

## CHAPTER 4

# Cults, Charismatic Groups, and Social Systems: Understanding the Transformation of Terrorist Recruits

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Given the rise in terrorist activity throughout the world in recent decades, there is much we can learn from examining how cults engage the minds of their recruits, how they generate their unique psychological and social forces, and how they acquire structure as a social system.<sup>1</sup> Of particular salience, a fairly substantial body of research on religious cults has been developed over the past several years, illustrating (among other topics) the importance of social identity processes for individuals who become cult members. Religious cults—typically driven by a charismatic leader—are highly cohesive, collectivist, and authoritarian. Within the group there is a great deal of harmony and positive regard for group members combined with negative perceptions of outsiders. Studies have revealed how individuals experience a profound increase in psychological well-being when they join these groups. Further, individuals who are particularly distressed prior to joining—such as those experiencing economic, social, and/or psychological stresses—are particularly more likely to experience a significant sense of relief upon joining a cult. Meanwhile, growth in cult membership helps to reinforce the merit of the group’s ideology and validate the group’s existence.

It is not uncommon to think of cults as anomalies. When described in the news, a cult is often portrayed as a sort of oddity, with little attention paid to the psychology and social structure that most cults have in common. However, the beliefs and behaviors of cult members become more understandable when the patterns underlying these organizations are viewed within the context of social systems. This chapter will expand the research of such patterns by exploring the role of cults and other charismatic groups in the terrorist world. In doing so, this discussion contributes to our un-

derstanding of how an average individual is transformed into a terrorist. But first, a definition of what is meant by the term “charismatic group” is necessary.

### The Charismatic Group

A cult is one of several types of charismatic groups. A charismatic group consists of a dozen or more members, even hundreds of thousands. It is characterized by the following psychological elements: members (1) have a *shared belief system*, (2) sustain a high level of *social cohesiveness*, (3) are strongly influenced by the group’s *behavioral norms*, and (4) impute *charismatic* (or sometimes *divine*) power to the group or its leadership. In a charismatic group, commitments can be elicited by relative strangers in a way rarely seen in other groups. Even Freud, who championed the compelling nature of individual motives, addressed this impressive capacity at length in his book *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.<sup>2</sup> He discussed these forces in terms of the “primitive sympathetic response of the group,” and said that “something is unmistakably at work in the nature of a compulsion to do the same as others, to remain in harmony with the many.”

The cognitive basis for this conformity is a *shared belief system*. The beliefs held in common by members of charismatic groups are a vital force in the group’s operation. They bind members together, shape their attitudes, and motivate them to act in self-sacrifice. When these groups are religious in nature, their beliefs are often codified, but some groups have no more than an ill-defined ideological orientation. In some religious cults, converts are introduced to the group’s ideology only after they have affiliated.<sup>3</sup> Once they have identified with the group’s general orientation, though, they tend to accept their beliefs quite readily when these are spelled out. Members of these groups tend to be intensely concerned about each other’s well-being and are deeply committed to joint activities. Their social cohesiveness, essential to the group’s integrity, is reflected in the close intertwining of the individual’s life circumstances with those of all group members. Meetings are frequent; they serve as a focus for group functions and articulate their cohesiveness. Members often express their need to associate regularly with each other by developing joint activities such as minor group tasks and rituals, which in turn justify such meetings. Both cult and self-help group members are always aware of when their next group meeting will be held, and look to them as a means of instilling commitment and a sense of purpose. A member’s emotional state may be highly vulnerable to disruptions of this routine, and a group gathering missed can become a source of distress.

All charismatic groups engage the emotional needs of their members in

an intensely *cohesive social system*. Group cohesiveness may be defined as the result of all the forces acting on members to keep them engaged in the group.<sup>4</sup> When cohesiveness is strong, participants work to retain the commitment of their fellow members, protect them from threat, and ensure the safety of shared resources. With weak cohesiveness, there is less concern over the group's potential dissolution or the loss of its distinctive identity, and joint action is less likely.

Group cohesiveness<sup>5</sup> is seen in informally structured groups, such as a clique of teenagers who make every effort to get together, even when forcibly separated by their elders. It also exists in formally structured groups, such as professional sports teams or military platoons, whose members undergo great sacrifice to assist each other in their common mission, particularly when confronted by adversaries. In most organized groups, however, cohesiveness is characterized by neither adversity nor great drama; in a fraternal organization, for example, members meet regularly to share experiences and give each other practical assistance.

Our understanding of group cohesiveness—particularly as applied to charismatic groups—is informed by studies of family relationships. The concept of “differentiation of self,” developed by family theorists such as Murray Bowen and Lyman Wynne,<sup>6</sup> helps explain the interaction between the individual and his or her family, and can be assessed independently of a person's diagnosis, social class, and cultural background. At one end of this scale lies the highly differentiated individual, characterized by autonomy and even rugged individualism. At the other end, family relationships exhibit emotional fusion and an inability to make critical judgments because of a need to assure harmony with others.

