

# Out of the Cults and Into the Church

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Understanding & Encouraging  
Ex-Cultists

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## CHAPTER TWO

# *Culture Shock*

*When two worlds collide*

The shock shattered me! It was like someone had crept up behind me and hit me full force with a baseball bat—I saw the Pastor drinking coffee!"

As Myra, Judy's ex-Mormon friend, shared with me, my heart went out to her. This twenty-six year old young woman with auburn hair and blue eyes displayed the mixture of emotions I recognized so well—the anger, the pained, bewildered look, the wrenching struggle to keep back the tears.

Her emotional reaction was not unusual. Myra's two worlds had collided. She was going through religious culture shock, that violent conflict one encounters after leaving one religion and entering another. A painful, disabling, and threatening experience.

Like other former cultists, Myra had not let go of doctrines she believed were of divine origin. She still carried her cult baggage with her, coffee abstinence and all. She needed help; otherwise, she might slip back into the arms of the cult.

I had briefly met Myra before, but this was the first time I had been to her apartment. She ushered me into the front room, inviting me to sit on the couch near an open window. It was a balmy evening, and the slow rhythmic chorus of crickets offered a serene backdrop. However, this was not reflective of Myra's emotions. Shock and inability to cope with Christians drinking coffee had left her frantic.

"As a dedicated Latter-day Saint" Myra continued, "I believed in the "Word of Wisdom" and strictly lived it. No coffee, tea, alcohol or tobacco—not even Coca Cola. My body was a temple for the Holy Spirit!

"When I saw the Pastor drinking coffee," she continued, "I managed to cover up my upset—as usual. But questions shot through my mind: If the Pastor is God's anointed leader in a church that is supposed to be more true than the cult, how can he violate his body? If he's in contact with God, God should have given him a revelation about such things. Was Joseph Smith, who received a revelation on the subject of keeping one's body clean, more in tune with God than this Pastor?"

Maybe Joseph Smith really *was* a prophet and I've made a terrible mistake by leaving!

"You can't imagine the panic I felt," she said, her voice shaking. "I was a wreck the entire evening. I was nearly ready to chuck Christianity and go back to Mormonism."

Myra's behavior was similar to a traveler arriving in a foreign country. Encountering unexpected situations which conflict with one's perspectives, a traveler feels uncertain and anxious. He doesn't know how to respond. He experiences trauma and shock because he thinks all people are basically the same and should act as he does. When he discovers this is not true, he isn't merely surprised, he's threatened.<sup>1</sup> He feels different, unaccepted, fearful. In addition, communication is difficult if not impossible. He wants to return home! This is how Myra was feeling. I knew she also wanted to return "home."

"Just when I think I'm doing pretty good," she continued, "I come face to face with more upsets in the church. Like the disrespect of using the pronoun 'you' when praying, instead of 'thee' and 'thou.' And I just can't understand why the pastor doesn't claim extra-biblical revelation or why some preachers have to shout—it's so irreverent! And . . . passing the plate - I mean, how commercial can you get! Aren't Christians committed enough to volunteer their tithing without having to be asked?"

"However," she quickly added, "I *am* convinced that Mormon doctrine is unbiblical—and I *have* decided I want to be in a church that goes by the Bible. But," she exclaimed, waving her arms in a frantic gesture, "I get upset over so many things! As a result, I sit in church looking at the

Christians, and something inside me says, *Myra - You're different from these people - you don't belong here. Why don't you get up and leave?* Sometimes I do." With that, Myra got up and walked over to the window. She stood there for a few moments trying to control her emotions.

"Have you spoken with your pastor or someone else in the church about this?" I asked.

"Heavens no!" she said, whirling around, "I can't explain myself to myself, let alone to them! Sometimes I don't even know why I'm upset. Besides, they'd think I was being critical." She paused. "It isn't actually criticism, you know. I don't know what it is." She dropped into her chair.

"Myra," I interrupted, "you're right where God wants you. You're going through a big adjustment right now. It's not easy to accept the fact that drinking coffee or other contradictions you're encountering, may not be a sin. You came out of a church programmed to believe God literally dictates every standard and taboo. Now you're in a church which claims God doesn't do that—it's left up to the

individual. You're not the first ex-cultist to experience culture shock, and you won't be the last."

