– **Special Monograph Edition** –

International Journal of CULTIC STUDIES

The History of Credibility Attacks Against Former Cult Members

Stephen A. Kent, Kayla Swanson
University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

International Journal of Cultic Studies

About the *International Journal of Cultic Studies*

The *International Journal of Cultic Studies* (*IJCS*) is a refereed annual journal that publishes scholarly research on cultic phenomena across a range of disciplines and professions with a view of making research results available to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers across the world. *IJCS* seeks to advance the understanding of cultic phenomena in their relationship to individuals, families, and society, notably in their psychological, social, legal, educational, religious, and cultural dimensions.

Many definitions of the term *cult* exist, and the term has been applied to a wide range of groups. However, the *IJCS* does not advocate nor support one particular definition and will consider submissions related to the full range of perspectives on cultic phenomena and issues that emerge from a scholarly or scientific study of such phenomena, including those of harm, treatment, individual subjectivity, agency, creativity, and the boundaries between the individual and society.

IJCS publishes original empirical and theoretical work, as well as literature reviews, scholarly analyses, book reviews, and case studies across academic disciplines and applied sciences, notably in anthropology, criminology, ethics, the humanities, law, linguistics, political science, psychology, religious studies, and sociology, accepting both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

The International Journal of Cultic Studies (*IJCS*) is published by the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA). As in most scholarly journals, the views expressed in *IJCS* are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the views of *IJCS*'s editors and editorial boards or of ICSA and its directors, advisory board members, or staff. Groups researched or mentioned in articles published in *IJCS* are not necessarily cults, nor should they be seen as undoubtedly harmful.

The History of Credibility Attacks Against Former Cult Members

Stephen A. Kent, Kayla Swanson

University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Abstract[1]

For decades, academics have discussed apostates, but in the late 1970s a number of prominent sociological researchers began defining them as unreliable information sources who intended their often-embellished atrocity tales or stories to motivate agents of social control to act against their former groups. A few dissenting voices to this interpretation appeared as early as the mid-1980s, but the wholesale rejection of apostates' information became the dominant academic position among important sociologists of religion. By the early 1990s, the grand figure of sectarian studies, Bryan R. Wilson, called for objective researchers and the courts to avoid apostates entirely because their atrocity accounts supposedly were self-serving and embellished. Having tested Wilson's dismissive assertions, however, against two important court cases that pitted apostates against group members, we found that most of the apostates' information was credible, while current members often lied. A balanced approach to apostasy, therefore, calls for academics to examine closely both apostate and current-member claims, realizing that bias and accuracy can appear in either.

[1] This study is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sectarianism [FECRIS] Conference, Warsaw, Poland, May 7, 2011.

In a subdiscipline of sociology supposedly devoted to the use of the scientific method in analyzing and explaining religious beliefs and behavior, several prominent figures (especially sociologists) fostered an antiscientific research norm beginning in the late 1970s that tainted much of the research conducted on sects, cults, and alternative (or new) religions. Their approach involved the categorical dismissal of the accounts of former members' (or apostates') insights about their previous involvements in controversial religions. Some prominent researchers in the field refused to utilize former members as resources; at the same time, they criticized any articles that did so by alleging that these sources were inherently unreliable.

The researchers' refusal was not one of degree— of doubting some or even most of the information that these former members could have provided: A body of academics simply refused to receive or use *any* information from them. Beginning in the last years of the 1970s, therefore, some major sociological studies on sectarian groups likely suffered from the exclusion of insights from people whose knowledge was firsthand. This antiscientific position within the realm of the sociology of religion did not even allow researchers to use former-member accounts after they had triangulated (or replicated) the claims through additional sources. Their rejection was immediate and complete.

In this article, therefore, we attempt to analyze how this antiscientific position developed within

the field by examining scholarship (in the 1950s and before) related to it. By the late 1970s, that scholarship utilized historical sources to argue that former members provided "atrocity tales" that likely were exaggerated or simply untrue. By the late 1980s, statistically based research on former members' (called *apostates'*) accounts reinforced the idea that those people who had been "deprogrammed" or were in touch with anticult organizations were most likely to provide atrocity tales that reinforced their negative evaluation of their former groups. The position against the credibility of former members reached its pinnacle in a statement by the grand figure of sectarian research, the late Bryan Wilson (1926–2004), who stated categorically that former-member accounts were untrustworthy, and, on those grounds, neither objective researchers nor courts should accept former-member testimony.

In what amounts to a study in the history of ideas, we examine the scholarship in each of these eras. First, we identify the source of the term *atrocity tales* within sociological scholarship. Then we reexamine the historical evidence of apostate accounts that supposedly showed their unreliability, focusing on the autobiographical account written by one of Brigham Young's former wives, Ann-Eliza Young (1844–1917). Third, we summarize researchers' claims against apostates' accounts throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s. Fourth, we examine two court cases in which the accounts of former members proved to be more accurate than those of current members. Finally, we cite a recent sociological book that is taking a more balanced view of apostates' accounts, often examining them along with accounts against them by their former groups.[2]

Earlier Contemporary Scholarship on Atrocity Tales and Stories

Discussions in the English language of "atrocity tales" or "atrocity stories" has an interesting history, dating back at least to the late 1940s.[3]

What may be the first appearance of a variation on atrocity stories appeared in George Orwell's (1903–1950) 1949 novel against totalitarianism entitled *1984* (Orwell, 1949). Big Brother's oppressive government had to keep people convinced that they must sacrifice their liberties to the state because it was at war with a powerful external enemy (Eurasia) and an internal traitor (Emmanuel Goldstein). In an extended program to highlight these purported enemies' crimes, Big Brother initiated a week devoted to exposing their hateful beliefs and actions:

> The preparations for Hate Week were in full swing, and the staffs of all the ministries were working overtime. Processions, meetings, military parades, lectures, waxwork displays, film shows, telescreen programs all had to be organized; stands had to be erected, effigies built, slogans coined, songs written, rumors circulated, photographs faked. Julia's [i.e., the girlfriend/lover of the male protagonist, Winston Smith] unit in the Fiction Department had been taken off the production of novels and was rushing out a series of atrocity pamphlets. (Orwell, 1949, pp. 122–123)[4]

Note here that, in *1984*, the state was attempting to change people's minds about internal and external enemies, whereas subsequent sociological scholarship used examples of

---

1885; but this portrayal is of former followers of Zarathustra who r*eturned* to religion, not departed from it (as is the modern sociological meaning). For example, Zarathustra lamented,

> 2. 'We have again become pious' – so do those apostates confess; and some of them are still too pusillanimous thus to confess. Unto them I look into the eye,—before them I say it unto their face and unto the blush on their cheeks: Ye are those who again *pray*!

> It is however a shame to pray! Not for all, but for thee, and me, and whoever hath his conscience in his head. For *thee* it is a shame to pray!

> Thou knowest it well: the faint-hearted devil in thee, which would fain fold its arms, and place its hands in its bosom, and take it easier: —this faint-hearted devil persuadeth thee that 'there is a God!' (Nietzsche, 1883–1885/1999, LII, 2, p. 125 [italics in original])

I am unaware of Nietzsche's discussion of apostates having any influence on sociologists.
[4] We thank Dr. Susan Raine of Grant MacEwan University for providing this reference to us.

atrocity tales as the attempts of former members of controversial religions to change government and citizens' minds about the existence of (largely internal but to some extent also external) threats to freedom, mental health, and democracy.

No evidence exists that Orwell's mention of atrocity pamphlets had any impact upon subsequent sociological literature. An article, however, that appeared 5 years later in the new magazine for political and cultural commentary, *Dissent*, was to impact decades of sociological writing. In an article entitled "The Age of the Informer," sociologist Lewis Coser (1913–2003) quoted the famous German social philosopher, Max Scheler (1874–1928), who had written about apostates in 1915, and which reappeared in a collection of essays (Coser, 1954, p. 250; also see Coser, 1956, p. 162, no. 15, and the editor's and translator's Preface in Scheler, 1915/1923/1961, p. 33):[5]

> The term "apostate" is not properly applied to a person who, in the course of his development, is rapidly changing his religious or other (political, juridical, philosophical) convictions; not even if the change occurs not in a continuous manner, but suddenly and in a rupture-like fashion. Rather is the apostate a man who, even in his new state of belief, is spiritually living not primarily in the content of that faith, in the pursuit of goals appropriate to it, but only in the struggle against the old faith and for the sake of its negation. The affirmation of the new content is, with him, not undertaken for its own sake, but is only a continual chain of acts of revenge against his spiritual past—a past which actually keeps him in fetters and with respect to which the new content functions merely as a possible point of reference from which he negates and rejects the old one. Therefore the apostate, considered as a religious type, is the extreme opposite of the "reborn"

for whom the new content of faith and the corresponding new central life-process as such are significant and valuable. (Scheler, 1915/1923/1961, translated by Coser, in Coser, 1954, p. 250)

Years later, Sociologist David Bromley (b. 1941) indicated that he obtained his initial idea about apostates from this 1954 article (Bromley, 1998b, p. 20), although he differed from Coser and Scheler's social psychological approach by taking "a broader, more structural perspective" (Bromley, 1998b, p. 20).

Coser reiterated his argument about apostates in 1956, also in the context of Scheler's earlier work:

> We maintained earlier that conflict with an out-group defines the boundaries of the in-group. Conversely, renegadism threatens to break down the boundary lines of the established group. Therefore the group must fight the renegade with all its might since he threatens symbolically, if not in fact, its existence as an ongoing concern. In the religious sphere, for example, apostasy strikes at the very heart of a church, hence the violence of denunciation of the apostate contained in the pronouncements of early Church fathers or in rabbinical statements from the time of the early Maccabees onward. (Coser, 1956, p. 69–70)

In this passage, Coser provided an opportunity for subsequent sociologists to examine the literature that groups wrote against their apostates, but sociologists would ignore that possibility for decades.

Five years later, in 1961, an English translation of Scheler's book *Ressentiment* appeared in English translation (Coser edited it and provided the introduction). English speakers, therefore, were able to see (in translation) the passage that had inspired Coser (see Scheler, 1915/1923/1961, pp. 66–67, in wording that differs slightly from Coser's 1954 translation). According to Scheler, an apostate is a former member who is out for revenge—out to damage

---

[5] Coser (1954, p. 250) gave the date for the collection of Scheler's essays as 1922. But in Coser (1956, p. 162, item 15), he gave the date as 1923.

the group to which he once belonged. Scheler made no comments, however, about whether the allegations that apostates made were true or false. Among sociologists, judgment on that issue would come later.

In 1960, an historical analysis of nativistic literature during (and somewhat after) the second quarter of the 1800s established the intellectual context in which future sociologists would evaluate critical accounts by former new-religions members in the late 1970s and 1980s. The analysis covered anti-Masonic, anti-Catholic, and anti-Mormon literature, with the anti-Mormon literature asserting that Mormons during this era "were undermining political and economic freedom in the West" (Davis, 1960, p. 205). That literature portrayed Mormon leaders as being especially cunning, thereby attracting the "projective fantasies of women" (Davis, 1960, p. 218; also see p. 217). As an example of the claim, David Brion Davis (b. 1927) summarized a statement by Ann-Eliza Young this way:

> Ann Eliza Young dramatized her seduction by the Prophet Brigham Young, whose almost superhuman powers enchanted her and paralyzed her will. Though she submitted finally only because her parents were in danger of being ruined by the Church, she clearly indicated that it was an exciting privilege to be pursued by a Great Man. (Davis, 1960, p. 218, citing Young, 1875, pp. 433, 440–441, 458)

Although a tinge of skepticism seemed embedded in Davis's summary of Young's enchantment, he neither supported nor dismissed it, and he made no other mention of Young or her published work.

Absent from Davis's analysis of nineteenth century anti-Mormon and other nativist literature was the term *atrocity tales*, which could have provided a label covering much of what opponents wrote about their targets. The term's first appearance in academic literature appeared 3 years after Davis's article, not in an historical analysis but rather in a sociological classic about the social burden of stigmas. The sociological classic was Erving Goffman's (1922–1982)

1963 book-length analysis entitled *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. In the single instance of the term's usage, Goffman wrote,

> Often those with a particular stigma sponsor a publication of some kind which gives voice to shared feelings, consolidating and stabilizing for the reader his sense of the realness of "his" group and his attachment to it. Here the ideology of the members is formulated—their complaints, their aspirations, their politics. The names of well-known friends and enemies of the "group" are cited, along with information to confirm the goodness or the badness of these people. Success stories are printed, [including] tales of heroes of assimilation who have penetrated new areas of normal acceptance. Atrocity tales are recorded, recent and historic, of extreme mistreatment by normals. Exemplary moral tales are provided in biographical and autobiographical form illustrating a desirable code of conduct for the stigmatized. (Goffman, 1963, p. 25)

The prose is turgid, but Goffman seemed to be saying that deviants often develop publications (such as magazines) that allow them to present themselves and their groups in positive lights, sometimes at the expense of "normal" members of society who oppressed them. When sociologists in the late 1970s rediscovered the *atrocity tales* term, they altered Goffman's usage from meaning mistreatment by society to alleged mistreatment by the former members of sects, cults, and new religions.

Deprogrammings and Obligatory Accounts of Atrocity Tales

As background to the staunch opposition that developed within the realm of sociology of religion to atrocity tales, researchers should keep in mind the generally negative reaction that some academics had to the widespread anticult activity begun in the early 1970s and that continued throughout the 1980s and beyond—*deprogramming*. This practice involved the

(often forcible) extraction of young adults from their controversial groups by people usually hired by, and working with, parents concerned about their offspring's involvement. In North America and throughout the Western world, cults tore into public awareness in the early 1970s, with groups such as the Hare Krishnas, the Tony and Susan Alamo Foundation, the Children of God, and the Unification Church attracting hundreds, and in some cases, thousands, of young converts. Certainly, controversial groups such as Scientology existed before this time, but the early 1970s saw numerous spiritual and other ideological claimants attracting youth who had grown alienated from a range of societal values (see Kent, 2001c). As youth joined any one of numerous groups during that period, they often cut ties with their families and personal histories. Parents feared, often quite legitimately (see Patrick with Dulack, 1976, pp. 260–264), for their loved ones' safety. By 1971, a number of these parents in North America turned to Ted Patrick, a man who claimed that he could deprogram (see Patrick with Dulack, 1976, p. 61) these youth out of their new commitments and back to a healthier state of mind. No figures exist about how many deprogrammings Patrick and others performed over the years, but they numbered at least in the high hundreds and almost certainly into the thousands. (David Bromley, for example, identified 397 "coercive deprogrammings" that occurred against members of the Unification Church between January 1973 and July 1986, although we do not know who the deprogrammers were [Bromley, 1988, p. 195]). In addition to (and often inspired by) Patrick, others also became deprogrammers on either full-time or part-time bases (see Kent and Szimhart, 2002).

Patrick's extraction of youth from these groups took many forms, from violent (see Patrick with Dulack, 1976, pp. 67; 100; 207–208) to relatively noncoercive. If and when, however, he "convinced" someone to deconvert, then part of his strategy to further cement the person's renunciation was to get the person to sign a statement denouncing his or her former group (see Patrick and Dulack, 1976, pp. 176; 230–236), and (if possible) to call a press conference

in which the new former member continued the denunciation. Patrick's assumption was that youth were tricked or manipulated into joining and highly pressured into remaining, and the recent former members often would reproduce these perspectives in their own stories.