Emotional fusion in families is akin to group cohesiveness in its merging of identity and decision-making functions. It occurs in large charismatic groups as well as in families, because members of both may be highly dependent on each other and rely excessively on their compatriots for emotional support and decision making.<sup>7</sup> This is also seen among certain families who are unable to tolerate disruptions in the balance of their members' relationships. For example, if a psychiatrist attempts to change an apparently harmful pattern of interaction within a family, one way or another that pattern will soon reestablish itself; this takes place without any formal understanding among family members, as if a governing structure existed outside their awareness.

Preserving intense interrelatedness is also essential to a religious cult.<sup>8</sup> Because of the need to preserve cohesiveness and interdependency, close-knit families and religious cults employ adaptive strategies to maintain stability in the face of internal or external threat. A distorted consensus emerges, a mutually-held point of view that allows the perception of equilibrium to be maintained. This consensus is often achieved by denying reality and rationalizing a shared perspective. In essence, reality becomes less important

to certain groups than the preservation of their ties. Freud's observation about group psychology and the pressures that draw individuals into consensual and irrational response is particularly apt here. The evolution of a crowd, he noted, is based on a compulsion in people to do the same as others, "to remain in harmony with the many."<sup>9</sup>

The *norms for behavior* in a charismatic group also play an important role in determining how its members conduct themselves. Members typically look to group norms for learning ways to behave in new situations. They may respond in a similar fashion to strangers perceived as threatening—in some groups, with a blunted and distant stare. Often they are implicitly aware of their style of behavior in an unexpected situation, while at other times it emerges without conscious appreciation of how they act. Behavioral change may also extend to mimicking the symptoms of mental illness. In these groups, transcendental experiences—often hallucinatory—are quite common. A deceased comrade "literally" stands by a member or a historical figure, bringing divinely inspired advice. Intense emotional experiences are reported, such as profound euphoria or malaise. Such phenomena, which are often seen among the mentally ill, occur among individuals who give no evidence of psychiatric disorder.

Finally, *charismatic powers* are typically imputed to leaders of these groups, but can also be ascribed to the group or its mission. Some contemporary terrorist groups, for example, are viewed by their members as heralding an inevitable new world order. The leaders of some religious-oriented groups are believed by their followers to have a uniquely close relationship with God, giving a virtually uncontested authority for that leader's decisions. These four psychological elements—shared belief system, social cohesiveness, behavioral norms, and charismatic power—are common to most charismatic groups. Further, they reinforce each other through a series of interactions that are similar in virtually any social system.

### The Charismatic Group as a Social System

At the interface between charismatic group and society at large, strange things happen. Many people have noted the glazed look of members of such cults as the Unification Church when they venture outside the fold and mix with nonmembers. It has been suggested that such behavior is symptomatic of psychopathology, specifically a detached state. Others who have studied cults and other charismatic groups, however, have not made such observations. This discrepancy represents different aspects of behavior at the boundary of a social system.

Another common observation is the animosity such groups elicit from outsiders. In a pluralistic society such as the United States, one may wonder why such hostility exists. Again, this reaction represents a characteris-

tic process that occurs at a cult's boundaries and will explain some troublesome interactions between members and nonmembers.

All social systems have certain functions that act to protect their integrity and implement their goals. To view cults more clearly in the broad social context, and to understand their interactions with society better, it is useful to draw upon systems theory. Four functions characteristic of systems are transformation, monitoring, feedback, and boundary control.

### Transformation

Systems have been likened to factories; they take input from the outside, which can be raw material, energy, or information, and process it into output, a product. This function, called transformation, allows the system to carry out operations essential to its own continuity or to the needs of a larger suprasystem to which it belongs. In a given system, the most important transformation—the one that typically defines its identity—is its *primary task*; most components of the system are geared toward either carrying out this primary task or preventing its disruption. The primary task of many religious cults is to prepare for the messianic end they envision, while the equivalent task of terrorist groups is to compel—through the use of terror—some sort of political, social, religious, or other type of change by a government or target population.

An unstable system, such as a cult in its earlier stages, is particularly susceptible to dissolution. Members may disaffiliate at any time, since the ties that bind them together have yet to be woven into the stable network of a social structure. In this regard, the concept of transformation can be used as a model for the persistent attempts of certain charismatic groups to stabilize themselves by acquiring new members. This may be why members can become so deeply involved in conversion activities; they themselves are motivated only by an inherent need to become engaged in the charismatic group, but they begin conforming to the group's needs as a system. Members would not on their own be inclined to go out and recruit for the group, but as parts of its system they come to act in accordance with its goals.

At some point in their evolution, most charismatic groups focus on recruitment as a primary task. The process may ensure a larger and stronger group and, when successful, can also help confer legitimacy to the group's own ideology, thereby consolidating the commitment of its long-standing members.

Another important aspect of that transformation function is how it disrupts the psychological stability of potential recruits, the "input" to this process. Since an intensive mobilization of a charismatic group's psychological and material resources may be directed at the conversion of new members, they can create deep turmoil in the individual convert. On the one hand, the group is intensely seductive in its attempt to attract new

members; on the other, it demands a disruption of antecedent social ties and a metamorphosis in the new member's worldview. Thus, when the full resources of the group are focused on a recruit, the potential for tearing the fabric of that individual's psychological stability is considerable. The result may be psychiatric symptoms in people with no history of mental disorder or psychological instability. The genesis of these symptoms may lie more in the conflict between the recruit's needs and the group's demands than in an underlying psychological impairment of the individual. In essence, an effective cult is able to engage and transform individuals in ways that disrupt an otherwise stable psychological condition, in many cases causing significant guilt and resulting in a severe psychiatric reaction.