"Culture shock?" she replied quizzically. "What's that got to do with church?"

Like many others, Myra had never thought of religion as a culture. But, the Mormon Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Unification Church—even Christian churches—are all cultures.

Each religion has its own world and unique ways of doing things—like a nation, tribe, or ethnic community. Each has its patterned ways of thinking and feeling—its shared symbols, meanings, values, ideas, standards and bonds. Each establishes roles, form self-images, transform lifestyles and attitudes, and foster certain behaviors and expectations in members. Christianity also produces these same elements. The major difference is, however, that it derives its cultural mores, mentality, values and bonds, not from self-appointed leaders but from God's revealed Word.

"Myra," I said, "considering the powerful influence a religion exerts, it's no wonder you're having a difficult time. At this stage, you're not able to stand outside of your former culture yet and see what an effect Mormonism had on you. One author put it very effectively. The effects of a culture on an individual are 'interwoven into a . . . complex fabric, woof and warp, color and pattern, without separation, stitched on the loom of each person's life.'"<sup>2</sup>

"So, what you're saying," Myra mused, "is that the cultural influence of a religion weaves the strands of our life into a pattern much like the pattern in a rug?"

"Yes," I replied, and if you want to change that pattern, you have to undo every strand. The whole rug, of course, then falls apart."

"What do you mean?" Myra asked.

"I'm saying that when an ex-cultist is confronted with new patterns which require undoing old ones, they are going to fall apart," I said. "It's as simple as that!"

"Simple?" stammered Myra. At that, she broke into uncontrollable sobs.

What Myra was going through would take time. Undoing old patterns and reweaving new ones is, as author Avery Dulles says, so difficult that it results in "mutual incomprehension, inability to communicate, frustration, and discouragement."<sup>3</sup>

Harold Bussell, in his book *By Hook or By Crook*, quotes authors James and Marcia Rudin who in *Prison or Paradise?* explain that "it can take years to overcome the fears and psychological damage incurred in a cultic group." Bussell agrees: "People often need professional help beyond what a pastor or church is able to give."<sup>4</sup>

After drying her eyes and blowing her nose, Myra asked, "Why do I react so violently over all this?"

"Myra, your reaction is perfectly normal. The sudden impact of the situation of seeing your pastor drink coffee was comparable to a head-on collision. Serious ruptures to parts of your mind were taking place. Let me explain.

"Everything we're culturally conditioned to believe and respond to is neatly arranged in 'filing cabinets' in our minds. Each drawer holds folders on various subjects. These contain our experiences, our beliefs, and our learned responses. For example, when we see dark clouds, our mind automatically pulls out a file on 'Weather.' It tells us to expect rain. Our response is to grab an umbrella.

"Every situation in life draws on these files," I said. "They constitute our picture of reality—the way we think things ought to be and the way we should respond."

"When you saw the pastor drinking coffee," I explained, "you went into shock over the difference between what your file on 'God's Health Laws' said you should expect and what you saw. You didn't know how to respond because you had no file folder that would validate his drinking coffee. Shocked by this contradiction, it was like the signals in your brain were short-circuiting. Naturally, you asked yourself, *If he were called of God, why isn't he keeping God's law?*"

"But, I even went home and cried about it," Myra said. "Imagine crying over something like that!"

"You were not only crying over the pastor drinking coffee; you were crying for other reasons too.

"Having your Mormon files neatly organized in your mind, made you feel secure. Now your security was threatened. You felt as if someone had yanked all your efficiently arranged files and thrown them on the floor in a mess beyond rearranging. Your mind was at a complete loss—you had nothing from which to draw. Desperate to put everything back the way you had them, you couldn't. You were crying because you felt powerless.

Myra nodded her head. "Go on," she said.

"In addition, all your beliefs about God and years of faithful abstinence were called into question—not to mention the authenticity of your new religion. In view of this disoriented state, you could react no differently than the way you did."

Myra dried her eyes and, though still visibly shaken, appeared pleased that her behavior had been so well defined.

Since she had prepared refreshments for my visit, she motioned me into the kitchen. Setting a plate of home-made chocolate chip cookies on the counter, she poured some lemonade into two glasses.