In reaction to former members' stories of negativity and manipulation, however, sociologists reacted in two ways. One way had a positive impact upon the study of new religions. Sociologists developed a number of conversion models, only one of which involved coercion and deception. Among the most popular was a sixfold model by John Lofland and L. Norman Skonovd, in which coercive conversions were only one of the types (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981). All five of the other models had converts playing varying degrees of active involvement in the conversion process itself.[6] These new models, therefore, represented some of the complexities around the conversion process that were not captured in most of the deconversion stories those recently deprogrammed were telling.

The other reaction that some academics took was to turn around Patrick's assumptions about trauma. In Patrick's model, one's involvement in a high-demand group was exceedingly stressful, and the deprogramming freed the person from that stressful environment. Some academics, however, argued that, in the accounts of former members, the deprogrammings, not the actual involvements with the groups, were the causes of stress. Deprogramming, therefore, and not the groups, supposedly were the problem. The stories that the former members told always and only focused on negative aspects of their former group; hence, they were atrocity tales that completely neglected to discuss positive aspects of the group. As biased stories, therefore, these so-called atrocity tales were not acceptable as accurate renditions.

---

[6] The six types of conversion that Lofland and Skonovd identified were *intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist,* and *coercive.* Each type differed according to five variables: *degree of social pressure; temporal duration; level of affective arousal; affective content;* and the *belief-participation sequence.* One also might wish to add *hypnotist* as a conversion motif, but the literature on that type never appears in sociological discussions.

The issue about the accuracy of these obligatory public denunciations after deprogrammings was even more problematic after a few former members criticized their former groups, thanked the deprogrammers, but then later rejoined the groups they had denounced (see Patrick with Dulack, 1976, pp. 176–178). Both cult defenders and other observers had to ask, "If things were as bad inside the groups as they said, then why did they return?" The assumption, therefore, was that former members had made their initial denunciations under duress, and that (at the very least) their former involvement had positive aspects.

An early, and dramatic, example of this pattern—of a deconverted person rejoining a group that she had denounced—took place in Toronto, Canada in 1975 and 1976. In March 1975, Canadian newspapers carried stories about how Ted Patrick worked with the parents of 19-year-old Linda Epstein to trick her into entering a hotel room so that he and his associates could deprogram her from the Hare Krishnas. As she recounted later, her father did not use force to lure her into the room: "'My father [was not] yanking me or touching me or anything, he just [took] me by the shoulder and we [went] into the room. [There was] nothing there, just the two beds'" (Epstein, quoted in Blatchford, 1975, p. 1). Immediately thereafter, Epstein saw the deprogrammers, and soon they began to work on her.

After 3 nights, she signed a prepared statement, which read (in part),

> "I was taught to hate my church, and that education was the Devil and was to be scorned. In fact, my mind was so controlled by the leaders of the Hare Krishna movement that if they ordered me to KILL my own parents, I would have done so. Under their pressure, I became totally unable to rationalize." (quoted in Schachter, 1975, p. C1 [capitalization in original])

The prepared statement continued,

> "I once again feel like a useful member of society. If, in any event, the Hare Krishna movement or any other sect or cult psychologically or physically kidnaps me back, I am requesting immediate action by the authorities; to come and physically remove me from this, because, in such case, regardless of what I may say or do at the time, I will not be acting under my free will." (quoted in Blatchford, 1975, p. 2)

Copies of this statement went to the American Federal Bureau of Investigation and Canadian Attorney General's Department in Ottawa (Blatchford, 1975, p. 1). At the subsequent press conference, Epstein's father and two of Patrick's associates "railed against the movement" (Schachter, 1975, p. C1).

In late December 1975, however, Linda Epstein rejoined the Krishnas, subsequently swearing an affidavit that she rejoined "through [her] own volition" (as quoted in Harpur, 1976, p. B1). At a press conference in early 1976, Epstein indicated "she was never happy at home and 'wanted more than anything' to devote her life to finding God" (Epstein, as quoted in Harpur, 1976, p. B1). Reflecting back upon the denunciation of the group that she had signed, she claimed that she had done so "'under duress,'" and that "'it in no way reflected [her] true feelings'" (Epstein, as quoted in Harpur, 1976, p. B1).

By no means should the Epstein case be taken as indicative that all statements former members make after deprogrammings are inaccurate; but certainly one can see how Epstein could say that she gave her initial statement under coercion. In any case, the deprogramming controversy provided a backdrop against which some sociologists of religion launched their assertions against apostates' credibility. In 1980, for example, the two sociologists (Anson Shupe [1948–2015] and David Bromley [b. 1941]) who most widely propagated the position that apostates' accounts were unreliable formed their conclusion partly in reaction against forcible deprogramming:

> coercive deprogramming was marked by abducting and detaining members of "cults" against their will, haranguing them for extended periods of time under emotionally charged conditions, and

then achieving in such individuals rapid redefinitions of their former religious experiences and beliefs that culminated in their apostasy. (Shupe & Bromley, 1980, p. 122)

In the context of forcible deprogramming, clearly they concluded that apostates' accounts likely were unreliable, and this conclusion permeated their scholarship on the believability of former members.

Scholarship on Apostates and Atrocity Tales and Stories in the Late 1970s and the 1980s

Shupe and Bromley's disbelief in apostates' accounts already had appeared in scholarship the year before they commented specifically on deprogramming. In one of the earliest scholarly publications to utilize the *atrocity tales* term in the context of alternative religions, they were two of the three authors of a 1979 article about how former members of the Unification Church, along with their supporters, used such accounts to delegitimize the organization and justify aggressive, social-control actions (such as deprogramming) against it. Within academic literature, this meaning was new. First, research on nineteenth-century nativistic movements (which admittedly did not use the *atrocity tales* term) spoke about the range of allegations that mainstream society members used against Mormons, Catholics, and Freemasons. Second, Goffman spoke about atrocity tales that deviant groups identified (often in publications) of oppressive actions taken by the dominant society against their members. Third, perhaps for the first time in the academic literature, atrocity tales became presentations about real or *imaginary* actions that former members of new, controversial religions make against their former groups. In a crucial values judgement, sociologists David Bromley, Anson Shupe, Jr., and J. D. Ventimiglia asserted:

> It is not of importance whether the allegations made in atrocity stories are actually true or false. The intent of such tales is not to present the complexity of events dispassionately but rather . . . to make the event and individual stand out

from the ordinary. . . . Whether such stories represent some kernel of "truth" is not only difficult to validate in many cases but is also irrelevant. The stories gain their persuasiveness and motivating power from their larger–than-life quality. (Bromley, Shupe, & Ventimiglia, 1979, pp. 43–44)

These few sentences represent the attitude that many new religious scholars would take to toward former-member accounts: Ignore them as possible sources of information (since validating their claim often was difficult). Instead, academics came to view the accounts as stigma-creating allegations made to discredit people's former groups that allegedly used manipulation and deception to convert them. In so doing, these academics avoided examining the tales as sources of potentially accurate information about what life was like on the inside of various groups. Historical fact lost out to sociological generalization, as sociologists dismissed atrocity tales as possible sources of information about sectarian life.

Later in 1979, David Bromley and Anson Shupe published the first article to link their atrocity-tales concept to one of the most important late-nineteenth-century writings against Mormonism by a former member, Ann-Eliza Young. Entitled "The Tnevnoc Cult" (and getting its name from reversing the word *convent*), they discussed in the article what they claimed were various nineteenth-century atrocity tales written against Mormons, Catholics, and Freemasons (as Davis had done in greater detail nearly twenty years earlier). After they summarized the supposed characteristics of Catholic nunneries as portrayed in the atrocity tales of the day, the sociologists argued that

> The stereotypes and litany of charges leveled against contemporary "new religions" also are remarkably reminiscent of allegations against the earlier "new religions": political subversion, unconditional loyalty of members to authoritarian leaders, brutalizing of members, sexual indiscretions, and possession of mysterious, extraordinary powers. . . .

And the atrocity stories told by apostates from earlier groups (Hopkins, 1830; Monk, 1836; Young, 1875) read much like the lurid tales told by former members of contemporary "new religions." (Bromley & Shupe, 1979, p. 365)

Soon afterward, they added, "the repression of religious movements during the nineteenth century [was] the result of undisguised xenophobic zeal and religious bigotry rather than . . . a legitimate response to any serious threat" (Bromley & Shupe, 1979, p. 365).

Careful examination of their citations, however, which involve alleged apostate publications, reveals that one of the three was *not* written by an apostate—Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery* (1836). It was instead a fictional publication designed to pass as a former-member account. Of the two remaining books that they cited,[7] one apostate book stood out then, and stands out now, as a reasonably accurate portrayal of serious threats to contemporaneous society, which one would not have expected, given Bromley and Shupe's dismissal of it.

The book in question is Ann-Eliza Young's 1875 memoir[8] of her life as a second-generation Mormon, which included polygamous marriage to the second Mormon leader, Brigham Young (1801–1877). This book's title leaves no doubt about its basic arguments: *Wife No. 19, The Story of a Life in Bondage, Being a Complete Exposé of Mormonism, and Revealing the Sorrows, Sacrifices, and Sufferings of Women in Polygamy.* It is very important for numerous reasons, and seemingly undercuts the claims of so many sociologists that apostate or former-member accounts cannot be trusted. First, while Young was not intending her account to be an exhaustive history of Mormonism, many of the claims she made about the group from the 1830s onward have withstood the scrutiny of

scholarship—so much so that modern scholars cite her book (for example, Compton, 1997, p. 419; Roberts, 2008, pp. 156, 265–266, 312, 334; Smith, 2008, pp. 118, 263).

Second, Young discussed aspects of early Mormonism that indeed were clear and very real social threats. She presented material on the Danites, for example, who were a band of renegade Mormons whose initial purpose was to expel apostates from association with the group (see Young, 1875, p. 268).[9] Young believed that these renegades resurrected during and around the years of Brigham Young's Mormon Reformation (Young, 1875, pp. 181–199) and were involved in crimes such as the Mountain Meadows massacre (1876, pp. 268–276).[10]

---

[7] One of these two books was Hiram Hopkins's *Renunciation of Free Masonry* (1830). For a brief analysis of the reasons that Hiram Hopkins's turn against Freemasonry embodied widespread sentiments of the day, see Bullock, 1989.

[8] For biographical information about Young, see Derounian-Stodola, 2009, 2014; also see Wallace, 1961.

[9] Young (1875) described the Danites or Destroying Angels as "a band of men regularly organized for the purpose of putting obnoxious persons out of the way" (p. 268). This description fits best the initial purpose of the Danites. An historian stated it thus: "The original purpose of the order [i.e., Danites] appears to have been to aid the Saints [i.e., Mormons] of Caldwell [County, Missouri] in their determination to be free from dissenter influence" (Gentry, 1974, p. 427). Second, "with the flight of the dissenters on June 19, 1838, the Danites lost their reason for existence. A new purpose had to be found to justify their continuation. The warlike threats continually breathed against the Saints by their Missouri neighbors furnished just the objective, namely, protection against mob violence" (Gentry, 1974, p 427). "In time, the order . . . assumed a third purpose, one entirely foreign to the spirit of the Church: retaliation against those who committed depredations against defenseless Saints" (Gentry, 1974, p. 428). The order appears to have had 300 members (Gentry, 1974, p. 445, item 97), and operated for about 5 months, from around June to November 1838 (Brodie, 1971, p. 215; Gentry, 1974, p. 450). The biographer of Joseph Smith, Fawn Brodie (1915–1981), described "the flight of the dissenters" to which Gentry referred. Dissenters Oliver Cowdery, John and David Whitmer, and Lyman Johnson knew of a fiery sermon [called the "salt sermon"] delivered by Sidney Rigdon, in which "he secretly warned the dissenters to flee Far West." This sermon may have been a signal for the Danites to act against them (Brodie, 1971, p. 218). The dissenters left for Clay County in order to hire a non-Mormon attorney, and when they were returning home, "they met their families on the road, bearing a tale of Danite persecution that the men could not believe possible as coming from their former brethren. The Danites had surrounded their homes, ordered the wives to pack their blankets and leave the county immediately, and threatened death to anyone who returned to Far West. They had been robbed, according to John Whitmer, of all their goods save bedding and clothes" (Brodie, 1971, p. 219). Also on the Danites, see LeSueur, 1987, pp. 37–47, 114–115, 120, 201, 208, 219, and 226.

[10] A number of Mormon actions that took place against non-Mormons (or Gentiles) may have served as the basis for Young's belief. For example, violent Mormon John D. Lee was involved in the initial Danite order (Gentry, 1974, p. 432) and then was a prominent figure in the Mormon raid and murders (of more than 60 people [see Brooks, 1962, pp. xiii-xxiv]; MacKinnon, 2007, p. 124, puts the number of deaths at 120) at Mountain Meadows. For Lee's account of the massacre, dictated to his lawyer as he waited for a

A modern historian called the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857 "an atrocity," one

> in which a detachment of the Utah territorial militia [of Mormons] (Nauvoo Legion) supported by Indian auxiliaries executed about 120 disarmed men, women, and children, the largest organized mass murder of white civilians in American history until the 1995 Oklahoma city bombing. (MacKinnon, 2007, p. 124)

MacKinnon also identified Brigham Young's formation of the doctrine of blood atonement, which involved paying for certain "sins" with one's blood (Young, 1876, p. 263). A contemporary historian concluded, "as the doctrine evolved under Brigham Young, it would have a powerful—and confusing—influence" (Bagley, 2002, p. 50).

Young correctly mentioned the "Mormon War" (sometimes called the Utah War.[11] [Young, 1875, p. 270; see also MacKinnon, 2007, p. 122]), which one historian described as "an armed conflict over power and authority in Utah between leaders of the LDS Church and the administration of President James Buchanan," which lasted from 1857 to 1858 (MacKinnon, 2007, p. 122, n. 3). Excluding those killed in the Mountain Meadows Massacre, some 20 people died in this war, contrary to claims by some historians that the war was bloodless (MacKinnon, 2007, p. 125). And of course, Ann-Eliza Young attacked polygamy, paying attention to the toll that it took on many of the women in the context of the iron-hand rule of Mormon founder Joseph Smith, then his successor, Brigham Young (Young, 1876, pp. 440–565).

Of particular note was Ann-Eliza Young's discussion of Brigham Young's disastrous Mormon emigration program, which required devout migrants to travel to Utah pulling and pushing handcarts that had a 17-pound baggage limit and a pound-a-day ration of flour (Young, 1876, pp. 200–227). At least 220 Mormons died in the handcart procession of 1856, making it "the greatest disaster in the whole pageant of westward migration across America" (Roberts, 2008, p. 6). The contemporary author who studied the ensuing tragedy proclaimed,

> In concurrence with Ann-Eliza Young, I have to conclude that the 1856 handcart debacle was the worst blunder of the Prophet's long career—worse in terms of human suffering even than his dogged championing of polygamy, a diehard clinging to a hopeless cause that delayed Utah statehood until 1896 and helped bring the territory to the brink of war against the United States. (Roberts, 2008, p. 334)

Young, therefore, had discussed atrocity tales, but many of those tales involved incidents that catalyzed an American president to dispatch troops toward the new territory, and others that were Brigham Young's violent reaction to that

---

court-ordered execution for his role in it, see Lee, 1877, pp. 123–259.

