

Muunies
Has the Unitarian Universalist Association
become a Mind Control Cult?

By
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When I was 18 years old, way back in 1982, I happened to be in New York City at the same time Sun Myung Moon, founder and leader of the Moonies, formally known as the Unification Church, conducted a mass wedding ceremony involving 2,000 couples. The unusual event is memorable to me because it made national news and I happened to be there when it did. But this wasn't the first, last, nor largest such event. Just last year the Unification Church united 8,000 couples, that's 16,000 individuals, from 150 countries into holy matrimony. The Moonies have conducted such ceremonies fairly frequently since their first occurred in 1961 (seven years after Moon founded Unificationism), usually involving 2,000 to 2,500 couples.

As an even younger teenager, my brother and I had befriended a couple who ran a local health food store in Pacifica, California, near the beach where we hung out. They were Moonies and ran the shop on behalf of its owner, the Unification Church. They were completely open about their religion, their devotion to and reverence for Moon, whom they believed was the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, about the business being a source of revenue for their church, and about having met the day they were married in 1974 during one of Moon's mass weddings.

They'd never met or spoken to their "savior" but told us that shortly before the wedding Moon walked about pointing his finger randomly at man and a woman to indicate they were to be married. They were certain that when he looked at them, his divine wisdom allowed him to see deeply into their souls and know they were destined for each other. As far I could tell they got along well, truly loved each other, and, by then, even had a little girl they clearly adored. Yet even as an impressionable teenager, whose beliefs as a Southern Baptist were no less nutty, I knew their marriage could have been nothing more than the result of chance due to the random finger pointing of a man who couldn't have looked deeply into their souls and, likely, didn't see nor care the least about their humanity and individual dignity.

Today, in his provocative and courageous book, *The Cult of Trump*, psychologist and mind-control expert, Steven Hassan, who was himself once part of Moon's cult, considers Sun Myung Moon to have been a malignant narcissist, along with other cult leaders like L. Ron Hubbard (Scientology), Jim Jones (Peoples Temple), David Koresh (Branch Davidians), Warren Jeffs (Fundamentalist Church of Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or FLDS), Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Rajneesh Movement), and Keith Raniere (NXIVM). "They all fit a similar pattern," Hassan says, "grandiose, arrogant, bombastic, supremely confident, demanding of attention and admiration, rarely admitting a mistake. They were known to lie, cheat, and steal without apparent conscience and even empathy."¹

I was surprised, in reading Hassan's book, to learn that one of my favorite thinkers, social psychologist Erich Fromm, coined this term, "malignant narcissism," to describe what he thought was "the most severe mental sickness, one that represented the 'quintessence of evil,' mostly because of the lack of empathy and morality on the part of the patient."² Anyone who knows Fromm's work understands why he would consider this the worst of evils, because it is the opposite of the humanistic ethic, which he considers the greatest good. This is why he concludes that, "*the sole criterion of ethical value,*" ought to be "[human] welfare,"³ and "that the unfolding and growth of every person [ought to be] the aim of all social and political activities."⁴

So, when an institution or individual gains the kind of control over the minds and wills that Moon's mass weddings demonstrate, which denies others their own individual agency, it is rightly considered the "quintessence of evil," and "malignant narcissist" is a deserving name for the perpetrators of such evil. Tragically, the desire to control others so completely is itself a sign of a stunted personality, of an individual who is nowhere close to fully unfolding as a human being. Because we can't be fully human without empathy or care for others. As Fromm also says, the whole meaning of life is to "develop into the individual one potentially is⁵... The duty to be alive is the same as the duty to become oneself."⁶

To do so, to fully develop our human potential is to fully realize what he considers our greatest human power, the ability to love. But, "Love is an activity," he says, "not a passive affect."⁷ It is something we do, and it is something we do unto others. "The most fundamental kind of love, which underlies all types of love," Fromm says, is "the sense of responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of any other human being, the wish to further his life."⁸ So how do we know if a person is fully able to love? By how one acts toward others. Does one work to free them or to control them? "Envy, jealousy, ambition, any kind of greed are passions," Fromm says. But "love is an action, the practice of a human power, which can be practiced only in freedom and never as the result of a compulsion."⁹ But the psychologically and emotionally incomplete person, perhaps a malignant narcissist if one is not growing at all, does the opposite.

The most fundamental anxiety for every person is caused by the innate conflict between freedom and belonging. Each of us longs to connect with others without losing ourselves, and to be ourselves without losing our connection to others. If we can't overcome this tension by fully developing our capacity to love—to love ourselves and others—by working to care, respect, know, and further the life of those we love—then we may attempt to do so through the false power of control. We connect with and know others while maintaining our own autonomy, that is, by controlling them (the sadistic solution) or by letting them control us (the masochistic solution). "There is one way, a desperate one, to know the secret," Fromm says. "It is that of complete power over another person; the power which

makes him do what we want, feel what we want, think what we want; which transforms him into a thing, our thing, our possession.”¹⁰

The most confounding and troubling facet of all this for me is not the malignant narcissists of the world, although they are disturbing enough, but that so many people—thousands, millions in some cases—are so easily influenced by them. I became acutely aware of this conundrum during my recent February sabbatical, after watching three docuseries about various cults. Two were UFO cults and third was about a troubled young woman who claimed to be God. The beliefs of all three cults were so obviously ludicrous that it was unimaginable that any person, let alone dozens to thousands, could have believed them. And the control that the cult leaders held over them was so complete that, in one case, its members committed mass suicide.