While we munched on cookies, she began sharing about the happy times and the disappointing times she had experienced in the Mormon church. She was still

full of questions, so we pulled our chairs onto the patio and continued talking late into the night. We finally quit at two-o'clock in the morning.

Myra, like many other former cultists, had two loads to carry. She was not only experiencing *religious* culture shock, but also *societal* culture shock.

While *religious* cultural shock is the difficulty one encounters after leaving one religion and entering another, *societal* culture shock occurs after a person first emerges from a cult and faces the shock of coping with reentry into society. This reentry alone is no easy task. One ex-Moonie, after being in the Unification Church for only three weeks, was seriously affected when he came out:

Being out in the world again was a shock; a cultural shock in which I was unable to deal with reality. My isolation by the Church [the cult] had been so successful that every day sights such as hamburger stands and televisions and even the people, looked foreign, of another world. I had been reduced to a dependent being! The Church had seen to it that my three weeks with them made me so vulnerable and so unable to cope with the real world, that I was compelled to stay with them."<sup>5</sup>

Considering all the theological, philosophical, and sociological unknowns in entering a new religion and that one suffers two kinds of culture shock, it is no wonder an ex-cultist has a difficult time. In addition, undoing what took years to build into one's belief system is no small task.

Late one afternoon I was surprised to receive a telephone call from ex-Mormon Melanie. She wanted to bring her mother to see me.

"She doesn't understand where I'm coming from," she said. "I try to explain this culture shock thing to her, but we always get into an argument."

"Why don't you come over after dinner," I said.

They drove up to my house at 7:30 p.m. Typical of San Antonio weather, they brought with them a sudden downpour of rain. Having no umbrellas, they made a desperate dash from their car to my front porch, splashing shoe-deep in water.

I ushered them into my warm kitchen and gave them towels for their hair. That broke the ice. We laughed amidst introductions, joking as to why anyone in his right mind would continue living where rain always ended up resembling a flash flood. We then went into the living room with our cups of hot chocolate.

Joan, Melanie's mother, began the conversation. "Melanie says I'm like a 'bull in a china shop' when I talk to her. I don't understand why she should be hurt when I tell her the truth. The Bible states that her cult beliefs are false, and anything false has to be of Satan. It's my responsibility as a Christian to tell her this. I try to help, but only end up making her cry. It's affecting our relationship. In addition, she says



I don't understand the 'culture shock' she claims she's going through. Melanie hasn't left the United States, so why is she saying this?"

I explained to Joan what I explained previously told Myra—that a person leaving a cult and entering a Christian church experiences the same kind of culture shock as a traveler entering a foreign country. To Myra, Christianity is like a foreign country.

"Now when a traveler," I said, "is unable to handle culture shock abroad, there are two options. One can withdraw and return home or else force oneself to become like the nationals.

Melanie is choosing to become like the nationals—Christians. But, on the other hand, if she can't handle it, she has the other option. She can return to the culture she was once comfortable with—the Mormon Church.

"To really help your daughter, you need to be aware that she came out of something very different—not just doctrinally but a very different way of life. This calls for a special sensitivity.

"Go on," Joan said.

"Cultural sensitivity, first of all, requires one to set aside prejudice—not an easy task for some. Secondly, look into the heart of a cultist to see that she is not the depraved individual often pictured. She probably is not a seeker of darkness as so many believe. In fact, she more likely is a seeker of truth, albeit he erred in joining a cult.

"Many join because they are seeking truth, aspire to a more virtuous way of life, and hope for a closer experience with God. The reason they investigate a cult in the first place is to plumb the spiritual depths of all that is available.

"What leads them out, on the other hand, may be two reasons. The cult doesn't live up to its claims, or God is bringing them out based on what Christian theologians have come to call, 'prevenient grace.'"<sup>6</sup>

"I'm sorry," Joan interrupted, "I don't understand that."

"Ex-cultists," I explained, "often say that before they joined a cult, they were praying that God would lead them to truth. Unfortunately, when they encounter a cult claiming to speak for God, they believe their prayers have been answered.

"The cult may satisfy them for a while, but sooner or later the unrest begins. This unrest," I explained, "is the divine urge of God drawing one, or 'prevenient grace' bringing him or her to the truth sought and prayed for in the beginning. Following these promptings out of the cult, he or she finally arrives where God intends."