Brigham Young initiated the Reformation in the fall of 1856 and emphasized "confession, repentance, atonement, forgiveness, rebaptism, and purification—but cast [it] in rhetoric so violent that it is problematic to this day" (MacKinnon. 2007, p. 128). Although "no reported killings have been linked to this [Reformation] discourse" (MacKinnon, 2007, p. 128), the years both before and after the Reformation were particularly dangerous ones for apostates and "Gentiles." Hostile, even life-threatening events during these years include

> an unsuccessful attempt to murder two non-Mormons traveling south in February 1857 authorized by secret letters from Brigham Young to his southern bishops. A miscarried plot succeeded in inadvertently wounding four other men. Using these same letters, Springville's bishop Aaron Johnson ordered the execution of "apostates" in March 1857, resulting in three deaths and an attempt on a fourth. Six months later, the Mountain Meadows Massacre occurred in an atmosphere of fear, threats, and heated rhetoric. In October, Richard E. Yates, a civilian mountaineer and trader, was killed in Echo Canyon after being captured by the Nauvoo Legion; and George W. Clark, a deserter from the Utah Expedition, was lynched on Smith's Fork of the Green River by parties unknown. In November 1857, six members of the Aiken party from California were attacked near Nephi; five men were killed and stripped of their possessions. (MacKinnon, 2007, p. 126)

Even during the period of these lethal events, some Mormons thought that the Danites were behind them (Bagley, 2002, pp. 76, 347; also see p. 112). Ann Eliza Young wrote about the Aiken party attack (Young, 1875, p. 270) and the Yates murder (Young, 1875, p. 278).

[11] Some people also use the term *Mormon War* to describe the 1838 skirmishes between Mormons and their non-Mormon neighbors in northwestern Missouri. By the time it ended, 20 Mormons had died in military action, one was beaten to death, and an unspecified number were killed from exposure after being driven from their homes. One Missourian died in battle, and about a dozen were wounded (LeSueur, 1987, p. 257).

dispatch (probably including the Mountain Meadows massacre). Certainly what she described were legitimate social threats.

Striking about Young's account of polygamy is its relevance for today—more than 140 years after she published it. In recent years, we see this book as one of the early outpourings of accounts of women (and now, a few men) who have left polygamy—what is now fundamentalist Mormon polygamy.[12] Like Young, these contemporary accounts still speak about tyrannical male leaders, emotionally battered women, and underage marriages. Then, as now, these issues were and are serious societal threats, not apostate fabrications fueling an unwarranted moral panic. In contrast to the conclusion of Bromley and Shupe—that "the repression of religious movements during the nineteenth century [was] the result of undisguised xenophobic zeal and religious bigotry rather than . . . a legitimate response to any serious threat" (Bromley and Shupe, 1979, p. 365; see also Shupe, 1998, p. 211), Young's autobiography identified and discussed serious issues that surrounded the emerging Mormon faith. Rather than Bromley and Shupe's publication on the Tnevnoc cult serving as a foundational article in the movement within the sociology of religion to discount apostates' accounts, social scientists could have used it to show how accurate and valuable some apostate accounts can be. Regardless of what could have been, the Bromley and Shupe article about the Tnevnoc cult became one of the early contributions to two strains of sociological scholarship—one that dismissed apostate accounts as unreliable *atrocity tales,* and a second that portrayed modern *cult* concerns as part of another moral panic that might even be hindering new groups from assimilating.

Two years later, in 1981, Bromley and Shupe published a book about the so-called new religions that used scholarship to target a popular audience. The sociologists' discussion about apostates revealed their interpretive focus on the societal role that disgruntled former members played as providers of atrocity tales. They asserted that these former members and their parents used these tales both to explain their previous involvements and to provide "evidence" for justifying punitive actions by social-control agents:

> Some ex-members, or what scholars call "apostates," tell their tales of atrocities that include lurid themes of exploitation, manipulation, and deception. They and their stories, which may be true, false, or embellished, serve several important uses. Aside from justifying the family's desperate and coercive actions [i.e., deprogramming] and avoiding any public stigma attached to both family and individual, such stories become evidence that other opponents of new religions can point to in seeking laws, police action, and other remedies against the groups. (Bromley and Shupe, 1981, p. 199)

It mattered not if any of the apostates' tales were true (about harsh or deplorable living, or working conditions within some groups); only what mattered was how the perpetrators of these accounts, their parents, and societal officials used them to repress these new religious expressions.

In that same year (1981), Shupe published a book chapter that took the social constructivist interpretation that he and Bromley made in the Tnevnoc cult article to its logical conclusion. Having argued that nineteenth-century apostate tales were not responses to legitimate threats but instead were examples of "xenophobic zeal and religious bigotry" (Bromley and Shupe, 1979, p. 365), now he asserted that these accounts lacked all credibility:

> From a sociological perspective informed by history, it . . . suggests the generalization . . . that anti-movements seeking to repress certain groups eagerly recruit apostates who will piously recount their exploitation and thus provide evidence, however embellished and exaggerated, that repression is

---

[12] Among many others, see Jessop (with Palmer), 2007; Palmer & Perrin, 2004; Solomon, 1984; Spencer, 2009; and Wall (with Pulitzer), 2008. I can only assume, but cannot prove, that Musser, with Cook, had Ann-Eliza Young in mind when they titled their book *The Witness Wore Red: The 19th Wife Who Brought Polygamous Cult Leaders to Justice* (2013).

justified. Failing to recruit such persons, they will manufacture them out of little more than imagination guided by prejudice. (Shupe, 1981, p. 218)

One source that Shupe cited as an example of his assertions was Ann-Eliza Young's *Wife No. 19* (Shupe, 1981, p. 218). Now apostate tales merely were embellished, exaggerated, prejudicial imaginings, possibly manufactured by oppositional, pronormative groups. They completely lacked credibility.

Although (according to the emerging sociological account) atrocity tales lacked credibility, they did provide glimpses into the fears of the established social order. Shupe, writing in conjunction with his frequent academic partner, David Bromley, asserted this point, which shifted focus away from any examination of possible truth claims within apostate accounts, after he had indicated that, through atrocity tales, apostates

> have played a key role in shaping public perception of and reaction to the new religions. Apostates have also played a major role in discrediting earlier "new religions" such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Mormons, Shakers, and Jehovah's Witnesses. It is the historical re-creation of this role at those times when the established social order perceives a threat to its interests that lends sociological significance to the analysis of apostasy and the atrocity tales that apostates relate. (Shupe and Bromley, 1981, p. 180)

The authors gave no credence to the use of apostates' tales as windows into high-demand groups, but saw them merely as reflections of broad social tensions.

In 1983, a missed opportunity to see atrocity tales as windows into a high-demand sect (the Unification Church) occurred in another article by Bromley, Shupe, and Ventimiglia. They realized that "an argumentative process" occurred "between the threatened group and the alleged violators of its interests." The authors added that "atrocity stories" constitute "a major weapon in such struggles" (Bromley, Shupe, &

Ventimiglia, 1983, p. 139). They identified atrocity tales that contained allegations involving value violations, psychological violations, physical and economic abuses, relationship issues with nonmembers, political-legal atrocities, and cultural violations, but they did not examine any of them for possible probative value about life within the Unification Church (Bromley, Shupe, & Ventimiglia, 1983). Nor did they identify parallel allegations by the group that may have appeared against the disgruntled defectors.

A few researchers in the 1980s and early 1990s, however, were not swayed by Bromley and Shupe's dismissive approach to former members' accounts. For example, in 1985, prominent British sociologist James Beckford indicated,

> I reject the idea that ex-members' accounts can all be subsumed under the heading of 'atrocity tales.' It would certainly be indefensible to rely on them exclusively for information about the structure or functioning of [new religious movements], but it is equally indefensible to deny that their accounts can tell us anything interesting about the social position of ex-members. (Beckford, 1985, p. 146)

Beckford's willingness, however, to listen to former-member accounts (and also accounts of disapproving parents of young adults in the Unification Church) led some people to label him as an anticultist (Beckford, 1985, pp. 146–147).

Furthermore, in that same year (1985), sociologist of religion Robert Balch (b. 1945) may have been the first academic to raise questions specifically about Bromley and Shupe's blanket dismissal of former members' accounts:

> Charges against cults are dismissed as "horror stories" publicized by anti-cult groups to discredit unconventional religions.

> Sometimes, however, the horror stories turn out to be true but Bromley and Shupe pay little attention to that fact.

Instead, their strategy is to show that such incidents are either atypical in new religions or common in the rest of society. (Balch, 1985, p. 26)

Soon he added,

> While I appreciate their effort to counter the impression that cults are somehow uniquely different and dangerous, I wonder if Woodward and Bernstein [who were *Washington Post* reporters] ever would have broken the Watergate case if they took the same approach to government that Bromley and Shupe use with cults. (Balch, 1985, p. 26)

Far too many sociologists ignored Balch's admonition to take seriously former members' accounts as information sources about the groups they left, and (as we soon shall see) nearly thirteen years later he would chide colleagues again for not doing so.

Marybeth Ayella was one of the few sociologists of religion who took to heart both Beckford's and Balch's balanced approach to apostate/former-member accounts. Ayella's 1993 essay on methodology concerning the study of these groups highlighted the problem of former-member accounts within her discussion of sampling:

> New religious movements (NRM) researchers have often described leavers of cult groups as "apostates," and they discount their accounts of their entry, life, and exit from the group as being valid sources of data on the group, as being biased—as being no more than "atrocity tales" cultivated in deprogramming sessions. On the other hand, they often accept accounts from current members as being acceptable sources of information on the group. (Ayella, 1993, p. 114)

Ayella's solution to the issue of credibility, however, for either group was the same: "to recognize the contextual construction of individual accounts of participation and leave-taking—that is, the fact that such accounts are strongly shaped by individuals' current reference groups" (Ayella, 1993, p. 114). Although these discussions about credibility did not mention the very real ethical issue that current members of some groups will be afraid to say anything even remotely critical about their respective groups for fear of reprisal, the general principle about talking to both current and former members if possible seems sound.

The year after Ayella's methodological discussion, sociologist of religion Stephen A. Kent (b. 1951) published an article about how Children of God (COG) members misattributed sanctified power and authority in the group's founder David Berg and his writings. Kent concluded the article by commenting directly on the apostates' debate:

> 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 "atrocity tales" [citing Bromley, Shupe, & Ventimiglia, 1979], the examples that 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 with new and more trustworthy interpretive frameworks. (Kent, 1994b, p. 41)

Despite these few dissenting voices, many social scientists of religion in the 1980s and into the 1990s not only disbelieved that nineteenth-

century apostate accounts might contain any kernels of truth; they also had completely dismissed both them and modern former members' accounts except as evidence of nativistic prejudice.

In one of the leading sociology-of-religion journals of the day, *Sociological Analysis*, James R. Lewis (b. 1948) concluded "that current cult 'captivity' tales (which constitute the bulk of the anti-cult literature) are, like Catholic and Mormon captivity tales, untrustworthy descriptions of their respective religious groups" (Lewis, 1989, p. 388). The implication was that scholars should dismiss former-member accounts out of hand, since they were (by their very nature) unreliable. Apparently, no reason existed even to examine them for accuracy.

Worth noting, however, about the two sources on Mormonism that Lewis used is that they never mentioned anything about Ann-Eliza Young's arguments against early Mormonism or Brigham Young. One of his sources, which was on Mormon images in nineteenth-century American literature (Arrington & Haupt, 1968) never mentioned Young's work (quite correctly, since it was not a novel). The other source was the first edition of a widely used Mormon history (Arrington & Bitton, 1979). Mention of Ann-Eliza Young's critical observation and evaluations of Mormonism, however, never could have appeared in that source, since coauthor Leonard Arrington (1917–1999) received permission from all three members of the Latter-day Saints' First Presidency (Arrington, 1998, p. 12) to write the book and sent a copy of the completed work (coauthored with Mormon historian David Bitten) to the First Presidency, which did not raise any objections to its content (Arrington. 1998, p. 187). However accurate they might have been, critical comments about Brigham Young from his ex-wife would not have passed censorial muster.[13]

Lewis used the findings from this 1989 article to participate in the blockage of an article on the Children of God that at the time was forthcoming in 1993. One of the authors of this study had the page proofs of an article that examined the psychosocial origins of the group's leader, David Berg (1919–1994). Children of God leadership learned about the forthcoming publication and (without being able to read it, since it was still in page proofs) initiated a campaign to block it. In this effort, they obtained a lawyer, who wrote a letter of protest to the publication's editors, along with a letter by one of the leaders. The third party who wrote to block the publication on the group's behalf was James R. Lewis, who had a coedited volume (along with Gordon Melton [b. 1942]) scheduled to appear on the group later in the year. In wording that revealed he had not actually read the forthcoming study, Lewis asserted,

> There are many points on which [Kent's] research is questionable. I have, for example, been informed that Prof. Kent relied heavily on information obtained from hostile former members of The Family (A.K.A. the Children of God) for this paper. Research on former members of controversial religious groups (e.g., my "Apostates and the Legitimation of Repression," *Sociological Analysis*, Winter 1989) has, however, demonstrated that such limited subsamples are non-representative, which calls into the question the objectivity of his entire study. (letter from Lewis to Lynn, March 4, 1993; copy available online at http://www.apologeticsindex.org/a106a.html)

Lewis's intervention against Kent's pending publication was extraordinary for numerous reasons, not the least of which was that Lewis himself is a former member of a new religion (Lewis, 2010), so he seemingly was putting his own credibility in question—a position that he exacerbated by assigning *PhD* after his signature to the letter, even though he did not have one

---

[13] Although Arrington and Bitton stated, "Historians have called the Mormon migration the best-organized movement of people in American history" (Arrington & Bitton, 1979, p. 100), they did admit in a footnote (without citing Ann-Eliza Young) that one of their sources "place the total number of deaths in the Wille and Martin [handcart] companies as between 197 and 217" (Arrington & Bitton, 1979, p. 362, item 15).

(Kent & Krebs, 1998, p. 37; see also Lewis, 1998, p. 20; Kent & Krebs, 1998, p. 25).[14] Kent's article eventually appeared, but in a different publication (Kent, 1994a).

Several months after Lewis's interference with Kent's publication, he (along with religious scholar Gordon Melton) oversaw a large study of Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT). Throughout it, he maintained his disinterest in former-member accounts, at least until the very end of his project. Under the auspices of an organization that Lewis founded called the Association of World Academics for Religious Education (AWARE), Lewis and Melton coordinated an interdisciplinary team study that researched CUT through its 1993 summer conference. Two sociologists, however (Robert Balch, from whom we heard earlier, and his student, Stephan Langdon), conducted a study of the study. One of their critical observations about it was that "the AWARE study did not include defectors," but it was obvious to them "that someone should have been designated to interview defectors, especially former members of Elizabeth Clare Prophet's inner circle" (Balch & Langdon, 1998, p. 201). Indeed, "no one on the research team expressed any interest in interviewing defectors" (1998, p. 202), even though "Balch had concluded from his previous research on new religions that defectors are more trustworthy than sociologists like to believe" (1998, p. 201).