A variety of devices are employed in this group to intensify the forces operating on potential recruits. The "training" is carried out in protracted sessions where disagreement with the trainer is actively discouraged, often by harsh verbal abuse. Little respite is afforded from the intensity of the group experience, and the training setting includes as many as two hundred potential recruits herded together, with their behavior tightly controlled. The dynamism of the experience further heightens the potential for energetic group influence and emotional contagion, and altered consciousness is promoted by a variety of contextual cues and behavioral controls.

Conversion is in fact a primary task of terrorist training. Casualties incurred during the difficult training regimen may have to be ignored, and the problematic issues they raise, repressed. This reinforces the "shared beliefs" of other followers, those who see "getting it" as more important than attention to specific personal conflicts or day-to-day relationships. Suppression of concerns that might detract from the primary task of an intensely committed social system is actually quite common. In the time of battle, for example, an army may be mobilized to achieve its immediate military objectives, and its primary task is therefore the transformation of all personnel and material into a fighting force. The psychology of the troops is bent to this mission to the exclusion of all else, since victory in battle is paramount. Concern for the needs of the wounded may be secondary, since this could detract from the thrust into battle. In a similar way, mobilization for the transformation process in the terrorist group cannot be deflected by the difficulties experienced by individual recruits because the usual constraints on exerting social pressure are suppressed.

### **Monitoring and Identification**

To operate effectively, a system must transform input from the environment into a form that meets its needs, but must also observe and regulate the actions of its component parts, thereby assuring that their respective activities are properly carried out and coordinated. This constitutes its monitoring function. Such monitoring is essential to any system, in order

to ensure the effective implementation of its primary task, whether that system is a living organism, a social organization, or a factory. The system must have an apparatus for monitoring its components. In the living organism, its nervous system serves this function, and in social organizations and factories, it is some form of management structure.

In the terrorist organization, monitoring is necessarily conducted by the trainers (in training camps) and by cell leaders. These monitors must know how to observe and govern the group's members in order to ensure the stability of the social system. In an effective system, the monitoring function will operate without undue need for communication or conflict resolution. The system's components—the group members—will respond automatically to the suggestions of the leadership. Whether consciously controlled or not, compliance with the group's announced perspective is expected.

To understand the means by which the charismatic group rapidly and effectively monitors the thinking and behavioral norms of its members, one must consider the psychological defense mechanisms employed by the group as a whole, which are unlike those operating in individuals. These defenses are employed for the unconscious management of conflicting motives so that the group can function smoothly in the face of conflict. Although similar defenses may be observed in other social systems, the charismatic group responds in particular ways that distinguish it from less tightly knit groups, since the forces of group cohesiveness and shared beliefs in the charismatic group facilitate its operation as a functional whole. These psychological defenses protect the group culture from unacceptable ideas, often "realities" produced by outdated initiatives or outside influences. Such realities may be ignored outright, by means of denial; forgotten through repression; or distorted through rationalization.

In a social system, monitoring is most easily implemented when a voluntary collaboration exists between those in control and those being managed, since outright coercion necessitates undue expenditure of resources and detracts from cooperative efforts to carry out the system's primary task. It is best, in fact, if those monitored accept the leadership without conscious deliberation and, since the defense mechanism of identification operates in an unconscious fashion, those who adopt the attitudes of their leaders do so without deliberating over the wisdom of their actions.

Perhaps the most unusual type of identification takes place when the members' own safety and well-being are jeopardized by their leadership. In terrorist training camps, recruits typically develop a positive bond with their trainers, not only complying with their expectations but even defending them against outside forces. Thus, despite the physical pain and rigor of terrorist training, the agent inflicting distress on the dependent person (the recruit) is also perceived as the party who can provide relief. Training for terrorism necessitates enduring unpleasant activities, while in some

of the more nefarious cults (religious or otherwise) members may be subject to various forms of abuse. Members nonetheless have their own psychological need for maintaining affiliation with the leader and the group, since they are captives by virtue of a pincer effect, which makes their emotional well-being dependent upon involvement in the group that inflicts distress. In a sense, they have no choice but to unconsciously make peace with the potentially threatening agenda of the leadership and comply with its expectations in order to achieve emotional relief.

A subcomponent of identification in certain cults and terrorist groups involves the suppression of autonomy. For a social system to regulate its functioning effectively, it must have the capacity to suppress members' deviation from its implicit or explicit goals. In charismatic groups, the penalty for those who deviate from norms is psychological distress; overt coercion usually is not necessary to induce compliance. From this, it can be inferred that attempts at achieving independence from such groups become rare, and would tend to be easily extinguished by the groups' leaders. In extreme cases, attempts to leave a group's membership may even result in execution.<sup>10</sup>

### **Feedback**

Feedback is one way for a system to obtain information about how well it is carrying out its primary task. Analysis of results is fed back into the system, and this provides information for planning future operations. For example, if a cult is trying to recruit, information on the relative response of potential members can be fed back to the cult leaders and guide them in improving the group's recruitment techniques.