I poured Joan more hot chocolate, then continued. "The Lord explains prevenient grace in Isaiah 42:16: 'I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them. . . . These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them'" (Isa. 42:16)

I suddenly glanced at the clock and noticed we had been talking for three hours. Walking over to the window, I closed it, then said over my shoulder, "I don't want to keep you too long, but I think we sort of got off the subject of culture shock."

"Explain, again," Joan responded, "what you really mean by my being culturally sensitive."

"Sensitivity means, first of all, to recognize the Mormon Church as a culture. Next, to see how it has indoctrinated Melanie, affected her thinking, influenced her perspective of the world and others, and how it has established certain norms of doing things. If you can do this, it will give you the cultural sensitivity you need. You'll then understand why it's so difficult for her to give up old ways of behavior and thinking and why it takes time."

Joan appeared more relaxed, exhibiting a growing interest in the subject. While Joan was asking more questions, I glanced over at Melanie. The wall she had put up against her mother was starting to crumble. I felt it would be a profitable evening—and it was.

Early the next morning I was in the garden gathering roses when I heard the phone ring. I ran into the house. "Hello," I said out of breath.

"This is Elizabeth." Her voice was hoarse from crying.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't think I'm going to make it in the church. I'm just not adjusting. I feel like throwing in the towel."

"Why do you say that?"

"I just heard about a missionary who went to India. The shock of being in a foreign country and trying to get used to new customs was so traumatic, he couldn't handle it. He ended up deserting his calling and returning home."

"Is that what you'd like to do, Elizabeth?" I set my basket of roses on the counter and scooted the kitchen stool closer to the phone.

"I think about it a lot," she admitted. With all the wear and tear of undoing my beliefs and trying to make new adjustments, returning would sure be easier. If I were back in the cult, I could relax and feel happy and secure again. I'd know exactly how things are and what would be expected of me. And I'd have friends to talk to who would understand me. I guess I'm feeling like that missionary."

"Why don't you come on over," I said.

"Great," she responded quickly and hung up.

I hurriedly grabbed a vase for the roses and filled it with water. It wouldn't take long for her to arrive. Sitting on the porch, I waited. As I suspected, her car pulled up within ten minutes.

"I just don't know why I put myself through all this," Elizabeth started, with tears in her eyes. What doesn't make sense is I think about going back but, at the

same time, I love Jesus and want to stay with these happy Christians. Yet, I'm not comfortable when I go to church because I think they're talking about me.

I know I'm different. But I just don't know how to talk to them—and I know they don't understand me. We just don't speak the same language. I sure miss all my old friends."

"Well, Elizabeth, "you're indeed in the same boat as that missionary. But, you certainly don't need to make the same decision he did."

"But, what if someone just can't make the change?" Elizabeth asked.

"Well," I said, "those who can't make the change, as one author put it, become 'cultural casualties'.<sup>7</sup> But," I said, noting the alarm on her face, "you won't become one of them, Elizabeth. You're going to make it, not only because others have made it, but because I'm going to help you, and God promises to finish every work he starts."

I briefly reiterated to her, as I did to Melanie's mother, the realities of culture shock. That what she was going through was nothing unique. World travelers went through it all the time.

"They too become frustrated and feel like aliens—especially when encountering the language barrier," I said.

"What do they do?" Elizabeth asked.

"They search for someone of their own kind—from their own country—someone who speaks their language. When they do, they form a fraternity. Let me give you an example:

"One summer, I found myself in a Mexicali hospital. There were no nurses who understood English—and my high school Spanish was failing miserably. I couldn't communicate, and sign language was frustrating. I faced a critical situation. Even if I did happen across a nurse who spoke a few words of English, I knew total understanding wasn't taking place because of the cultural differences.

"The few other Americans who found themselves patients in the hospital immediately began poking their heads into others' rooms, hoping to find someone—anyone—who spoke English. Those who weren't bedridden crowded into other patients' rooms, including mine, regardless of how sick we might be—just so they could communicate. Once they did, one would have thought we were all long lost buddies, even though we were strangers.

"It's not uncommon," I added, "for former cultists to feel the same way. They also feel like foreigners trying to communicate in a world they don't understand and, worse yet, where no one understands them.