Only at the very end of the study did Lewis speak with former members. Accidentally, his wife had a conversation with a "disaffected" former member who subsequently arranged a meeting with about 30 others. Lewis and his wife attended the meeting, along with two other members of the AWARE team. By the time this meeting took place, however, "most of the aware team was gone," and allegations revealed by the former members were neither investigated further nor included in the study's published results (Balch & Langdon, 1998, p. 206).

In 1998, David Bromley edited, and contributed to, an academic volume on apostasy. In one essay, he made distinctions among existing American organizations as to whether they were Allegiant (Type I), Contestant (Type II), or Subversive (Type III). He then identified three corresponding

> types of exit characteristics of these organizational forms—Defector, Whistleblower, and Apostate. Dramatic, compelling evidence of the alleged evil is imperative to mobilize and sustain an opposition coalition and neutralize potential resistance. Apostates play a pivotal role in creating such evidence, offering personal testimony in which they attest to witnessing and being compelled to participate in the target movement's nefarious activities. The role is constructed in interaction between the individual existing in putatively subversive movements and one or more parties in the oppositional coalition. (Bromley, 1998b, pp. 20–21)

Bromley's typology ignored examination of accuracy in the content of apostate tales for their placement within genres of social constructionism. Legitimate issues of exploitation and abuse may exist within apostates' allegations, but by now influential sociologists were ignoring their content and only focusing on their contributions to the process of creating social evils. Despite this blind spot about possible issues of exploitation being revealed in at least some apostate accounts, historian Stephen G. Wilson realized that the distinctions between defector and apostate that Bromley drew were "not without merit" in relation to apostasy in the ancient Western world (Wilson, 2004, p. 120).

The Debate Over Atrocity Tales from 1990 On

A few years later, in 2001, when Stephen Kent used the accounts of former Scientologists who reported to have been in the organization's forced labor and reeducation program, the Rehabilitation Project Force (RPF), one of the criticisms that he received from Canadian sociologist and Scientology consultant Lorne Dawson (b. 1954) (see Dawson, 2001, p. 395 n. 2) was that Kent's arguments relied heavily on the testimony of a small sample of apostates (i.e., individuals who had left Scientology and now bore a grudge against it [Bromley, 1998b; Dawson, 2001, pp. 380–381]). The actual number of former-member accounts that Kent used was eight; but they were woven within information from Scientology policies, court documents, and numerous books, articles, and magazines, and the Internet postings of a current member (Kent, 2001a, p. 351). Nevertheless, regardless of whether the apostates' accounts received collaboration from other sources, their mere use was enough to warrant criticism (see Dawson, 2001; Kent, 2001b). Kent had not stayed within the sociological gatekeepers' conceptions of apostates, so on those grounds he had to be criticized. Consequently, it did not matter to Dawson that

> I do not have access to the materials [Kent] uses in order to make my own assessment. But in some respects it is not relevant *whether or not the facts are true.* (Dawson, 2001, p. 380; italics added)

Kent had committed the methodological sin of assuming that apostates' atrocity tales can provide valuable insights about the groups in which people had been involved, but this assumption was heresy to the academically orthodox.

Disapproval by scholars towing the orthodox position also was apparent in a criticism of Kent that appeared in a 2001 academic article (reprinted in book form in 2004) entitled "New Religions and the Anticult Movement in Canada," by the husband-and-wife team, religious-studies professor Irving Hexham (b. 1943) and anthropologist Carla Poewe (b. 1941).[15] The article named several Canadian academics who wrote about new religions, and Hexham and Poewe presented them as having published numerous academic papers providing solid information about the activities of new religions in Canada. "The reputations of these scholars have been crucial to the public perception of NRMs [new religious movements] in Canada" (Hexham & Poewe, 2001, p. 286; 2004, p. 247). These academics usually provided moderate and well-informed comments to the media. There was, however, an exception among Canadian academics (according to Hexham and Poewe):

> The one exception to the generally neutral tone of most Canadian academics and their rejection of anticult rhetoric is Stephen Kent. Kent has been outspoken in his criticism of many new religions, particularly Scientology, and works closely with various anticult groups. Although Kent's views are widely known, few Canadian academics agree with his findings and most disagree quite strongly because of his tendency to use the testimony of ex-members. (Hexham & Poewe, 2001, p. 286; 2004, p. 247)

Hexham and Poewe did not prove any examples of how Kent's facts about Scientology or other groups were wrong—just that his willingness to use information from former members was methodologically deviant. At least according to Hexham and Poewe, he was the only Canadian new-religions scholar to do so.

Not all academics writing about so-called new religions were as dogmatic in their opposition to the validity of apostates' testimonies as were Bromley and Shupe, Lewis, Hexham, and Poewe. In, for example, a debate between Kent and sociologist of religion and lawyer Lori Beaman (b. 1963) over harm issues related to fundamentalist Mormon polygamy, Beaman wrote:

> Sometimes the horror stories come from isolated "exes," who are disgruntled or

---

[15] Note that Poewe's name did not appear on the *Nova Religio* article but was in the book version's reprint.

harmed. Sociologists of religion have long been cautious about using "ex" stories to assess the practices and beliefs of religious groups. This is not to discount them entirely, but to recognize that they may offer limited insight into religion and those who believe and practice. (Beaman, 2006, p. 47)

Beaman's position was appropriately cautious, but at least it did not rule out completely using information from former members.

The following year, however, after Ayella's balanced methodological advice, the grand figure of sectarian studies, Bryan R. Wilson, took a hard-lined approach about former-member accounts, completely rejecting them for both scholarly research and court use. His position did not appear in a peer-reviewed document, but instead in a booklet published by Scientology. Nevertheless, his esteemed status as a sociologist provided gravitas to his conclusions. His dismissal of former members' (or apostates') accounts could not have been clearer:

> Neither the objective sociological researcher nor the court of law can readily regard the apostate as a creditable or reliable source of evidence. He must always be seen as one whose personal history predisposes him to bias with respect to both his previous religious commitment and affiliations, [and] the suspicion must arise that he acts from a personal motivation to vindicate himself and to regain his self-esteem, by showing himself to have been first a victim but subsequently to have become a redeemed crusader. As various instances have indicated, he is likely to be suggestible and ready to enlarge or embellish his grievances to satisfy that species of journalist whose interest is more in sensational copy than in a[n] objective statement of the truth. (Wilson, 1994, p. 4)

Wilson did not provide sources to support his bold assertions, but he likely constructed them with some of his previous research in mind.

In 1990, Wilson had written that sectarians "learn how to articulate . . . [their motives] in an appropriate way . . . [and] in a way satisfactory both to themselves and their fellow religionists" (Wilson, 1990, p. 200). Furthermore, these converts "bring their reasons for conversion into conformity with group expectations, gradually eliminating idiosyncratic elements and reiterating in-group justifications" (Wilson, 1990, p. 200). Ultimately, Wilson concluded that "individuals are socialized to conversion, and subsequently they learn how to express, in appropriate language, just what has happened" (1990, p. 200). Although Wilson did not make the connection directly between his conclusions about converts' accounts and apostates' accounts, one can see how his assertion regarding converts may have impacted his later assertions about apostates.

In any case, his discussion in that same year about apostates was only a degree less harsh than what he would conclude in 1994. In 1990, he commented that

> The apostate is generally in need of self-justification. He seeks to construct his own past, to excuse his former affiliations, and to blame those who formerly were his close associates. Not uncommonly the apostate learns to rehearse an 'atrocity story' to explain how, by manipulation, trickery, coercion, or deceit, he was induced to join or to remain within an organization that he now forswears and condemns. Apostates, sensationalized by the press, have sometimes sought to make a profit from accounts of their experiences in stories sold to newspapers or produced as books (sometimes written by 'ghost' writers). (Wilson, 1990, p. 19)

Although some equivocation existed in Wilson's 1990 assessment of apostates (note the phrases *not uncommonly* and *sometimes*), no such equivocation existed in his 1994 statement.

While asserting that sectarians alter their conversion stories to fit the expectations of their groups, Wilson dismissed the accounts of former members under the assumption that they, too, altered their tales to fit their new, anticult

communities. Scientology has used the logic in Wilson's antiapostate position to discredit former-member critics, recently (for example) lodging a successful complaint to Britain's Press Standards Organization against England's *Mail Online* for an article about the supposed bromance between actor Tom Cruise (b. 1962) and Scientology leader David Miscavige (b. 1960). One of the arguments that Miscavige used in his complaint was that the newspaper "had relied on sources who were 'disaffected former members' with no knowledge of the Church's operations . . ." (Sweney, 2016).

Wilson's absolutist rejection of any value in apostates' testimonies is the culmination of a position that originated in the work of Bromley, Shupe, and colleagues beginning in the late 1970s. Even though dissenting voices to this rejection emerged as early as the mid-1980s, the prominence of Bromley and Shupe within the sociological study of new religions, combined with the sheer number of publications that they produced, has led to the hegemony of their position among many prominent scholars of sectarian groups. Wilson based his negation of almost any value in apostates' statements on Bromley and Shupe's work (see Wilson, 1990, p. 19, n. 26), and many sociologists of religion agreed with him. Individual dissenters to this rejection, however, still appeared.

One such dissenter was sociologist Lewis F. Carter, known for (among other works) his book on Rajneeshpuram. Carter appreciated the insights that many former members can provide to researchers: "As ex-members, apostates are especially well-positioned in terms of knowledge, as well as possibly some elements of motivation…. [Moderate ex-members] may have 'insider' knowledge, coupled with an 'outsider' detachment" (Carter, 1998, pp. 228–229). His evaluation of former members actually led David Bromley to acknowledge that "apostates also may be an important source of information" because some of them "have extensive knowledge of the organization, and 'moderate' former members may possess the virtue of insider knowledge and outsider detachment" (Bromley, 1998c, p. 15). Many scholars in the academy, however, either did not know about, or simply did not accept, this moderate position

toward apostates' information, and Bromley did not use this opportunity to revisit his previous positions.

In 2000, counseling psychologist and Executive Director of the American Family Foundation (AFF), Michael Langone, analyzed what he called the "two camps" involved in the study of "cults and new religious movements" (Langone, 2000, p. 79). He defined these two camps as "critics" (what others often called *anticultists*) and "sympathizers" (what others often called *procultists* [Langone, 2000, p. 81]). He pointed out that

> sympathizers, who tend to be academics in sociology and religious studies, have published widely . . . while critics, who tend with some notable exceptions to be mental health professionals, have not published as much and have not usually responded to sympathizers' critiques of the so-called "anti-cult movement" (ACM), which typically is presented as including professional and academic critics. (Langone, 2000, p. 80)

Langone was critical of the sympathizers on methodological grounds. He reported that

> Academic sympathizers (mainly sociologists) did not conduct empirical surveys of professionals or activists in the so-called ACM. To understand the "ACM" they relied on theories that emphasized the social construction of phenomena such as deviance or evil . . . , rather than objective nature of the phenomenon under study. This theoretical orientation led to their writing about such notions as "atrocity tales" (Bromley, Shupe, & Ventimiglia, 1979) to characterize the negative reports of former group members, who were dubbed "apostates" and distinguished from "defectors," who did not produce negative reports. Although, strictly speaking, these terms may not have been intended to be value judgments or statistical generalizations about the truth claims of critics (Bromley [ed.], 1998), they clearly came

to be perceived as such—in both camps. (Langone, 2000, p. 83)

Langone had returned to the foundational article in the social constructionist interpretation of former members' accounts (Bromley, Shupe, & Ventimiglia, 1979), and criticized it for failing to examine the actual content of former members' claims, a failure that appeared in other sociological work (see Dawson, 2001, p. 380; see also Shupe, 1981, p. 218).

On a related issue, Langone extended his criticism of social constructionists by pointing out their imbalanced acceptance and use of current members' versus former members' accounts about cults and new religions:

> Sympathizers, for example, seemed to accept uncritically the positive reports of current members, whose accounts they did not tag with derogatory labels, such as "benevolence tales," or "personal growth tales." Only the critical reports of ex-members were called "tales," a term that clearly implies falsehood or fiction. (Langone, 2000, p. 83)

Langone's intent was to foster a dialogue between the two camps, and some evidence exists that one of the hard-line social constructionists, David Bromley, was modifying his position.

In 2001, Lewis Carter and Bromley coedited a book about reflexive ethnography, and one of the authors was Amy Siskind, who was an apostate from a quasi-religious, communitarian, Marxist, deviant, psychotherapy group, the Sullivan Institute/Fourth Wall Community (see Siskind, 1994, pp. 72–76). Siskind was acutely aware of the criticisms of former "cult" members and their accounts, so she addressed some of these issues directly in her essay:

> Those who have written about the untrustworthiness of apostate accounts [citing Bromley's 1998 edited volume, *The Politics of Religious Apostasy*] have argued that individuals who have left new religious or quasi-religious communities have an overly negative view of their previous experiences and are likely to stress this view in their accounts and analyses. While this may be true to some extent, it is also true that members are the only source of information we have about most groups that can be considered even remotely reliable. Most controversial groups have specific strategies for portraying themselves positively, such as the "show homes" of The Family, and other venues designed specifically for outsiders by other groups. (Siskind, 2001, p. 192)

As a former member who left the Sullivanians and then earned a doctorate in sociology, Siskind knew the kinds of "front region" self-presentations (Goffman, 1959, p. 107) that controversial groups perform for public consumption. Former members, therefore, were the only way that academics and others could see "backstage" (Goffman, 1959, p. 112). Their testimonies, therefore, were valuable, not arbitrarily dismissible.

Testing Bryan Wilson's Dismissal of Apostate Accounts

Despite these (and other) dissenting voices against the position toward apostates' testimonies that Wilson and others held, the deeply entrenched rejection of them dominated the social sciences. What no one has done, however, is attempt to test any of Wilson's absolutist claims. His blanket rejection, for example, of courts' use of apostates invites an examination of cases in which they have testified. In all these cases, have apostates provided useful and truthful information? Or in at least some trials, did they offer biased, deceptive information when on the witness stand? Two important cases allow for a limited examination of these questions. One of the cases is the 1995 British ruling by Lord Justice Alan Hylton Ward (b. 1938) in a custody case launched by a grandmother attempting to gain custody of her grandchild from her daughter, who was a member of the Children of God/The Family. Australian barrister Ian Freckelton said about this case that

> [i]t is one of the most remarkable decisions of the Family Division of the High Court in terms of its methodology in grappling with some complex and

conflicting rights and obligations and declining to grapple with others. (Freckelton, 1998, p. 14)

The other case (about which the authors have a near-complete set of court documents) involved a series of legal battles in the mid-2000s between an alternative healing, quasi-religious group from Maine, the Gentle Wind Project (GWP), and former members—specifically, Jim Bergin and Judy Garvey. Apostate critics may be able to produce cases in which court decisions rejected apostates' credibility, but Wilson intended his 1994 statement to reject apostates' accounts for *all* cases. Consequently, evidence from *any* case that accepted apostates' accounts as being useful and credible would cast doubt on the absolutism of his assertion.