Feedback may be either positive or negative. Positive feedback gives the system information that will increase the effectiveness in achieving desired results. When negative feedback ceases to be available, the organization loses an important aspect of its ability to self-correct for actions which may be detrimental to the group's members. Transformation activities may go unmoderated, and the system's boundaries can be disrupted.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the system must have unrestrained access to negative feedback to exercise a proper degree of self-regulation and not dissipate its energies.

This latter function is important in charismatic groups because they are prone to suppress negative feedback when it runs contrary to the group's internal stability. It is a special risk because of the highly effective monitoring function that allows the cult system to control the information made available to its members. Means of avoiding undue negative feedback are essential to charismatic groups because their ideology and practices often elicit hostility from the general society. If allowed to enter the system unobstructed, such negative feedback leads to suppression of the group's transcendent vision and a decline in members' morale.



Certain charismatic groups try hard to isolate their members from all negative feedback, but this can be dangerous, as the group may lose information valuable to its own self-regulation. These groups usually are no longer actively recruiting and have little need for protracted contact with outsiders. Other groups, however, rely on the successful recruitment of new members to provide them with positive feedback. Such successes are used to reinforce the merit of the group's own ideology and promote new initiatives that validate the group's chosen course. New recruits give legitimacy to a group in the face of a hostile world, and encourage members to carry the group's mission forward. Such feedback can be a useful tool for social regulation.

### **Boundary Control**

In sum, an open system must carry out its transformation functions while maintaining internal stability by monitoring its own components and responding to feedback. These functions, however, can be disrupted by intrusions from outside. For this reason, boundary control is a vital function of any social system.

Boundary control protects social systems against dangerous outsiders. It includes not only the screening of people but also of information, since information is a potent determinant of behavior. If a charismatic group is to maintain a system of shared beliefs markedly at variance with that of the surrounding culture, members must sometimes be rigidly isolated from consensual information from the general society that would unsettle this belief system. During the initial phases of conversion to charismatic groups, novices may be regarded as vulnerable, and discouraged from establishing contact with their families. Similar processes of individual isolation from family, friends, and society often takes place in the setting of terrorist training camps. After their integration into the group, when their beliefs have been consolidated, these new members may be encouraged to reestablish ties with their families so as to promote a benign public image and perhaps help recruit other new members.

Any group that coalesces around a cause or function must soon establish a boundary to differentiate those who are participating from those who are not. Two important facets of activity form the boundary of charismatic groups, each mirroring the other. The first is a set of behaviors and attitudes of members, often deviant, that is directed at outsiders. It reflects how the system focuses its social forces to protect its boundaries. The second is a reciprocal set of behaviors and attitudes of the surrounding society, often an aggressive response of outsiders to the group's members.

The boundary of behavior of cult members that has made the deepest impression on outsiders involves the glazed, withdrawn look and trance-like state that some find most unsettling. Although this may appear patho-

logic, it can help group membership by reducing the possibility of direct exchanges with outsiders—it has an insulating effect. Thus, the trancelike appearance protects the group's boundary. It would be more likely to develop in settings that threaten the group's integrity, so that an observer who is perceived as an antagonist is more likely to see the behavior than one who is not.

Fearfulness of outsiders, or xenophobia—a common characteristic of cults—is another important manifestation of boundary control. It holds groups together, but it can reach the dimensions of outright paranoia. It represents a boundary control function carried to the extreme and is seen among those group members pressed by family or strangers to give up their ties to the group. It is also evident in the way outsiders are often treated with a different standard of openness or honesty.

Defensiveness and paranoia associated with the boundary function of a charismatic group elicit a complementary reaction from the surrounding community. This is seen in the animosity between family members of converts and the sects, in the breakdown in communication between sects and some religious groups, and in the hostility toward sects voiced by some former members.

Attempts at communication between parents and their children who have joined contemporary groups are often rife with misunderstanding and hostility. The new recruit often becomes an agent of the group's boundary control function and regards the relatives who make contact as attempting to disengage the person from the movement, whereas the parents, operating at the boundary of a highly cohesive group, frequently become preoccupied with the effort to dislodge the new member. Communications are often frozen at this level.

Overall, members of a cult may be driven to behave as they do by forces that act within the social system to assure its stability and implement its primary task. On the other hand, the openness of each member to such influence can only be understood by recourse to one's biologically grounded responsiveness to group influence. In the world of the terrorist organization, then, an individual is transformed by group forces as well as by their personal willingness to be transformed by these forces.

## **The Charismatic Group in the Terrorist World**

For the Islamic fundamentalist, becoming a member of the global jihad can be viewed as a complex process, and the social bonds and psychological forces involved in this act are similar to those of religious cult membership. For example, the membership of terrorist groups develop and maintain their own organizational saga and negative perceptions of outsiders. Similar examples of shared beliefs, altered consciousness, and behavioral con-

formity that contribute to cult membership are seen among terrorist organizations—particularly those driven by charismatic leaders. Thus, a discussion of the social and psychological forces that reinforce an individual's commitment within cults has clear implications for our understanding of how groups like Hamas or al Qaeda maintain their membership despite rather grueling living conditions. Much the same as cults, terrorist groups merge identity and decision-making functions into a common membership framework and work to replace an individual's psychological distress with an enhanced sense of self-being and belonging.

