Aum" (Reid, 1995, A8). Subsequently, observers around the world of the events following the Aum subway gassing gasped as investigators revealed information that contradicted the assessments offered by "prominent scholars in the specialty of new religious movements" such as Lewis and Melton.

Japanese Studies expert Ian Reader

observed, "Melton had earlier made the comment that, when the media reports scandal stories about religious movements, the substance of such stories normally proves to be less than the extent of the allegations." As, however, information became available about the actions of Aum, "the evidence showed the actions of the movement to be greater than had originally been rumored." Reader concluded, "[a]s a result of all this, not only has the reputation and image of religion in general been damaged, but so has that of its scholars..." (Reader, 1995, 2). Lewis' advocacy on behalf of what he calls "persecuted religious minorities" has contributed to this damage because, in some instances, he has allowed his research to be compromised by the very groups that he is defending.

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