To begin our analysis, first we consider the Ward case. Lord Justice Ward entered the case well-informed about the hostility between some former members and the anticult movement to which they may have been aligned, and The Family organization itself. Nevertheless, the information (in terms of actual Family publications) that the anticult movement provided to the grandmother proved to be accurate:

> Not all who leave The Family show intense hostility to them [*sic*]. Of course some are embittered by their experiences but others feel nostalgia and affection for the good aspects of life in the community. The expert evidence satisfies me that the majority look back more in sorrow than in anger. On the other hand, there is a vociferous minority who, no doubt with good cause, are deeply antagonistic. Many are involved in or used by the anti-cult organizations. I have become acutely aware of the violent, almost paranoid mutual hostility and fear between some of these organizations and The Family. Because of the passions aroused, I have been on guard against attempts to deceive me by distortion and exaggeration of the truth. I am alive to the possibility that there has been cross-fertilization of the evidence so that

hearsay evidence has been falsely dressed up in the guise of personal experience. It is plain that the Plaintiff has had the support of the anti-cult movement in procuring a considerable body of the documentary evidence which has been placed before me. At the end of the day there is very little live challenge to the authenticity of that evidence even if the manner in which it was obtained is open to question. (Ward, 1995, p. 6)

Ward, therefore, was aware that some of the plaintiff's witnesses had degrees of contact with the anticult groups, but one or more of those groups were instrumental in producing vital documents that he might otherwise not have seen. One of the plaintiff's witnesses, identified (as most of the witnesses were) only by her initials (MP), struck Justice Ward as having been influenced by her family's vocal media campaign against the group:

> Because they [i.e., MP's family members] have been so heavily involved in the media campaign against The Family, I initially viewed their evidence with some skepticism. MP was particularly aggressive in the way she gave evidence. Her language was deliberately crude and she seemed as determined to paint as perverted a picture as [a defendant's witness, SF] was to view life through rose coloured spectacles. The truth lies somewhere in between these two extremes. (Ward, 1995, p. 31)

Regarding another of the plaintiff's witnesses, Justice Ward indicated

> that although I accepted the general purport of RD's evidence, much of which was confirmed by later events, the manner of his giving it was so emotive that I tended to look for corroboration of what he was saying. (Ward, 1995, p. 38)

In the first instance, the plaintiff may have had a witness whose credibility and reliability were tainted by her media appearances against the

group, and who portrayed herself as having "been first a victim but subsequently to have become a redeemed crusader" (Wilson, 1994, p. 4). Note, however, that the judge suspected that a witness for the defendant was equally exaggerated, as was MP, suggesting that current members also were susceptible to bias in testimonies.

Plaintiff's witness KJ presented herself in a way that suggested she was fighting against The Family partly (as Wilson said) "to vindicate [her]self and to regain self-esteem, by showing [her]self to have been a victim but subsequently to have become a redeemed crusader" (Wilson, 1994, p. 4). In tears, KJ testified to having been sexually assaulted repeatedly from an early age, including having to provide fellatio to her stepfather. Justice Ward reproduced her statement:

> I went into a state of shock but because of the indoctrination in the *Mo Letters* [which contained founder David Berg's teachings], I came to accept it [i.e., sex with her stepfather]. If Mo [i.e., David Berg] said it was OK it must be OK. In "My Childhood Sex" he says his nanny was giving him oral sex and that it was acceptable so I accepted it. It is something that I very much regret. I am ashamed of it. I am horrified to think that I bowed to his teaching against my own conscience. I assumed him to be a man of God, a good man. It was incomprehensible he would be evil or use the Bible for evil. He talked with such authority. I am now deeply horrified and regret these things. He had no right to do these things to people who were vulnerable. I am very angry. (KJ, quoted in Ward, 1995, pp. 38–39)

Chief Justice Ward reflected upon her statement by saying,

> She is very angry. She now conducts a campaign against The Family to salve her conscience. I do not doubt that she paints the picture as black as she can but even stripping away layers of blackness, the picture still remains black. (Ward, 1995, p. 39)

At first glance, it might appear that KJ is an example of an apostate who "acts from a personal motivation to vindicate [her]self and to regain self-esteem, by showing [her]self to have been first a victim but subsequently to have become a redeemed crusader" (Wilson, 1994, p. 4). What separates her, however, from Wilson's description of an apostate is that the atrocities that she went through apparently did not hinder or taint her ability to present useful and accurate information to the court. Earlier, Chief Justice Ward referred to her as "a very important witness" (Ward, 1995, p. 30). He came to that conclusion because his notes reminded him

> how time and time again I was impressed with the wealth of detail which came pouring out in a way which did not suggest either invention or the recounting of the experiences of others. There were too many occasions when she was given the opportunity to embellish facts to the disadvantage of The Family and refrained from doing so. She gave credit where credit was due, for example, to SF [i.e., a female witness for The Family]. At one point she broke down and denounced Berg in tones of such obvious deep personal anguish that I caused the tape recording of that part of her evidence to be made available and I played it back at one point during the hearing. Her evidence stood in some contrast to that of another of the Plaintiff's witnesses, RD, who from time to time did descend into unconvincing histrionics. KJ spoke of the early sexual exploitation in which she engaged as a very young child. (Ward, 1995, pp. 30–31)

In other words, in contrast to Wilson's claim that apostates are "ready to enlarge or embellish [their] grievances . . . ," KJ simply did not do so. She provided valuable and accurate evidence to the court, in contradiction to what Wilson would have predicted. A witness, however, for the plaintiff (and hence who was a current Family member) was one who tried to embellish his testimony by using histrionics.

In discussing the credibility of another witness, Chief Justice Ward approached the testimony of MB cautiously:

> MB gave evidence of her relationship with her grandfather. Her evidence is plainly of importance. She is a disaffected former member. Her aunt Deborah (Berg's daughter), has led a campaign whose object is that The Family be destroyed. MB has been subjected to the influence of Deborah. She is in close contact with all those intent on The Family's downfall. Her evidence, more than anyone's, had to be subjected to the most careful scrutiny. She is moreover a young woman with an uncertain psychiatric history. . . . (Ward, 1995, p. 47)

Continuing his discussion of MB's testimony, he concluded,

> It remains for me to judge whether her hostility undermines her credibility. I became more and more convinced by her evidence the longer she gave it. She did not seem to me to paint the picture blacker than it was. She said at one point that she only wished to say what was necessary and there were several instances where it would have been perfectly possible for her to gild the lily [i.e., unnecessarily add] had that been her purpose. By way of one example, she spoke of her time in the Philippines and of Simon Peter's involvement with the young. She said that she and her friend A1 had been taking a nap and when she awoke, A1 told her that Simon Peter had had sex with her. She said she did not see it and when offered the opportunity to say that he had misconducted himself with her, she unhesitatingly said that he had not. I had to consider the extent to which she was prone to exaggeration. I had listened aghast to her account of her exorcism and I began to think it could not possibly all be true. Much later in the case I read The Family's own account, which appeared to be a transcript of a

tape recording of the events as they happened and that showed that MB had been moderate in her complaint of the indignities heaped upon her. It was suggested to her that because she had been billed for stardom within The Family as the leader's granddaughter and had so enjoyed the spotlight of adulation during her time with Music with Meaning [i.e., The Family's prominent singing group], she now could not survive without being the centre of attention and so in order to appear on television "Chat Shows," she needed to say more and more outrageous and untrue things. I totally reject that criticism of her. That is not at all how she struck me. (Ward, 1995, p. 47; also see p. 24; Kent, 2004, pp. 63–64; Kent & Hall, 2000, pp. 65–68)

Returning again to Wilson's antiapostate statement, here the court had someone who had spoken often to the media, but these appearances did not lead her "to enlarge or embellish [her] grievances" rather than provide "a[n] objective statement of the truth" (Wilson, 1994, p. 47). If anything, MB understated the atrocities committed on and against her.

With the possible exaggeration of MP, the apostate witnesses in The Family case convinced Chief Justice Ward that they provided credible, useful evidence, which is exactly opposite what Wilson predicted. Many of The Family's witnesses, however, had serious credibility problems. Time and again Chief Justice Ward had to disregard their evidence. In fact, early in the case, he wrote a long section outlining some of the untruths and deceptions that he had encountered in the evidence of Family witnesses:

> I regret to find that in many instances there has been a lack of frankness and a failure to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. By way of example:
>
> 1. Answers to the Official Solicitor's interrogatories were less than full

and frank in material respects which I will deal with later.

2. EM who has important child care responsibilities, was frank enough to admit that she would lie to protect the children and I regret to find that is at times exactly what she did.

3. The Family's Australian lawyer considered it appropriate to make a video recording of conditions in various homes in various countries to place before the Australian Court as evidence of what life was like in a typical home. MA was recorded saying that "The barrister has asked me to describe the surroundings of the 27½ acre plot that we live on." He continued, "We live in a very productive part of England . . . When we first moved in, this place was completely overgrown and unusable . . . We have managed to clear it and make it a place for the children . . . In the back garden over here we have our fourth daughter KAS playing with the ferrets." No one listening to that recording could think otherwise than that that was MA's home. It was not. His wife LA told the listener that "in all my experience all these years in The Family, I have found the children to be happy well adjusted children." She said the same to me in her affidavit sworn in these proceedings and repeated that all children she has met were happy and well adjusted. There was no mention of the Victor programmes to deal with difficult children that had been running in her homes as well she knew.

4. In another video prepared for the Australian Court, film was made of a home in Denmark and the children were asked, more than once, whether they had heard of silence restrictions. No one raised a hand. SC remained mute. He knew about silence restriction. He had been on silence restriction himself. I had been impressed by his evidence until that point and there was much about him which was likeable. When pressed about this discrepancy, he tried at first to shrug it off as not being a "life or death situation." When pressed he explained that he had not told the truth because of his embarrassment for he had no wish to explain why he had been placed on silence restriction and that he was "a rotten apple." What is disturbing, therefore, about this evidence is not only the lack of frankness in presenting material to another Court but also the psychological pressure that had been put upon the boy by the experience of being put on silence.

5. Another transcript prepared for Australia included an apparently enthusiastic JG telling the Australian Court how happy he was. He was not happy. He lied because he could not stand up to the shepherd[s] and tell them that in fact he wished to leave The Family. It is again an example of a lack of candour together with emotional pressure being put upon the young members of the group.

6. In September 1990 a boy SM ran away from a Family home, Burnt Farm in Hertfordshire. He was apprehended at Ramsgate trying to cross the Channel. When the Social Services Department investigated the matter, and called Burnt Farm, a shepherd, RM, denied that he had anything to do with the Children of God, It was a blatant lie. Significantly, also, the home was closed in a hurry and the members dispersed. Could there be a clearer example of Deceivers yet True? [i.e., a Family publication that taught the acceptability of lying in

order to protect The Family's supposedly godly work]. From the children comic I quote: "you knew that enemies would persecute you and your Family and all your brothers and sisters and chase you out of their city, if you didn't HAVE to, would you tell them who you are?" (Their emphasis.)

This is an example of a practice I find to have been widespread. "Selah" is a word known to all members of The Family. It means secret. The system must not know it. It is an attitude of mind which prepares them to hide, run away, remove the trunk with The Family literature, take their packed "flee-bag" containing a minimum of essential personal possessions and escape. Things have probably changed over the past 4 years. The Family are [*sic*] more open. The best evidence of that is their willingness to contest this litigation. It was a matter which was the subject of the Summit 93 [which was a meeting of prominent Family personnel]. But even now, The Family still cannot be fully frank, even with their own lawyers. They write: "We have given some of our legal counsellors **nearly** full sets of Mo letters so they can properly prepare our defence" (The added emphasis is mine [i.e., the judge's]).

They do not trust even their own lawyers. They do not fully trust their own experts and I gained the impression that Doctor Millikan was less than pleased and Doctor Heller was certainly deeply dismayed because he felt he had been misled by The Family.

These are worrying examples and they are not the only ones of the ingrained habit of lying if they have to and of telling half the truth if they can get away with it. I shall in due time have to give careful consideration to the extent of change within The Family and to the crucial question of whether I am able to trust them.

As I begin the process of evaluating the evidence and arriving at decisions on the disputed matters of fact, I remind myself again not only to be on guard that pressures from the anti-cult movements may have caused distortion of the Plaintiff's evidence but also that the examples I have set out above demonstrate to me quite clearly a pervasive tendency on the part of The Family to be economical with the truth. (Ward, 1995, pp. 13–14)

In this remarkable initial list of dishonest and secret actions and statements by The Family and its witnesses, we see the kind of deceptive and dishonest behavior that Wilson's antiapostate statement suggested would occur among apostates. It did not, and the opposite was true: Current members were prone to lie. As Chief Justice Ward concluded, the defendant's witnesses demonstrated to him "a pervasive tendency on the part of the Family to be economical with the truth" (Ward, 1995, p. 14). Moreover, one young man, SC, refused to tell the truth because he was "embarrassed" about having been assigned to a harsh punishment (including a restriction to maintain silence) as a supposed "rotten apple" (Ward, 1995, p. 13; see also Kent, 2001a, p. 361; Kent, 2005, p. 136; Kent & Hall, 2000, pp. 66, 67, 70). Wilson's statement indicated that an apostate would attempt "to vindicate himself and to regain self-esteem," but this behavior was exactly what this current young member did, because of "the psychological pressure that had been put upon the boy by the experience of having been put on silence" (Ward, 1995, p. 13). The young man was trying to either regain or maintain his self-esteem in the context of the group that had punished him by restricting his right to speak.

Throughout his decision, Chief Justice Ward commented on the deceitfulness of The Family and many of its witnesses. In, for example, an unsuccessful attempt to obtain from The Family a particular document that he believed had to be within the group's computer system, Chief Justice Ward concluded,

I am driven to find that The Family have [*sic*] not been frank with me and I am

bound therefore to be suspicious that the internal records of this highly organized computerized group contain records they wish to withhold from the court. (Ward, 1995, p. 41)

In another instance, a witness for the defendants got caught lying to the court. The plaintiff had alleged that some female members of The Family

"are encouraged to appear in video tapes which show them naked or scantily dressed masturbating. These video tapes are alleged to be made for the consumption of David Berg."

The answer was a denial of that allegation. In his affidavit sworn in December 1992, SPM stated that the allegation that women in The Family had been forced to masturbate on video was completely untrue. He stated the dancing was by adults.