Studies of terrorist groups—ranging from the Red Army Faction of Germany to the myriad Islamic militant groups in Egypt—have all emphasized the important relationship between individual well-being and complete loyalty to the group. While there are clear distinctions between social networks and formal cults, our understanding of cult mentality allows us to shed light on terrorist behavior.

To begin with, like other charismatic groups, the traits of terrorist-oriented cult organizations are often best illustrated by the way they bring about changes in the thinking and behavior of individual members. Much has been written—in this three-volume publication and elsewhere—about the role of ideology and indoctrination by terrorist organizations. Clearly, the doctrine and pronouncements of al Qaeda leaders, for example, is meant to solidify group goals and ensure that new recruits embrace the concepts of global jihad. The expansive network of alumni from al Qaeda's training camps in Afghanistan serves to maintain interpersonal connections, relationships which lead to what Freud would call remaining “in harmony with the many”<sup>12</sup> even at the expense of human security.<sup>13</sup>

Other parallels between religious cults and terrorist organizations include the role of a charismatic leader in providing direction to the collective energies of group members. Cult leaders are often seen as powerful personalities who inspire, even hypnotize their audiences, and who may punish dissent or deviation from the group's values or objectives.<sup>14</sup> At a basic level, an individual like David Koresh—of the infamous Branch Davidians compound in Waco, Texas—can use his charismatic power to force a group of people to do things they would not ordinarily do. More extreme cases include Jim Jones, who led his followers to commit mass suicide in Guyana. But wherever cults have been organized by a charismatic leader, the changes in thinking and behavior that are brought about within individual group members have not been achieved solely by the leader's power; rather, the four psychological elements discussed earlier in this chapter—shared belief system, social cohesiveness, behavioral norms, and charismatic power—play a critical role in the evolutionary process of virtually all charismatic groups. A case in point, which clearly lies within the realm of the terrorist world, can be seen in the Aum Shinrikyō cult and its leader, Shoko Asahara.

### A Case Study: Aum Shinrikyō

During a morning rush hour, in March 1995, two five-man teams converged on the Kasumigaseki station, the hub of Tokyo's underground transit system and a short walk from the Japanese Parliament. They carried plastic bags of sarin, a liquefied poison gas, along with their umbrellas. Already protected by antidotes to the poison, they punctured the bags with the umbrellas, releasing vapors from the liquefied gas, and fled quickly. Sarin, which was developed in Nazi Germany, attacks the central nervous system and is deadly in the smallest quantities. In this case, the attack killed twelve subway riders, and many others were temporarily blinded and collapsed on sidewalks as they tried to run for safety.

Aum Shinrikyō was a religious sect that claimed to have 10,000 members in Japan and 20,000 abroad, mostly in Russia. It had been previously suspected of wrongdoing by the Japanese police, and was now presumed to be responsible for the subway poisonings. After the subway attack, more than 2,500 officers raided Aum's various offices, while hundreds of Aum priests continued to meditate and pray at its headquarters. The public's anxiety was only heightened when statements of the group's leader, Shoko Asahara, were beamed to Japan by radio from Vladivostok and Sakhalin in Russia—statements such as “Let us face death without regret.”

At the cult's main compound in Kamikuishiki, a small farming village in the shadow of Mount Fuji, riot policemen entered warehouses carrying caged canaries, a means of alerting them to the presence of toxic fumes. They found some 500 metal drums containing deadly poisons like sodium cyanide. The discovery of huge stocks of the chemicals used to make sarin was particularly startling, because even minute quantities of the poison are extremely lethal.

An investigation by Japanese authorities revealed that Aum's leadership had managed to acquire or build a vast, diversified arsenal, including computer-controlled laboratories and remote-controlled machinery for sealing plastic pouches. They had recruited large numbers of university science graduates, who were conducting research into botulism and other biological weapons. The police seized raw materials that could have been used to cultivate viruses. Aum operated three companies of its own to buy chemicals, and in Moscow—where the group claimed a considerable following—there were reports of members having met with Russian nuclear specialists, indicating Aum's interest in acquiring nuclear weapons. There was also evidence that the group had purchased a large Russian military helicopter and had priced Russian tanks, submarines, and military aircraft.

The 1995 attack was not the first violent act committed by this organization. In 1989, agents of Aum had murdered lawyer Tsutsumi Sakamoto, along with his wife and infant son. Sakamoto had represented families of cult members who were trying to get their relatives back from

Aum Shinrikyō, and had appeared on television to present his case shortly before being murdered. Police found the bodies only when they undertook a search after the Tokyo attack six years later. Cult members later testified that the victims had been injected with a drug, struck with a hammer, and then strangled.<sup>15</sup>

Aum leaders had even considered releasing nerve gas in the United States, a country thought by Asahara to be hostile to his group.<sup>16</sup> Dr. Ikuo Hayashi, who had served as medical director of Aum, said that the U.S. attacks were planned for June 1994 but were suspended. The intelligence director of the group had even instructed him to go to the United States to pick up a package of sarin that was to arrive in a shipment of ornaments. Hayashi, by the way, a respected cardiologist who had worked in an American hospital before joining the cult, is illustrative of the talent that was inducted into the group.