"That's sure the way I feel," Elizabeth said. I'm desperate to talk to someone else who understands. You're the only ex-cultist I know. Probably what I need, is to find others who have become Christians. Can you put me in touch with any?"

That was when Myra, Elizabeth, Judy, Melanie and Richard began meeting at my home. It was nothing formal or tightly structured—just friends meeting together, who had something in common. They came with their pastors' blessings. It was a relief for each of them to find out they weren't alone.

The discussions were moving and poignant. Other times they became quite analytical, as when they finally acknowledged they were indeed different from most Christians.

"After all, we have come out of a cult," Judy offered. "And long-time-established-Christians do have different mind-sets and do speak another language."

"I think," Richard concluded, "that with all our crazy and weird problems and everything else considered, we're acting like normal ex-cultists."

"Yep, it's consoling," Judy grinned. "And I bet it'll be just a matter of time before we'll be calling ourselves normal Christians!"

Light-hearted discussions were frequent. Richard was always coming up with some "psychiatrist" joke. One he aimed at Elizabeth: "The psychiatrist said to the lady on the couch, 'You're not paranoid about Christians—what they're saying about you is really true!'"

Some get-togethers were spent sharing cult experiences, a procedure which cult researcher Susan Rothbaum confirms as beneficial. Reminiscing about one's cult days, she says, helps to say goodbye to the past, vent feelings about present problems, and look to the future.<sup>8</sup>

All in all, the group gained strength in sharing their convictions about Christ and expressing hope for the future.

The next few days my thoughts were on Elizabeth, Richard, Judy, Myra and Melanie. I could see progress, but it was slow. I knew that with their faith still in a quandary and emotions in a distraught state, family and friends were finding it difficult to show patience. I also thought about established Christians and their zeal in witnessing for Christ. I knew they had no idea how to handle an ex-cultist.

I recalled reading that in about a two-year period, forty thousand members left the Mormon church—many of whom would be entering Christian churches.<sup>9</sup> I also thought of the two year turnover of adolescents who join other cults, then leave when they reach adulthood. Seventy-eight percent immediately enter traditional churches.<sup>10</sup> I knew that if Christians were not prepared to help them, they would drift away or else return to their cults. I needed to come up with some suggestions on how to help.

I soon did. Derived from Philip Harris and Robert Moran's *"Managing Cultural Differences"*, and Craig Storti's book, *The Art of Crossing Cultures*, I adapted both to fit the ex-cultist.<sup>11</sup>

*HOW CAN CHRISTIANS HELP?*

1. *Be informed.* Become knowledgeable by some kind of cross-cultural preparation.

What kind of preparation is needed? An excellent example is the training program described by Harris and Moran. Although designed for businessmen working in foreign countries, it also has application to Christians working with former cultists.<sup>12</sup>

The program stipulates what a trainee needs to learn in anticipation of his contact with another culture. They must become informed about:

- behavioral patterns
- beliefs
- contemporary and historical figures
- family standards and structures
- food customs
- non-verbal forms of communication
- political systems
- power structures
- social structures
- religious holidays
- symbols
- motivational forces

Similarly, this same kind of advice is confirmed by Dr. Margaret Singer in her article, "Coming Out of the Cults." She admonishes those desiring to help cultists, especially therapists, that they learn all about a cult's program (not just the doctrines). If they don't, they will be "unable to open up discussions or even understand what is happening."<sup>13</sup>

When Christians are prepared like the above businessmen, they will be more effective. For example, knowledge of food customs will give an idea of the shock a Hare Krishna or Mormon experiences the first time he sees a pastor drinking coffee. A Hare Krishna is taught that all food is spiritual, that eating is an act of worship. Coffee, as well as alcohol, tea, eggs, meat and fish, are spiritually banned.<sup>14</sup> A Mormon believes God prohibits coffee, as well as caffeinated soft drinks, tea, and tobacco. Drinking coffee is a sin, comparable to breaking a commandment.

With this awareness, Christians can give the new believer an explanation about Christians' use of coffee before he or she actually encounters the situation. This will eliminate the severity of the shock.