I gave leave to the Plaintiff to file further evidence and she produced a number of video tapes said to emanate from The Family. The Family were [*sic*] indignant at their production and that indignation arose in part from the obvious fact that the production of these tapes utterly destroyed the case that had earlier been presented by them. (Plaintiff, quoted in Ward, 1995, p. 22)

Later in the case, Chief Justice Ward again wrote about this witness's unreliability,

I am driven to conclude that he was not fully frank with me. I cannot accept that he was so immersed in the preparation of this case that he was blind and deaf to what was going on about him. (Ward, 1995, p. 83)

In another example of lying about the content of videos that showed striptease dancing, female member SF

said that the allegation about children taking part in pornographic stripteases were [*sic*] a fabrication. Giving her the benefit of the doubt that "pornographic" qualifies stripteases so that her statement

might be true on such a construction, nevertheless not to admit that children were at least involved in some kind of stripteasing is another tiny example of "Deceivers Yet True". She knew that her husband filmed 12 year old VP having to do one of these striptease dances. She did one herself. (Ward, 1995, p. 24)

SF's son proved to be a completely unconvincing witness:

FC told me, "I don't know anything about striptease dances, honestly." He was shuffling his feet and he was lying to me. He was a prissy, smugly self-righteous young man. He had known since September 1992 of the allegations made by MB that young children were having to strip. He said he had no need to ask whether it was true or not because he doubted it very much. He found it very hard then to believe that his mother would have danced topless because she was not that kind of person. When pressed to accept that his mother's obvious sensibilities had been corrupted by the *Mo* [*L*]*etters*, he defiantly refused to contemplate the implications because he declared it was not relevant today because "all I know is I am serving Jesus right now and doing the best for Him."

This is typical of the evidence I heard from Family members who, schooled in the way to deal with these questions, attempted to argue that it was no different from taking a family photograph of a little girl running naked on the beach in Greece. MM, from her present more conservative perspective, acknowledged that, "we lived in a bubble in some ways looking back." There was little, if any, full acknowledgment of the corrupting effect of the dance nor of the directive force of Berg indulging his own salacious desires. (Ward, 1995, pp. 24–25)

Chief Justice Ward realized, therefore, that ongoing membership in The Family distorted

members' perceptions of their actions and the actions of the group, including the harm that they caused. Membership also propelled witnesses to lie, distort, and evade.

Many other examples existed of the defendant's witnesses lying or evading the truth. A female member of The Family, EM, provided evidence, and Chief Justice Ward reflected upon both her and what she said:

> It was interesting to read again comments I wrote in the margin of my notebook about the manner in which she gave evidence. Among the several things I noted were, for example, "nice lady but blind to the consequence of her acts"; "nervous, clenching and unclenching her fists and very tense"; "she is being defensive and is lying," "evading the truth" (when she sought to deny the authenticity of the picture in the "Child Discipline" letter where the adult holds a stick as I have already described). Thereafter my notes become variations on the theme of "evasive," "very evasive," "lies!," "not frank," "clear evidence of cover up." She was, therefore, an exasperating witness because she is an essentially sincere lady who simply cannot believe that her genuine actions taken with the best will in the world for the benefit of the teens with whom she has been so involved have nonetheless had wholly harmful consequences. (Ward, 1995, p. 81)

On a personal level, therefore, Chief Justice Ward liked the witness, but her testimony was wholly unreliable. She was intellectually and emotionally unable to realize the harmful consequences of her actions toward teens.

In summary, a review of Chief Justice Ward's statements about apostates' versus Family members' testimonies demonstrates that Bryan R. Wilson's assertions about apostates' unreliability and embellishment simply were almost completely wrong in relation to this case. By far, current members were most likely to display the discrediting characteristics that he had applied inappropriately to apostates. In this case, academics and the court would have been

far better advised to be highly suspicious if not dismissive of current members' testimonies and evidence. Without intending to do so with the plaintiff's witness MB, Chief Justice Ward had utilized (at least a variant) of a methodology that Robert Balch had offered 7 years earlier. He demonstrated that her "accounts could be corroborated by checking stories against each other" (Balch, 1998, p. 201; see also Ward, 1995, pp. 50, 66). He also corroborated the stories by checking them against documents (for example, Ward, 1995, pp. 51, 54–55). Back in 1979, Bromley, Shupe, and Ventimiglia had rejected even trying to ascertain the accuracy of former members' accounts by arguing, "[w]hether such stories represent some kernel of 'truth' is not only difficult to validate in many cases but is also irrelevant" (Bromley, Shupe, & Ventimiglia, 1979, pp. 43–44). Chief Justice Ward, however, was able to validate them, and his discernment of (what in many cases was far more than mere) kernels of truth was essential for the case over which he presided.

The Gentle Wind Project Cases

Turning now to an American quasi-religious group involved in a court case that pitted current members against apostates, the Gentle Wind Project (GWP) sold Healing Instruments that allegedly repaired one's etheric structure,[16] and it claimed these instruments improve a person's mental and emotional health. GWP members Jim Bergin and Judy Garvey left the group after having spent 17 years in it. During these years, they dedicated significant time and money to the group, actively promoted Gentle Wind and its alleged healing products, purchased Healing Instruments, assisted in the group's research, published its material, and participated in radio interviews praising it. Upon departure from GWP, the couple opted to share their experiences online, citing instances of financial misconduct, the lack of legitimate studies

---

[16] GWP claimed the etheric structure was an energetic field around the body. According to GWP, it was "the permanent [individual]" (WERU, 1997) that passed through incarnation and carried forward with each alleged rebirth. Since traditional medicine could not repair damage to this field, GWP's alleged healing technology aimed to "heal and repair mental and emotional damage at its source within each person's energetic structure" (Miller, 1999, p. 26).

conducted by the group (despite claims of conducting blind and double-blind studies), and instances of manipulation.

In response to the former members' accounts, Gentle Wind leaders asserted that the oppositional stories were libelous. Their response also included Internet postings that made disparaging statements about Bergin and Garvey, which included attempts to minimize their involvement with the group. Material on the Gentle Wind website suggested that Garvey "ha[d] a possible history of serious mental illness" (GWP, 2004[a]); and in his deposition, John Miller attempted to back up this claim by asserting that he believed Garvey had schizophrenia (Miller, J., 2005, pp. 172–174). When pressed about whether he had the qualifications to make that diagnosis, Miller stated he felt "angry and hurt" (Miller, J., 2005, pp. 173–174).

As the battle between the two sides continued online, Gentle Wind brought a civil lawsuit against the former members (and other critics). In 2004, the first suit asserted that the critical individuals and some oppositional organizations had breached the federal Racketeer Influence and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO, a law designed to fight organized crime), and asserted the defendants defamed GWP. After the court dismissed this lawsuit, GWP refiled a case in 2006 in the District Court of Maine against a smaller group of defendants (i.e., the former members and one anticult critic), alleging defamation and libel. This second case never went to trial because, in October 2006, the defendants and plaintiffs signed a Settlement Agreement. In this signed agreement, GWP and the individual plaintiffs

> acknowledge that Defendants may, at their discretion, continue to operate the internet website known as "windofchanges.org," and Plaintiffs agree that nothing in this Settlement Agreement is intended to, or shall be construed to, limit, restrict or otherwise affect Defendants' operations of or the content of that website (*Gentle Wind et al v. Bergin and Garvey,* 2006[b], p. 3).

Although this case ended before a judge had to offer a legal judgment, the Settlement Agreement strongly suggested that the critics' claims were legitimate while the allegations against them on the Gentle Wind website were not.

At the same time GWP brought the civil suit against former members, its leaders also defended themselves and their organization against the State of Maine and the Maine Attorney General. This case concluded with the signing of a Consent Decree in August 2006.[17] The findings of the Consent Decree outlined several conclusions that broadly covered Gentle Wind's medical claims and their leaders' breaches of fiduciary duties. For instance, the court found that Mary Miller and John Miller had

> violated 5 M.R.S.A. §207.[18] by making express and implicit representations on GWP's websites, and in other material, that the healing instruments have been objectively scientifically tested and have been scientifically proven to be effective. (*State of Maine and Attorney General v. Gentle Wind et al.,* 2006, p. 2)

This legal conclusion was in line with what Bergin and Garvey had claimed. Their critical statements, therefore, about the nonscientific reality of the instruments received verification.

In addition to the court highlighting the deceptive claims about scientific testing of the healing instruments, GWP's board of directors breached numerous fiduciary duties. These breaches included "the transfer of charitable funds in the form of personal loans to the brother of an officer" (*State of Maine and Attorney General v. Gentle Wind et al.,* 2006, p. 2), and "failing to keep correct and complete books and

---

[17] Mary Miller claimed that she signed both the Consent Decree and the Settlement Agreement primarily because of her exhaustion and lack of finances necessary to continue legal action (Miller, 2010, pp. 328, 345).

[18] This reference is to a portion of the *Title 5: Administrative Procedures and Services,* Chapter 10: Unfair Trade Practices for the State of Maine, §207, which explicitly covers "unfair methods of competition and unfair or deceptive acts or practices in the conduct of any trade or commerce…" (Government of Maine, 1969).

records, or minutes of the proceedings of GWP's board meetings" (*State of Maine and Attorney General v. Gentle Wind et al.*, 2006, p. 3). Furthermore, the board members breached fiduciary duties "by approving the expenditures of charitable funds for the acquisition and upkeep of real and personal property . . . titled in the names of certain individual Defendants" (*State of Maine and Attorney General v. Gentle Wind et al.*, 2006, p. 3).

The court concluded that Gentle Wind leaders not only had been deceptive about the effects of the healing instruments, but also had conducted improper nonprofit business activities and improper financial actions. The court prohibited Gentle Wind and the individual defendants from

> representing in the State of Maine in any manner, directly or indirectly . . . the manufacturing, promotion, packaging, labelling, sale, or distribution of healing instruments, and that the healing instrument have been scientifically tested. (*State of Maine and Attorney General v. Gentle Wind et al.*, 2006, p. 3)

In more detail, the consent decree prohibited statements that said "the healing instruments repair damage to one's energetic or 'etheric structure'" (*State of Maine and Attorney General v. Gentle Wind et al.*, 2006, p. 4); or that the healing instruments

> solve most of the problems found in humanity, lower blood pressure, reduce the need for anti-anxiety medication, reduce combativeness in Alzheimer's patients . . . [were] proven to be effective in hospital settings . . . [and that GWP] . . . tested the healing instruments using blind and double-blind studies. (*State of Maine and Attorney General v. Gentle Wind et al.*, 2006, p. 5)

Additionally, leaders representing the GWP could no longer claim the group "adhered to the highest research standards" (*State of Maine and Attorney General v. Gentle Wind et al.*, 2006, p. 4), that the research had "been duplicated by independent health care professionals" (*State of Maine and Attorney General v. Gentle Wind et al.*, 2006, p. 5), or that there was "no placebo effect in the performance of the healing instruments" (*State of Maine and Attorney General v. Gentle Wind et al.*, 2006, p. 5).

Essentially, the defendants agreed with the court's charges that all of the healing claims were false and that they had failed to comply with duties and regulations as directors of a nonprofit. The court fined Gentle Wind, along with certain individual defendants, and offered restitution to anyone who had purchased a Gentle Wind healing instrument since 2003. The decision of the court and the compliance of GWP validated former members' critical claims regarding the organization and its leadership. Interestingly, despite the signed court admission that GWP leaders falsified claims regarding the group's reputed healing products, the organization and individual defendants continued, briefly, with the lawsuit against Bergin and Garvey.

Several years after the resolution of both cases, Mary Miller published a lengthy book that detailed her account of the court cases. In this account, Miller maintained that GWP had conducted research to the members' "own standards" (Miller, 2010, p. 334). She maintained that those who developed and shared the instruments had "[told] people what [they] believed to be true" (Miller, 2010, p. 335). Although Miller admitted that the board had made mistakes regarding records and finances, these mistakes "in no way [took] away from the fact that GWP instruments [allegedly] helped some people" (Miller, 2010, p. 364). Miller suggested that those who were critical of GWP likely would "test out as sociopaths, and . . . schizophrenics" (Miller, 2010, p. 9), simply "did not understand what . . . [GWP was] looking for" (Miller, 2010, p. 9), and were part of a "cyber smear" conspiracy involving not only the defendants of the first case, but also an Assistant Attorney General of Maine (Miller, 2010).

Miller stressed that the court cases left members "humiliat[ed] and heart[broken]"(Miller, 2010, p. 422), and that writing the book had forced her to "relive the horrors of what happened to us" (Miller, 2010, p. 434). What is most interesting

about Miller's account, at least in a discussion surrounding the validity of former members' testimonies, is the degree to which emotionally charged language was a subtext in the book. When former members use such emotionally charged language, their critics regard their testimonies with skepticism. As the GWP cases show, however, apostates' criticisms of the group proved to be accurate, while the emotionally charged counterattacks and self-justifications were inaccurate and based upon falsehoods.

For instance, during her deposition, as one of the GWP's leaders (Mary Miller) stated, the GWP was only a loosely connected group of individual members who did all not share similar interests (Miller, 2005, pp. 70–73). Our exploration of literature the group produced, however, revealed contradictory evidence. One *Instrument Manual* asserted that the core group members lived with, or near, each other and implied that (among other shared interests) members enjoyed comedy movies such as *Ghostbusters* and a collective favoritism of the Celtics basketball team (GWP, n.d., p. 6). These statements clearly contradicted Miller's denial that members had shared interests. Perhaps this small discrepancy between a leader's statement and the written material was because of the copious amount of material that this small group produced; or perhaps the leader had forgotten or lost this information over the years. Nevertheless, Mary Miller had represented group members as having been individualistic, and published material contracted that representation.

Another contradiction existed between a statement by GWP leaders in a legal document and the group's printed material. In the initial complaint that Gentle Wind leaders filed, they asserted that "Gentle Wind has never publically advertised its products" (*Gentle Wind et al v. Bergin and Garvey,* 2006a, p. 4). In December 2004, however, Gentle Wind had a notice in the "Coming Events" section of a community newspaper. The notice advertised "alternative healing instruments to alleviate stress, restore mental and emotional health" (GWP, 2004c, p. 4). Several days earlier, in another weekly publication, Gentle Wind ran a full-page ad

inviting people to come and "experience this Remarkable New Technology [*sic*] first-hand" (GWP, 2004b, p. 6).

The story of Gentle Wind's battle with apostates demonstrates that courts must exert caution when they are gathering information directly from groups. It provides an example of accurate apostates' statements about the activities of their former cultic groups. Many social scientists were critical of apostates' accounts without actually investigating their claims, but clearly current members often have demonstrable problems in telling the truth. Simply put, researchers and courts have to assess statements of both current and former members carefully, but the GWP court cases show that an *a priori* dismissal of apostates' information simply is unwarranted.