### **Asahara as a Cult Leader**

In his pamphlets, Shoko Asahara urged people to join his program of “Death and Rebirth,” pointing out that “as we move toward the year 2000 there will be a series of events of inexpressible ferocity and terror”; that “Japan has been unjustly deprived of the concept of death and life after death”; and that he would teach people about both.<sup>17</sup> Japanese newspapers estimate that Asahara’s chemical stockpile could have created enough nerve gas to kill between 4.2 million and 10 million people.

Asahara was described by followers as an intelligent, soft-spoken married man with six children. He had a long beard, a beatific smile, and wore oriental robes. He was the sixth of seven children born to a maker of tatami mats in a small Japanese village. One of his older brothers was almost completely blind and had to attend a school for children with limited vision. Shoko’s parents decided to enroll him there as well, since his vision was also limited, but because his sight was better than that of the other students he became a leader among them. He later experienced a string of failures during his school years, including unsuccessful runs for student body president in elementary, junior high, and senior high schools. After failing his college entrance exams, he moved to a Tokyo suburb to work as an acupuncturist.

In the early 1980s, Asahara opened a shop selling concocted Chinese medicines, and was arrested and fined for marketing drugs of unproven effectiveness. He later launched a company called “Aum,” which ran a yoga school and operated health-related activities. He traveled to Nepal and India and came back with photographs of himself with senior Tibetan lamas, even the Dalai Lama. He promoted his school with some success, using these pictures to present himself as an internationally respected religious leader.

By 1987, Asahara had acquired a small following and had founded Aum Shinrikyō as a religious sect. It was a time when a number of similar Buddhist- or Shinto-oriented sects were emerging in Japan and attracting young people who were disenchanted with the country's materialist orientation. Aum appeared to offer a clear alternative. As though to prove its special power, it promised its members the ability to levitate and would present recruits with photographs of Asahara poised inches above the ground in a yogic position. It also provided recruits with headgear containing batteries and electrodes designed to align their brain waves with those of their leader. Asahara had a knack for recruitment, and Aum began to attract many bright, discontented university students, particularly those trained in the sciences. As his sect grew richer, he developed a paunch and began to drive around in a Rolls Royce.

The group's tactics for securing members reflected many of the worst aspects of other cultic groups. These included alterations in consciousness and sensation, as the recruits were sometimes starved and given psychotomimetic drugs. In one account given after the sarin attack, a woman described how she and her daughter were locked inside a dark, windowless room shortly after joining the sect and were forced to watch a continuously running tape of Asahara. Furthermore, when police raided the cult's training compound in Kamikuishiki shortly after the subway attack, they found fifty people in an advanced state of malnutrition and dehydration, some barely conscious; remarkably, they eschewed the medical attention offered them.

Intense cohesiveness, bolstered by physical isolation, was also a vehicle for sustaining members' involvement. Asahara demanded that many of his followers live in communes, cut off from relatives and family. There was a striking inconsistency between the activities of Aum's leadership and the Buddhist-derived philosophy maintained by the large majority of its members. Most members knew nothing about the criminal activities of the group's leaders, a fact that reflects the profound discrepancy between the means employed by the core leadership and the pacific attitudes shown by members.

As is typical of many charismatic sects, recruits were often told to sign over their property to the group, and Aum went so far as to murder one person who opposed the expropriation. The relative of a recruit was kidnapped in the street after protesting that his sister had been required to give away all her assets, and later police unearthed evidence that the man had been murdered by Aum members.

Surprisingly, the Tokyo disaster made only a modest impression on most members of the cult. A few weeks after the event, one graduate student reported that he was urged by his family and friends to leave the group. He insisted on staying, and said, "I've got to do this, and that's all I can say. I'm sorry, Mom. Sorry Dad . . . if I were head of the public security com-

mission in Japan, and if I were thinking of what group is the most dangerous for the present social system in Japan, it would be Aum . . . because Aum has such potential for the future."<sup>18</sup> A disaffiliated member, questioned about his experience in the group, had eaten only root vegetables that were often rotten and caused diarrhea. Nonetheless, he said that even after leaving Aum, he often found himself singing Aum songs and recalling his experience with the group fondly.

Fumihiro Joyu, a thirty-two-year-old spokesman for Aum, was something of a media star in Japan and an idol of many teenage girls and young women. As a monk in the movement, Joyu said that he shunned wine, woman, and sex. Even after the Tokyo attack, he attracted a bevy of young girls in front of the sect's headquarters waiting to see him emerge. Some of them indicated belonging to a Joyu fan club. He continued to deny the cult's responsibility for the gas attack months after the event.