2. *Notice similarities and differences between the new believer's cult and your own church (besides doctrines).* A Japanese industrialist made a vital and amazing observation about the differences between American and Japanese firms. He said: "Companies are 95% alike in their approaches and operations, but the 5% difference is what really matters."<sup>15</sup> Attention needs to be paid to the five percent. Those businessmen, anticipating contact with another culture, but who disregarded the five percent difference, experienced a high percentage of failure. In other words, without cross-cultural preparation, they had a 33-66 percent failure rate. Contrast this, however, with those businessmen who took advantage of the training program. Educated to be sensitive to national customs, behavioral patterns, etc., they had only a 2% failure rate!<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, Christians may find ninety-five percent similarities between themselves and a Mormon because they both speak English, live in America, and possibly use the Bible. But, the five percent difference is what is crucial. It may mean the difference between failure and success.

3. *Be culturally sensitive.* A former cultist is convinced Christians have no idea what he or she is going through. Although Christians pray for an ex-cultist with the aim of being successful in winning the ex-cultist to Christ, it takes more than just praying. If there is no understanding of the new convert's former culture and how leaving effects shock, rapport will not be established.

Lack of understanding will bring insensitivity. This can be seen when a well-meaning Christian insists the former cultist attend the Sunday School's class on "Cults." This class will not prove beneficial—it will have a negative result. The ex-cultist does not want to hear her cult's doctrines put down, even though she no longer believes them. Attacking a new convert's former faith is not effective.

Cultural sensitivity also allows one to understand the obstacles new converts are faced with. They must:

- Acquire group identity with new peers
- Change their identity
- Assess acceptable behavior
- Break language and communication barriers
- Cope with new cultural expectations
- Determine norms
- Give up old signs and symbols, embrace new ones
- Master new customs and rituals

Lack of sensitivity may be one more factor that will push the new convert back into the arms of the cult.

How can one acquire cultural sensitivity? (1) by asking God to develop it; (2) by studying all aspects of a cult; and (3) by being willing to listen noncritically to the ex-cultist tell about her happy experiences in the cult. (Despite his reasons for leaving, she may still have fond memories she needs to talk about and work through.)

4. *Introduce the former cultist to a support group.* If one is not available, begin one. When a tourist experiences culture shock, especially if he intends to stay for some time in the new country, he looks for a support group to help him adjust.

An excellent example took place in India between 1857 and 1947. When the British army arrived in India, they went into severe culture shock. To survive their years of anticipated service, they created support groups or fraternities. However, they were so desperate they went to extremes. They created a miniature England! Author, Craig Storti, says they: "chose to construct uncannily accurate replicas of Wilshire and Devon villages, complete with parade grounds, bandstands, . . . stone churches, picket fences, gravel walkways, even golf courses where feasible, clinging tenaciously to a lifestyle more passionately British, if the truth be told, than many of them had ever lived back home."<sup>17</sup>

Observer, Charles Allen says that after coming in from the streets of India and stepping inside their home, "you were back in Cheltenham or Bath . . . .You went from bungalow to bungalow and you found the same sort of furniture, the same sort of dinner table set, the same kind of conversation."<sup>18</sup> It gave them necessary support while they adapted to the language and customs of India.

One, of course, doesn't expect ex-cultists to go to this extreme. But, the experience above illustrates the problems when switching cultures and the desperate need to communicate with someone of like mind.

Similarly, the former cultist needs to find other individuals from his own country—those who speak his language. Through mutual support, the new convert can gradually let go of his past and adapt to his new culture.

5. *Suggest ways of handling culture shock.* Because of the shock former cultists receive from observing Christian customs and behavior which differ from their own, it often leads him or her to criticize, as well as be offended. While it should go without saying that the new convert should rely upon God to help in those moments, the reality is that at the time of the upset he or she probably won't feel like praying. Therefore, a logical plan is also helpful.

First, explain to the former cultist what religious culture shock is. Tell him that one of the keys to handling it is *awareness*, then *analysis*. Craig Storti calls

this process, "instinct override." It is the way travelers eliminate emotional stress<sup>19</sup> and will also work for the new convert.

Suggest that when he encounters a situation, the ex-cultist should train himself to become aware of his agitated feelings the *instant* they arise. Then he should analyze what is taking place. If he can shift into an analysis, his emotions will subside. This is because emotion and logic cannot occupy the same place at the same time.