Reevaluation of Apostates' Testimonies in Scholarship in the 2000s

Since the 1990s, the literature on apostates has dropped off dramatically. Only one major academic article (Almendros, Carrobles, Rodríguez-Carballeira, & Gámez-Gaudix, 2009) and one book (Cottee, 2015) on the subject have appeared. Both publications are important, however, because each critically reflects on some of the earlier apostate scholarship. The major academic article was the product of a fourfold team of Spanish psychologists from both the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and the Universidad de Barcelona, who examined

> the perceptions that 101 self-identified Spanish former members of diverse abusive groups have of their past group and their reasons for leaving it, as well as the psychological distress they experienced following their exit. (Almendros et al., 2009, p. 111)

The researchers summarized much of the sociological literature that contributed to the critical position on apostates as follows:

> The validity of negative reports provided by former members who perceived themselves to be objects of abuse and manipulation while in the group has been called into question. Their testimonies have been labeled

"atrocity tales" . . . , based on the understanding that these appraisals of their former cultic experiences would be negatively biased by their method of exit—involuntary or counseled exit . . . , and/or the influence of any contacts maintained with cult-awareness associations (CAAs) after they have left the group. It has even been claimed that the tendency of former members to hold negative and stereotypical attitudes toward their groups would correlate closely with the degree of exposure to the socializing influences of the "anti-cult movement" . . . , and that this relationship results in descriptions of supposed mental aberrations that occurred in the group. Even more, claims have been made that the subjects who had left the group after any kind of exit-counseling would tend to adopt these "anti-cult" organizations, or coalitions of opposition . . . , as their groups of reference, which would in turn pressurize former members to verify their victimization so that they manifested greater difficulties or psychopathology than those who abandoned the group by their own choice. . . . The former members would be encouraged to follow a "social script" defined by the anti-cult organization, which would highlight their role as "victim" or "survivor" in the context of a "captivity narrative." . . . Finally, it has been argued that these negative testimonies and evidence of victimization of the former members, above all those who have been deprogrammed, constitute the main evidence that shapes or influences public opinion regarding these groups . . . . (Almendros, et al., 2009, pp. 117–118)

This summary of the sociological perspective on apostates proved to be important for the research team's findings, because their results directly contradicted these earlier published results.

In essence, Almendros et al. (2009) found that the means by which people left abusive groups had little impact on their subsequent feelings about having been abused in them. The so-called atrocities that many former members recounted were not functions of having either been counselled or in contact with anticult associations:

> Unlike the arguments forwarded from the sociological camp, which tend to discredit information provided by former members who have received counseling, our data show no differences regarding the perceptions of the motives for disaffiliating from the group, or in the abusive practices reported, between those who left "voluntarily". . . , those who left after a period of what we have termed "personal reflection" (considering only those subjects who chose just this one option), and those whose exit was counseled or "involuntary." . . . Indeed, we should stress the similarity in the perceptions among these individuals of the psychological abuse experienced in their former groups, manifested both in their overall scores on the [Group Psychological Abuse Scale],[19] and in the types of abuse captured by the subscales. Likewise, neither did we find any significant differences in the psychological distress . . . in the two groups and in both sexes.

> The same absence of differences in the variables mentioned was also found when we compared the group of individuals who had received assistance from a [cult awareness association] and the group who had not. We had expected to find differences between the groups, but, contrary to arguments forwarded from a sociological perspective, we expected those differences along the lines that counseled individuals would show lower levels of psychological distress. Among these participants, Almendros . . . found

---

[19] The Group Psychological Abuse Scale comprises four subscales that measure compliance, exploitation, mind control, and dependency (Chambers et al., 1994).

no differences in the psychological distress reported between those who had received counseling after leaving (excluding those receiving this support at the time they participated in the study), and those who had never received any psychological help following their exit from the group. Overall, our results do not suggest that former members demonstrate any benefits from counseling, whenever it was received in their psychological state at the time they responded to the questionnaires. It is possible that the professional help they received would, in many cases, have been of a generalist type, given the lack of specialist resources for this particular social group. . . (Almendros, 2009, pp. 132–133)

The finding of this research undercut the foundational assumptions of the sociological literature from the late 1970s, throughout the 1980s, and into the 1990s. Neither contact with anticult organizations nor counseling affected people's perceptions of abuse regarding their experiences in their former groups. At least according to this study, researchers, therefore, should not discount the accounts of apostates, based either upon their means of exit or their subsequent professional or anticult contacts.

Cottee's 2015 book about apostates took the discussion away from the so-called new religions and looked at them in relation to departures from a major religion—Islam. With the eyes of the world on Islam and its relation to Western values, one topic that has captured the attention of scholars, politicians, and the public is how Islamic countries and their citizens react to alleged defectors from the faith (Warraq, 2003). A 2015 study, for example, by the Law Library of Congress identified "twenty-three countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia . . . that make apostasy, or renouncing one's religion, a capital offense" (Law Library of Congress, 2015, para. 1; see also Marshall and Shea, 2011).

Cottee is aware of these realities, acknowledging that

[a]postasy, to be sure, is a fundamental human rights problem in Muslim-majority countries, where in some states punishment for apostasy is death and violent vigilantism against apostates and religious minorities goes unpunished. (Cottee, 2015, p. 211)

He realized, however, that, at least before the volume that he wrote, "there is not a single sociological study in either article or book form, on the issue of apostasy from Islam" (Cottee, 2015, p. 1). Rather than focusing on these global issues, however, in his book on apostates Cottee was aware of this global perspective; but he chose instead to examine closely the accounts of 35 apostate Muslims in the United Kingdom (26) and Canada (9). Through these interviews and related correspondence (Cottee, 2015, p. 5), Cottee observed what it was like to be an ex-Muslim in the West. Before entering into his findings, however, Cottee reviewed the dominant sociological literature on apostasy, and found it lacking:

The anti-apostate narrative is the mirror image of the apostate atrocity narrative and serves to: (1) condemn the apostate's exit; (2) legitimize coercive control against the apostate; and (3) rationalize the apostate's exit or defection to another group.

Anti-apostate narratives have thus far received little or no sustained attention in the sociology of apostasy. This may in part reflect a systematic religious bias in the sociological sub-specialism, in which all the critical hermeneutic energy is focused on demystifying the rhetoric of apostates and their sponsors. The counter-rhetoric of religious groups is alas neglected and marginalized to the periphery of scholarly concern. This gives the unfortunate impression that it is only apostates who are in the business of constructing 'narrative tales' for the purposes of condemnation and that it is only religious groups which are on the receiving end of moral crusades. But the reverse is also undoubtedly true, as Stephen A. Kent has convincingly

argued. The sociological literature on NRMs, Kent says, "has focused almost exclusively upon the construction of 'atrocity tales' by members and organizations in the 'countercult movement'" [Kent, 1990, p. 409]. Missing from this literature, however, is any systematic examination of the efforts of religious groups to "portray their opponents as intolerable deviants" [Kent, 1990, p. 409]. Kent's argument is that the condemnatory rhetoric of religious groups against their former members is as much a legitimate area of scholarly concern as the condemnatory rhetoric of apostates. (Cottee, 2015, p. 28–29)

Cottee had not been a part of the "cult wars" in the latter part of the twentieth century, which might help explain why he was able to cut through the rhetoric of the period and refocus the issue of apostates' testimonies in a balanced perspective with their opponents.

Probably, though, Cottee felt compelled to dispel the older sociological bias against apostates because he saw a similar bias in some politically Leftist circles against ex-Muslim apostates:

On the left . . . , the question of Islamic apostasy barely registers and is seen at best as a diversion from more pressing issues, like the emancipation of Palestine. On the occasions when it is discussed, concern over apostates is typically derided as 'Islamophobic' and activist ex-Muslims are attacked in an *ad hominem* register as charlatans out for their own ends. (Cottee, 2015, p. 4)

Cottee wanted none of this. At least for people in the West with whom he spoke and communicated, ex-Muslims have difficult negotiations within their communities, their families, and societies at large.

In contrast with the sociological image of apostates in the latter part of the twentieth century, many of the people whom Cottee studied left Islam and simply were trying to move on with their lives:

Indeed, far from being a tool of social control, many apostates find themselves as its primary *target*: as objects of condemnation, even demonization and coercion. They appear in degradation ceremonies alright, not as hostile witnesses, but as stigmatized 'others,' ritually vilified for their insubordination and 'treachery.' (Cottee, 2015, p. 26 [italics in original])

The struggles, therefore, that they encounter because of their apostate stance comprise important stories that are worth hearing and telling (Cottee, 2015, p. 5). Cottee did not want their narratives dismissed and degraded as apostate accounts were in sociological circles in the1980s and 1990s.

Conclusion

Bias among prominent sociologists of religion at the end of the twentieth century led to their dismissal of former cult members' accounts as unreliable and self-serving. Some of these sociologists argued that they were shifting the discussion away from a social psychological perspective (which looked at the motivations for apostasy) to a structural perspective, which examined how social-control agents used these apostate accounts. Amidst this shift was a deeply buried and generally unrecognized bias that attempted to protect many new religions by avoiding analyses of accuracy within apostate charges. This attempt likely had its roots in academics' negative reaction to deprogramming and the frequent atrocity tales that some deprogrammers pressured their clients to speak or write.

This avoidance of analyzing apostates' tales for information about their former groups first appeared when sociologists of religion dismissed the late-nineteenth-century accounts of an apostate Mormon, and it led to a published article by three prominent sociologists that justified not examining apostate claims, not only because they supposedly were difficult to evaluate, but also because the issue of validation was irrelevant to them. Here, as in other places, *sociologists passed off assertion as research.* This shift to a structural examination, however, provided only a partial picture of the new

religious scene and resulted in a failure to identify and examine what the renounced groups said and did about their apostates and other critics. In addition, this shift resulted in a failure to examine any criticisms that apostates offered about the groups they left. We are reminded here of words by the social philosopher of knowledge, Karl R. Popper (1902–1994), who (writing during and after World War II) decried intellectual traditions that diminished democracy and valorized attacks on reason. In his 1944 preface, Popper argued,

> If our civilization is to survive, we must break with the habit of deference to great [people]. Great [people] may make great mistakes; and . . . some of the greatest leaders of the past supported the perennial attack on freedom and reason. Their influence, too rarely challenged, continues to mislead those on whose defence civilization depends, and to divide them. (Popper, 1950, p. v)

Prominent sociological thinkers at the end of the twentieth century ignored and discredited observations by people who often had lived within authoritarian, antidemocratic, and abusive ideological groups, banishing the content of their criticisms from the social debate about many new religions. In doing so, they suppressed democratic, free debate by informed persons.

Ignored by these prominent sociologists were small numbers of dissenters. These dissenters argued for careful examination of the content of apostate accounts as possible glimpses behind the curtains of new religious life. One dissenting article even argued for a concomitant examination of accounts by apostates *and* their former groups, realizing that both of them may be the targets of delegitimation efforts regarding their opponents.

Perhaps with subsequent scholarship on new religions and similar ideological groups, we will learn about the damage such bias against former members' accounts has caused in previous scholarship. Some indication of that damage appeared in the analysis of AWARE's multiparty and multidisciplinary study of Church Universal and Triumphant, but similar damage likely was much more widespread. Gatekeeper

scholars shouted down or avoided attempts to take apostate accounts seriously, because to do so was a direct challenge to the biased but pervasive sociological disciplinary norm. An entire generation of scholarship may have been compromised.

Difficult to assess is what impact this biased perspective may have had on the courts. With one of the world's leading sociologists pronouncing that neither courts nor objective academics should accept apostates' accounts, scholars' expert reports in cases likely were compromised, and former-member witnesses may have been inappropriately attacked if not rejected. An examination of two court cases, however, provides evidence that, at least in them, virtually all of this prominent sociologist's pronouncements about apostates in most instances proved to be incorrect.

In the twenty-first century, the study of apostasy has expanded from new religions to Islam. Some few studies have looked at apostasy within the context of theological or political perspectives, but Simon Cottee's study that paid attention to the early sociological apostasy scholarship examined Western apostates from that faith. This examination, however, rejected the dominant bias of these earlier studies in and around the 1980s and 1990s about apostates' accounts by reaching back into that period to identify some of the dissenting voices. One voice that this author singled out had called for studies of both apostates and antiapostate accounts. Adopting this balanced perspective, new religious scholars will be able to critically examine some of the biased scholarship of the past. The last words, therefore, on the sects, cults, and new religions of the late twentieth century have yet to be written.

Bibliography

Almendros, C., Carrobles, J. A., Rodriguez-Carballeira, Á., & Gámez-Guadix, M. (2009). Reasons for leaving: Psychological abuse and distress reported by former members of cultic groups. *Cultic Studies Review, (8)*2, 111–140.

Arrington, L. J. (1998). *Adventures of a church historian.* Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Arrington, L. J., & Bitton, D. (1979). *The Mormon experience.* New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Arrington, L. J., & Haupt, J. (1968). Intolerable Zion: The image of Mormonism in nineteenth century American literature. *Western Humanities Review, (22)*3, 243–260.

Ayella, M. (1993). "They must be crazy": Some of the difficulties in researching "cults." *American Behavioral Scientist, 33*, 562–577. (Reprinted in C. M. Renzetti and R. M. Lee (Eds.), *Researching sensitive topics* (pp. 108–124). London, UK: Sage.

Bagley, W. (2002). *Blood of the prophets: Brigham Young and the massacre at Mountain Meadows.* Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

Balch, R. W. (1985). What's wrong with the study of new religions and what we can do about it? In Brock K. Kilbourne (Ed.), *Scientific research and new religions: Divergent perspectives* (pp. 24–39). San Francisco, CA: American Association for the Advancement of Science, Pacific Division.

Balch, R. W., & Langdon, S. (1998). How the problem of malfeasance gets overlooked in studies of new religions: An examination of the AWARE study of the Church Universal and Triumphant. In Anson Shupe (Ed.), *Wolves among the fold: Religious leadership and abuses of power* (pp. 191–211). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Beaman, L. (2006). Response: Who decides? Harm, polygamy, and limits on freedom. *Nova Religio, (10)*1, 43–51.

Beckford, J. A. (1985). *Cult controversies: The societal response to the new religious movements.* London, UK: Tavistock.

Blatchford, C. (1975, March 7). How father took Linda from sect. *Globe and Mail*, pp. 1, 2.

Brill. (2013). *Handbook of religion and the authority of science.* (publicity page). Retrieved from http://www.brill.com/handbook-religion-and-authority-science

Brodie, F. (1971/1945). *No man knows my history: The life of Joseph Smith the Mormon prophet.* (Second revised and enlarged edition reprinted 1985). New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Bromley, D. G. (1988a). Deprogramming as a mode of exit from new religious movements. In David G. Bromley (Ed.), *Falling from the faith: Causes and consequences of religious apostasy* (pp. 185–204). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Bromley, D. G. (1998b). The social construction of contested exit roles: Defectors, whistleblowers, and apostates. In David G. Bromley (Ed.), *The politics of religious apostasy: The role of apostates in the transformation of religious movements* (pp. 19–48). Westport, CT: Praeger.

Bromley, D. G. (1998c). Sociological perspectives on apostasy: An overview. In David G. Bromley (Ed.), *The politics of religious apostasy: The role of apostates in the transformation of religious movements* (pp. 3–16). Westport, CT: Praeger.

Bromley, D. G., & Shupe, A. D., Jr. (1979). The Tnevnoc cult. *Sociological Analysis, (40)*4, 361–366.

Bromley, D. G., & Shupe, A. D., Jr. (1981). *Strange gods: The great American cult scare.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Bromley, D. G., Shupe, A., Jr., & Ventimilia, J. C. (1979). Atrocity tales, the Unification Church, and the social construction of evil. *Journal of Communication, 29*, 42–53.

Bromley, D. G., Shupe, A., Jr., & Ventimilia, J. C. (1983). The role of anecdotal atrocities in the social construction of evil. In David G. Bromley & James T. Richardson (Eds.), *The brainwashing/deprogramming controversy: Sociological, psychological, legal and historical perspectives* (pp. 139–160). Toronto, Canada: Edwin Mellon Press.