The sustained commitment of members, as exemplified by the graduate student and the group's spokesman, flew in the face of reality and reflected a need to retain fidelity to a failed movement even when it was proven unworthy. This is very much aligned with what other research has discovered about doomsday cults. Members of such groups remain committed even after their leaders' predictions of the world's end came to naught; many simply rationalized this failure and retained their fidelity to the movement.<sup>19</sup>

## Discussion

The case of Aum Shinrikyō offers a useful example of how cults and terrorist organizations engage the minds of their recruits, how they generate their unique psychological and social forces, and how they acquire structure as a social system. There are four elements in particular by which Aum exemplifies the transformative process of other charismatic groups: isolation, paranoia, grandiosity, and absolute dominion. Regarding *isolation*, a group can remove or distance itself from the values of our common culture, even the importance of preserving life. This can take the form of geographic isolation, such as Aum's training facilities. For example, Shoko Asahara established an isolated compound in rural Japan; he also maintained a gulf in communication between his inner circle and his widely dispersed adherents, thus isolating the decision makers from the flock of followers.

An isolated cultic group provides fertile soil for the emergence of *paranoia* and *grandiosity* in its leader, and will aggravate these traits in the leader who already sees himself as espousing a philosophy of absolute truth. Paranoia and grandiosity are interdependent—a person who needs to sustain full control over his flock, in order to maintain the appearance of divinity that most charismatic group leaders enjoy, will inevitably begin

to suspect others of trying to take it away. He fears that the government or even parties inside his own sect will envy his powers and try to obstruct his mission. This sets up a siege mentality and leaves the leader awaiting the moment of assault. The interweaving of grandiosity and paranoia sets the stage for thinking that a fight to the death—or in some cases, mass suicide or martyrdom—following a confrontation with the government is legitimate. Isolation, grandiosity, and paranoia all set the stage for a leader to establish *absolute domain* over his followers. This can be achieved through the intensification of the system's monitoring of members' behavior—that is, observation and regulation of members to ensure that the group's tasks are carried out as the leader's control continues.

**Controlling perception and behavior.** As discussed earlier, the traits of charismatic groups are often best illustrated by the way they bring about changes in the thinking and behavior of individual members. Indeed, virtually all types of charismatic groups seek control over their members' behavior, thoughts, information and emotion. People are more vulnerable to social influence when they are made to think, sense, and feel differently than usual, when someone or something disrupts their emotional balance. Such changes in subjective experience (or alterations in consciousness) can undermine the psychological matrix in which our views are rooted, so that we lose track of customary internal signposts. They may also introduce a feeling of mystery, or a sense that forces beyond our control are operating. Thus, they can prime us to accept unaccustomed explanations for our experiences and adopt new attitudes implied in these explanations. In this regard, it is perhaps no surprise to learn of Aum's use of drugs, meditation, and other psychologically-related activities in transforming their new recruits into full members, given that altered consciousness can help shape members' attitudes in a charismatic group.

**Social cohesion.** Preserving intense interrelatedness is also essential to both a religious cult and terrorist group.<sup>20</sup> Because of the need to preserve cohesiveness and interdependency, close-knit families and religious cults employ adaptive strategies to maintain stability in the face of internal or external threat. As illustrated by the case of Aum Shinrikyō, a distorted consensus emerges, a mutually-held point of view that allows the perception of equilibrium to be maintained. This consensus is often achieved by denying reality and rationalizing a shared perspective. In essence, reality becomes less important to certain groups than the preservation of their ties. Freud's observation about group psychology and the pressures that draw individuals into consensual and irrational response is particularly apt here. As he noted, people are sometimes compelled to do the same as others, "to remain in harmony with the many."<sup>21</sup>

**Shared belief systems.** Members of Aum had a shared belief in a vision for the future, which served as a vital force in the group's operation. These



beliefs bind Aum's members together, shape their attitudes, and motivate them to act in self-sacrifice. Members of Aum tend to be intensely concerned about each other's well-being, as well as that of their leader Asahara. These shared belief systems are particularly powerful when they include religious dimensions. From Islamic fundamentalist groups in Saudi Arabia or Indonesia to Christian militia groups in the United States, the belief that God endorses the values and objectives of the group is a particularly powerful motivator for group cohesion.

***Belonging and psychological well-being.*** Members of Aum displayed the attributes of other cults—namely, the need to belong to the group, from which psychological well-being is drawn. Decades of psychological research have observed how group membership can replace an individual's psychological distress (which can be the product of any number of personal or social traumas) with an enhanced sense of self-being. This, in turn, helps explain the lengths to which group members will go to protect the group from outside forces, even when presented with evidence that the group is engaged in activities which society deems unacceptable.

***Communication patterns among group members.*** As noted earlier, boundary setting plays a critical role in determining patterns of communication between group members and those deemed as “outsiders.” In the case of Aum Shinrikyō, members were cordoned off from contact with the outside world, and Asahara maintained a gulf in communication between his inner circle and his widely dispersed adherents, thus isolating the decision makers from the flock of followers. Monitoring and controlling communication patterns, and restricting any form of dissent, enabled Aum Shinrikyō's leaders to ensure that new members of the group accept the beliefs and values of the group.

Together, these elements of isolation, paranoia, grandiosity, and absolute dominion exemplify how Aum Shinrikyō—as well as other cults and terrorist organizations—generate unique psychological and social forces that transform a fairly ordinary individual into a potentially lethal terrorist.