Further, tell him: "At the moment of your reaction, say to yourself, 'I am making a judgment, but my judgment is based on my cult experience. I do not know enough about Christian customs or beliefs yet to have a legitimate grievance.'"

If the new convert can practice this instant analysis, a great deal of frustration will be neutralized. Here is a summary of the steps:

1. A cultural incident in the church occurs which is the primary *action*.
2. This causes a *reaction* (anger, fear, etc.).
3. He is then faced with *two options*: withdraw or become aware of his reaction and analyze it. By analyzing, emotions will subside.
4. He is then to *reflect* on the cause of his reaction.
5. Then his *reaction subsides*.
6. *Result*: The ex-cultist develops culturally appropriate expectations, and his sense of offense, anger, or hurt, subsides.<sup>20</sup>

Eventually, the former cultist will see that his offended feelings are not a result of what Christians are doing to him or what they are doing against God, but because he is expecting them to think and respond with the same mentality.

Finally, ask him to set aside time at the end of each day to reflect on why he reacted a certain way. Have him write down the situation, his reaction, and analysis. Tell him you will discuss it with him later. When he recognizes that the cult conditioned him into having certain expectations and reflexes, he will see that Christians are neither sinning nor behaving incorrectly.

He then needs to repent, ask God's forgiveness for his criticism, and continue to ask for God's help to adjust to his new religious culture. His behavior will then be altered, and he can view Christian customs from a new perspective.

The above procedure was of great use in our home meetings. As Elizabeth attended our get-togethers, talked about her problems, and listened to others' advice and encouragement, emotional upheavals gradually subsided. It didn't happen overnight, but within the first year her reactions diminished, and her outlook became more positive:



"Although I talk about going back to the cult," she said, "I know it wouldn't work. I've got too much Christianity in me now. It's just nostalgia on my part—fantasizing how it used to be. I know I left for good reasons. I also know I've come a long way, evidenced by the fact that I'm feeling more comfortable around Christians now. I believe I'll soon fit in more completely."

Myra, too, with suggestions and the backing of the group, was able to pick up the disarray of file folders spread over the floor of her life. Gradually she replaced Mormon files with Christian files. She still abstains from coffee as a principle of good health but is not offended if others choose to drink it.

Melanie and her mother, Joan, became reconciled. At the close of that evening together, Melanie moved over to the couch and put her arm around her mother.

"Mom," she said, "even though God led me back into a Christian church, I can't undo years of indoctrination easily. I've been programmed to think and behave in certain ways. Criticism won't undo these ways any faster. It's going to take time."

Joan smiled sadly and began to cry. "I've really come down on you too hard. I'm so sorry."

Melanie and her mother embraced, and it was the beginning of a new relationship between them.

When a former cultist's world collides with the Christian world, trauma is inevitable. The conflict between beliefs, customs and behaviors leaves the new believer bewildered and in shock. He or she experiences what Kurt Goldstein calls, "catastrophic anxiety . . . the most severe of all anxieties." Cultural anthropologists claim it produces "strong ego-destructive forces . . . ego impairment and weakening of the ability to function."<sup>21</sup> In view of this, it is no wonder a former cultist fears he will not make it.

Undoing beliefs is a slow process. But it will usually take care of itself as the new convert hears Christians declare over and over again what they do and don't believe and observes the church community in action.

As the established Christian makes him or herself accessible and teaches the new believer to rely on Christ, both the former and the latter establish a lifeline for the ex-cultist to cling to during the many crises. Having a Christian friend who is available and who has developed rapport through cultural sensitivity will result in a well adjusted, spiritually mature ex-cultist.

Although culture shock is the new believer's first major problem, there is another which, if not understood and allowed for, can extend the former cultist's depression and grief into an indefinite length of time.

## Chapter 2 Notes

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4. Harold L. Bussell, *Unholy Devotion: Why Cults Lure Christians*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 117.
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6. Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, revised by Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 106-107.
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11. Storti, 29, 58-65.
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14. John Butterworth, *Cults and New Faiths* (David C. Cook 1981), 25.
15. Harris and Moran, x.
16. Ibid., 3.
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18. Ibid, 36. Quoting from Charles Allen's *Plain Tales From The Raj*.
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