Bullock, S. C. (1989). A pure and sublime system: The appeal of post-revolutionary freemasonry. *Journal of the Early Republic, (9)*3 (Autumn), 359–373.

Carter, L. F. (1998). Carriers of tales: On assessing credibility of apostate and other outsider accounts of religious practices. In David G. Bromley (Ed.), *The politics of religious apostasy: The role of apostates in the transformation of religious movements* (pp. 221–237). Westport, CT: Praeger.

Chambers, W. V., Langone, M. D., Dole, A. D., & Grice, J. W. (1994). Group Psychological Abuse Scale: A measure of the varieties of cultic abuse. *Cultic Studies Journal, (11)*1, 88–117. Available online at http://www.icsahome.com/articles/the-group-psychological-abuse-scale-csj-11-1-1994

Compton, T. (1997). *In sacred loneliness: The plural wives of Joseph Smith.* Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books.

Coser, L. (1954). The age of the informer. *Dissent*, (Summer), 249–254.

Coser, L. (1956). *The functions of social conflict.* New York, NY: The Free Press.

Cottee, S. (2015). *The apostates: When Muslims leave Islam.* London, UK: Hurst.

Davis, D. B. (1960). Some themes of counter-subversion: An analysis of anti-Masonic, anti-Catholic, and anti-Mormon literature. *Mississippi Valley Historical Review, (47)*2 (September), 205–224.

Dawson, Lorne L. (2001). Raising Lazarus: A methodological critique of Stephen Kent's revival of the brainwashing model. In Benjamin Zablocki, & Thomas Robbins (Eds.), *Misunderstanding cults: Searching for objectivity in a controversial field* (pp. 379–400). Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Derounian-Stodola, K. Z. (2009). Ann Eliza Young (Denning). *Legacy, (26)*1, 150–159.

Derounian-Stodola, K. Z. (2014). Ann Eliza Young: A star on the nineteenth-century American lecture circuit. *Studies in American Culture, (17)*1, 27–57.

Freckelton, I. (1998). 'Cults', calamities and psychological consequences. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law. (5)*1, 1–46. doi:10. 1080/13218719809524918

Gentle Wind et al. v. Garvey and Bergin. (2006a). CV-06-11. Complaint. District Court of Maine. (January 9). Copy in Stephen A Kent Collection on Alternative Religions, University of Alberta.

Gentle Wind et al. v. Garvey and Bergin. (2006b). CV-06-11. Settlement Agreement. District Court of Maine. (October 24). Copy in Stephen A Kent Collection on Alternative Religions, University of Alberta.

Gentry, L. H. (1974, Summer). The Danite Band of 1838. *Brigham Young University Studies, (14)*4, 421–450.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes of the management of spoiled identity.* New York, NY: Touchstone.

Government of Maine. (1969). *Maine revised statutes. Title 5: Administrative Procedures and Services,* Chapter 10, Unfair trade practices, §207, Unlawful acts and conduct [1969, c. 577, §1 (NEW).]. Available online at https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/5/title5ch10.pdf

Gentle Wind Project (GWP). (n.d.). The sacred instrument of the Tao: The Tao for the 21st century: Healing instrument manual.

(Collected papers). (Box 7 "Tao Instrument" Stephen A Kent Collection on Alternative Religions, University of Alberta).

Gentle Wind Project (GWP). (2004a). Gentle Wind Project. Retrieved online at *gentlewindproject.org* (URL no longer available). Copy in Stephen A Kent Collection on Alternative Religions, University of Alberta.

Gentle Wind Project (GWP). (2004b, December 2). A holiday invitation. *The Weekly Packet*, p. 6. Copy in Stephen A Kent Collection on Alternative Religions, University of Alberta.

Gentle Wind Project (GWP). (2004c, December 9). Coming events. *Compass*, p. 4. Copy in Stephen A Kent Collection on Alternative Religions, University of Alberta.

Harpur, T. (1976, January 6). Forcibly 'rescued' woman, 20, rejoins Hare Krishna sect. *Toronto Star*, p. B1.

Hexham, I., & Poewe, K. (2001, April). New religions and the anticult movement in Canada. *Nova Religio, (4)*2, 2881–288. Reprinted (with K. Poewe's name added as coauthor) In Phillip Charles Lucas, & Thomas Robbins (Eds.), *New religious movements in the 21st century* (pp. 241–250). London, UK: Routledge.

Jessop, C. (with Palmer, L.). (2007). *Escape*. New York, NY: Broadway Books.

Kent, S. A. (1990). Deviance labelling and normative strategies in the Canadian "new religions/countercult" debate. *Canadian Journal of Sociology, (15)*4, 393–416. Available online at https://skent.ualberta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Deviance-Labelling-and-Normative-Strategies.pdf

Kent, S. A. (1994a). Lustful prophet: A psychosocial historical study of the Children of God's leader, David Berg. *Cultic Studies Journal, (11)*2, 135–188.

Kent, S. A. (1994b, Spring). Misattribution and social control in the Children of God. *Journal of Religion and Health, (33)*1, 29–43.

Kent, S. A. (2001a). Brainwashing programs in The Family/Children of God and Scientology. In Benjamin Zablocki, & Thomas Robbins (Eds.), *Misunderstanding cults: Searching for objectivity in a controversial field* (pp. 349–378). Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Kent, S. A. (2001b). Compelling evidence: A rejoinder to Lorne Dawson's chapter. In Benjamin Zablocki, & Thomas Robbins (Eds.), *Misunderstanding cults: Searching for objectivity in a controversial field* (pp. 349–378). Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Kent, S. A. (2001c). *From slogans to mantras: Social protest and religious conversion in the late Vietnam War era.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Kent, S. A. (2004). Generational revolt by the adult children of first-generation members of the Children of God/The Family. *Cultic Studies Review, (3)*1, 56–72.

Kent, S. A. (2005). Education and reeducation in ideological organizations and their Implications for Children." *Cultic Studies Review (4)*2: 119–145.

Kent, S. A., & Hall, D. (2000). "Brainwashing and Re-Indoctrination Programs in the Children of God/the Family. *Cultic Studies Journal, 17*, 56–78.

Kent, S. A., & Krebs, T. (1998). When scholars know sin: Alternative religions and their academic supporters. *Skeptic, (6)*3, 36–43.

Kent, S. A., & Krebs, T. (1999). Clarifying contentious issues: A rejoinder to Melton, Shupe, and Lewis. *Skeptic, (7)*1, 21–26.

Kent, S. A., & and Szimhart, J. P. (2002). Exit counseling and the decline of deprogramming. *Cultic Studies Review, (1)*3, 241–291.

Langone, M. (2000). The 'two camps' of cultic studies: Time for a dialogue. *Cultic Studies Journal, 17,* 79–100.

Law Library of Congress. (2015, June 30). Laws criminalizing apostasy Retrieved online at http://www.loc.gov/law/help/apostasy/#summary (Full report available online at http://www.loc.gov/law/help/apostasy/apostasy.pdf

Lee, J. D. (1877). *Mormonism unveiled (or The life and confessions of the late Mormon bishop, John D. Lee…).* St. Louis, MO: Bryan, Brand & Company; New York, NY: W. H. Stelle & Co.

LeSueur, S. C. (1987). *The 1838 Mormon war in Missouri.* Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.

Lewis, J. R. (1989). Apostates and the legitimation of repression: Some historical and empirical perspectives on the cult controversy. *Sociological Analysis, (49)*4, 386–396.

Lewis, J. R. (1993, March 4). Letter to Monty L. Lynn. (1 p.).

Lewis, J. R. (1995). *The dream encyclopedia.* Detroit, MI: Visible Ink Press.

Lewis, J. R. (1999). Let the scholar who is without sin cast the first stone: James R. Lewis responds. *Skeptic, (7)*1, 18–21.

Lewis, J. R. (2010). Autobiography of a schism. *Marburg Journal of Religion, (15)*1. Available online at https://www.uni-marburg.de/fb03/ivk/mjr/pdfs/2010/articles/lewis_2010.pdf

Lofland, J., & Skovovd, L. N. (1981). Conversion motifs. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, (20)*4, 373–385.

MacKinnon, W. P. (2007, Spring). 'Lonely bones': Leadership and Utah war violence. *Journal of Mormon History, 33,* 121–178.

Marshall, P., & Shea, N. (2011). *Silence: How apostasy and blasphemy codes are choking freedom worldwide.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Miller, J. (2005, July). Deposition of John D. Miller *Gentle Wind et al v. Bergin Garvey et al.* 04-CV-103-PC. United States District Court for the District of Maine.: 1–197.13 July. Copy in Stephen A Kent Collection on Alternative Religions, University of Alberta.

Miller, M. (1999, January). The Gentle Wind Project healing emotional wounds. *Townsend Letter for Doctors & Patients.* (January): Print. Available online at http://www.tldp.com/issue/186/Gentle%20Wind%20Project.htm

Miller, M. (2005, July 11). Deposition of Mary E. Miller. 04-CV-103-PC *Gentle Wind et al. v. Bergin Garvey et al.* United States District Court for the District of Maine.1–199 (July 11). Copy in Stephen A Kent Collection on Alternative Religions, University of Alberta.

Miller, M. (2010). *Caught in the act of helping: How a government official destroyed twenty-three years of effort aimed at producing a revolutionary new stress relief technology.* USA: Life-Insights Publications. Copy in Stephen A Kent Collection on Alternative Religions, University of Alberta.

Musser, R. (with Cook, M. B.). (2013). *The witness wore red: The 19th wife who brought polygamous cult leaders to justice.* Boston, MA: Grand Central Publishers.

Nietzsche, F. (1883–1885/1999). *Thus spoke Zarathustra.* Translated by Thomas Common (1911), republished in 1999. Mineola, NY: Dover.

Orwell, G. (1949). *1984.* Reprinted 1961. New York, NY: New American Library.

Palmer, D., & Perrin, D. (2004). *Keep sweet: Children of polygamy.* Lister, BC, Canada: Dave's Press.

Patrick, T. (with Dulack, T.). (1976). *Let our children go!* New York, NY: E. P. Dutton.

Popper, K. R. (1950). *The open society and its enemies.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Roberts, D. (2008). *Devil's gate: Brigham Young and the great Mormon handcart tragedy.* Toronto, Canada: Simon & Schuster.

Schachter, H. (1975, March 7). Parents 'rescue' girl from sect. *Toronto Star,* C1.

Scheler, M. (1915/1923/1961). *Ressentiment (t*ranslated in 1923 by William W. Holdheim; edited by Lewis Coser in 1961). New York, NY: Free Press of Glencoe.

Shupe, A. D., Jr. (1981). The historical perspective. In Ansun D. Shupe, Jr. (Ed.), *Six perspectives on new religions: A case study approach* (pp. 207–219). Toronto, Canada: Edwin Mellon Press.

Shupe, A. D., Jr. (1998). The role of apostates in the North American anticult movement." In David G. Bromley (Ed.), *The politics of religious apostasy: The role of apostates in the transformation of religious movements* (pp. 209–212). Westport, CT: Praeger.

Shupe, A. D., Jr., & Bromley, D. G. (1980). *The new vigilantes: Deprogrammers, anti-cultists and the new religions.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Shupe, A. D., Jr., & Bromley, D. G. (1981). Apostates and atrocity stories: Some parameters in the dynamics of deprogramming. In Bryan Wilson (Ed.), *The social impact of new religious movements* (pp. 179–215). New York, NY: Rose of Sharon Press.

Siskind, A. (1994). The Sullivan Institute/Fourth Wall Community: 'Radical' psychotherapy as quasi-religion. In Arthur L. Greil, & Thomas Robbins (Eds.), *Between sacred and secular: Research and theory on quasi-religion* (pp. 5–77). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Siskind, A. (2001). Telling tales, naming names; My experience as apostate and ethnographer of the Sullivan Institute/Fourth Wall Community. In David G. Bromley, & Lewis F. Carter (Eds.), *Toward reflexive ethnography: Participating, observing, narrating* (pp. 181–196). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Smith, G. D. (2008). *Nauvoo polygamy "but we call it celestial marriage."* Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books.

Solomon, D. A. (1984). *In my father's house.* Toronto, Canada: Franklin Watts.

Spenser, I.(2009). *Cult insanity: A memoir of polygamy, prophets, and blood atonement.* Boston, MA: Center Street.

State of Maine and Maine Attorney General v. The Gentle Wind Project et al. (2006, August 9). ALFSC-CV-2006-00221 Consent decree and order. Superior Court Civil Action. 1–10 (August 9). Copy in Stephen A Kent Collection on Alternative Religions, University of Alberta.

Sweney, M. (2016, July 19). Scientology leader's complaint over *Mail Online*'s Tom Cruise story upheld. *The Guardian,* Available online at https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jul/19/scientology-mail-online-tom-cruise-david-miscavige

Van Eck Duymaer van Twist, A. (2015). *Perfect children: Growing up in the religious fringe.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Wall, E. (with Pulitzer, L.). (2008). *Stolen innocence: My story of growing up in a polygamous sect, becoming a teenage bride, and breaking free of Warren Jeffs.* New York, NY: William Morrow.

Wallace, I. (1961). *The twenty-seventh wife.* Bergenfield, NJ: New American Library.

Warraq, I. (2003). *Leaving Islam: Apostates speak out.* Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

WERU. (1997, March 24). *An ounce of prevention* (host: Geri Aucoin-Behre; guest, Mary 'Moe' Miller). Cassette (Part Two). (Copy in Stephen A Kent Collection on Alternative Religions, University of Alberta.

Wilson, B. R. (1990). *The social dimensions of sectarianism: Sects and new religious movements in contemporary society.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Wilson, B. R. (1994). *Apostates and new religious movements.* Los Angeles, CA: Freedom Publication. Available online at http://hatewatch.freedommag.org/hatewach/experts/eng/wilson01.pdf

Wilson, S. G. (2004). *Leaving the fold: Apostates and defectors in antiquity.* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Young, A. E. (1875). *Wife no. 19: The story of a life in bondage, being a complete exposé of Mormonism, and revealing the sorrows, sacrifices and sufferings of women in polygamy (1876 reprint).* Hartford, CT: Dustin, Gilman. (2007 facsimile reprint: Digireads.com Publishing, Stilwell, KS.)

About the Authors

Stephen A. Kent, PhD, Professor of Sociology, University of Alberta, teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on the sociology of religion and the sociology of sectarian groups. He has published articles in numerous sociology and religious study journals. His 2001 book, *From Slogans to Mantras: Social Protest and Religious Conversion in the Late Vietnam War Era,* was selected by *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* as an Outstanding Academic Title for 2002. In 2012 he received The Margaret Thaler Singer Award for advancing the understanding of coercive persuasion and undue influence from the International Cultic Studies Association. E-mail: steve.kent@ualberta.ca

Kayla Swanson, MA, earned her Master of Arts in Religious Studies degree from the University of Alberta in 2015 in Religious Studies. Her master's thesis focused on the Gentle Wind Project as a quasi-religion, new-age, alternative health movement. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies with a minor in Political Science from the University of Alberta in 2012.