## Conclusion

This chapter illustrates the usefulness of describing terrorist group membership more in terms of social adaptation rather than personal pathology. Instead of the typical Hollywood portrayal of terrorists as wild-eyed, mindless fanatics, this discussion suggests that psychological and social forces can be brought to bear in reducing the attractiveness of terrorist group membership. The social system forces found in cults and other types of charismatic groups—including those committed to terror—play a critical role in transforming an individual's values and belief systems, creating group members whose commitment to membership in (and objectives of) the group

takes precedence over individual needs or desires. In extreme cases—including members of Aum Shinrikyō or the hijackers responsible for the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, DC—a dedication to committing terrible acts of homicide and suicide, and protecting the group (or the al Qaeda cell) from discovery beforehand, is more important than an individual's fundamental desire to remain alive. This dedication, in turn, can be seen as the product of forces common to most any charismatic group.

To summarize this chapter, the charismatic group can be viewed as a close-knit community defined by the following primary characteristics: It has a strongly-held belief system and a high level of social cohesiveness; its members are deeply influenced by the group's behavioral norms and impute a transcendent (or divine) role to their leader. These groups may differ among themselves in the particulars of their ideology and ritual behavior, but they do have several traits in common, including 1) an attraction to joining the group; 2) the transformative experience of membership; and 3) the social system forces that surround members, giving meaning and structure.

***The attraction of entry into the group.*** Charismatic groups are likely to emerge at a time when the values of a society are felt to be inadequate for addressing major social issues. Individuals are more prone to join if they are unhappy because of situational problems or chronic distress and if they have limited affiliate ties to family and friends. Groups generally engage new members by creating an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance and support, and offering a worldview that promises a solution for all existential problems. Engagement (or conversion) entails experiences of intensely felt emotion or perceptual change. It also provides a relief of neurotic distress and a feeling of well-being. For newly recruited members of the group, these experiences serve to validate the group's mission.

***The transformative experience of group membership.*** The group's leader is reputed to have the potential of bringing a resolution to the problems of humanity. In interacting with followers, the leader is also drawn into believing the grandiose role accorded him and then justifies his behavior by referring to the transcendent mission suggested by the group's philosophy. This can cause him to make demands on his followers that outsiders would see as petulant and abusive. The group attributes special meaning, colored by its philosophy, to everyday language and events; this meaning is usually related to dogma or written code attributed to the group's leader or progenitor. Recruits experience a *relief effect* with membership. That is, the closer they feel to their fellow members and the group's values, the greater the relief in their emotional distress; the more they become emotionally distanced from the group, the greater their experience of distress. This relief effect serves as the basis for reinforcing compliance with the group's norms, as it implicitly rewards conformity with enhanced well-being and punishes alienation with feelings of distress. It also keeps members from leaving the

group, because they are conditioned to avoid the distress that results from relinquishing the benefits of the relief effect.

Group behavioral norms generally structure all areas of members' lives, their work, sexuality, socialization, and intellectual pursuits. Activities in these areas are preferentially carried out with other members, so that friends and colleagues are generally shunned as outsiders. Membership is characterized by levels of "sanctity," so that a member is continually striving to achieve a higher level of acceptance by conforming all the more with the group's expectations. Such conformity generally results in members' experiencing considerable hardship.

***The charismatic group as a social system.*** The group operates as a close-knit social system to ensure its stability. It does this by manipulating the activities and views of its members. Members' activities are monitored closely, either by formally designated observers or other general members. Compliance with the group's norms is assured by the members' need to avoid estrangement and resulting distress if they appear to question those values. Scapegoating or vilifying members who go astray helps to maintain a sense of goodness and trust among members. Information is managed, in order to minimize dissonance between the views of the group and the contrasting attitudes of the general society. The group may therefore engender attitudes and views that fly in the face of reality to prevent destabilization in members' commitment. Implicit "evidence" of the credibility of the group's ethos is also provided by new members, and aggressive recruitment therefore helps stabilize the entire system.

Boundary control is exercised by the group to protect it from threatening incursions from without. The group will therefore engender a suspicious attitude toward the general society in order to protect its members from assimilation. A clear difference is drawn between members and nonmembers, in terms of their innate value as people. Nonmembers are accorded less moral weight and may be deceived or snubbed to assure the stability of the group as a social system. Charismatic groups come into conflict with the surrounding society in a number of ways. They disregard the concern of the families of new members. They behave in a defensive and paranoid way toward outsiders suspected of being hostile to the group. They aggressively maintain ideological positions at variance with those of the general public. And to maintain group cohesiveness, many find it necessary to migrate to an isolated setting.

These traits of charismatic groups help explain the behavioral transformations described in many of the chapters of this volume. Through a mix of psychological and social dimensions observed in this discussion, the charismatic group and the individual form a symbiotic relationship, serving each other's needs. When joining a charismatic group, an individual is transformed by powerful forces into a personal extension of the group's identity, which compels him or her to carry out activities that were unthinkable prior

to group membership. Even when a suicide terrorists attack is the goal, this act can be justified as serving the needs of the group, needs which take primacy over the individual's basic desire for a longer life. Overall, this analysis of cults and charismatic groups enables one to better understand the behavioral transformation that takes place among new recruits to certain terrorist organizations.

### **Acknowledgments**

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