Fortunately for me, one of those interviewed about that particular cult was Dr. Steven Hassan, the cult and mind-control expert I’ve already spoken of. I immediately purchased two of his books in search of answers, *Combating Mind Control* and *The Cult of Trump*, both of which I highly recommend. Early in the first of these, Hassan defines mind control as, “any system of influence that disrupts an individual’s authentic identity and replaces it with a false, new one.”¹¹ We see this demonstrated by the couple I spoke of moments ago who, rather than choosing whom they would marry for themselves, allowed a person they’d never met make this monumental decision for them.

But being influenced by others isn’t necessarily destructive, which is why, Hassan explains, “I also use the term undue influence—‘undue’ because these practices violate personal boundaries and human integrity, as well as ethics and, often, the law.”¹² Undue influence, then, requires the destruction of an individual’s will and sense of self. “Mind control,” again, “is any system of influence that disrupts an individual’s authentic identity and replaces it with a false, new one.” I’m reminded of the words spoken by the Ministry of Truth to Winston Smith after his arrest for committing *thoughtcrimes* in George Orwell’s dystopian horror novel, *1984*, “We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves.”¹³ Hassan says, “The essence of mind control is that it encourages dependence and conformity and discourages autonomy and individuality¹⁴ ... Individualism is fiercely discouraged.”¹⁵

The line that most caught my attention in *Combating Mind Control* is Hassan’s assertion that “even mainline religious organizations can have destructive aspects, use undue influence, or become destructive cults.”¹⁶ *Is this what’s happened to Unitarian Universalism? Has it fallen under the spell of a mind control cult? Does this explain why so many people I thought I knew, colleagues I’d known for years, individuals who were once members of this very church, suddenly began behaving in ways I could never have imagined? Have they lost their autonomy and individuality because of an organization that encourages dependence and conformity? “In these groups,” Hassan says, “basic respect for the individual is secondary to the leader’s*

whims and ideology. People are manipulated and coerced to think, feel, and behave in a single 'right way.' Individuals become totally dependent on the group and lose the ability to act or think on their own."¹⁷

To figure out if an organization falls under the category of mind control cult, Hassan has developed the BITE model, and acronym for Behavioral, Information, Thought, and Emotional control. A mind control group that uses any or all of these to unduly influence others is suspect. Hassan refers to "any group in which mind control is used in destructive ways as simply a cult."¹⁸ So if the Unitarian Universalist Association and any of its member congregations are unethically controlling behavior, information, thoughts, and emotions within their organizations and among their members, by this definition, they are a mind control cult.

Using the BITE model, I have concluded that this is precisely that case, that the UUA uses all of these categories to some extent to unduly influence its members.

Controlling the **behavior** of others in the UUA is difficult given that Unitarian Universalism is historically rooted in the ideals of individual freedom, congregational autonomy, and human dignity. For the past several years, however, the UUA leadership has been changing this by creating a punitive culture of fear, intolerance, and shame, and by transforming itself from a member service organization into what it euphemistically calls a "covenantal religion." At the 2015 UUA General Assembly, for example, Moderator Jim Keys announced a new task force, explaining, "The Task Force was charged with changing the culture of the UUA from one of a member services administration to one of mutual covenanting." Keys also spoke of reshaping how our congregations are governed, elated that, as he said, "eight districts in the south and central Northeast have voted to dissolve and defer governance to the UUA."

Additionally, the UUA now has complete control of ministerial education, certification, and placement, by which it has slowly infiltrated the top leadership of its member congregations—ministers who indoctrinate our churches with a new illiberal ideology and who forbid contradicting views being expressed. Those ministers who dare protest or resist this shift are increasingly accused of causing harm and being "out of covenant." Between the UU Association's establishment in 1961 and 2020, only nine ministers had been permanently disfellowshipped from ministry, mostly for sexually or financially inappropriate behavior. Since 2020, five ministers have been disfellowshipped for "bullying" behavior or creating "hostile work environments," which means they said something the UUA authorities disagreed with. Speech is now considered a form of harm and violence.

Additionally, in 2020 the UUA began granting ministers "full" Fellowship instead of what was formally called "final" Fellowship. "Final" meant a minister was free of any further certification requirements. "Full" means they are bound to certain "continuing education" requirements as deemed necessary by the UUA throughout their entire careers. As its 2023 document explaining this change states, "We seek a different system, one based in relationship, development, and a commitment to lifelong learning." I consider this to mean,

“lifelong control.” The same document now defines a minister as someone “granted fellowship by the MFC [Ministerial Fellowship Committee],” which is contrary to our age-old tradition of exclusive congregational ordination. The document also states the UUA will approve only those “whose work is theologically grounded, expresses Unitarian Universalist values and principles, and reflects commitments to anti-oppression, collective liberation, and ongoing learning.” To be a UU minister these days, you better have learned your lessons.

Regarding the control of **information**; since around 2021 the *UU World* magazine has completely eliminated its “Letters to the Editor” section. This section was once five to ten pages long. But, after my 2019 book, *The Gadfly Papers* made many aware of what is happening, a policy was adopted forbidding my name from being published in the magazine, which necessarily eliminated most letters expressing concern. Rather than publishing only positive letters, the magazine simply stopped publishing all letters. The result is that now there is no place for feedback, honest or otherwise. Information is one directional, from the UUA to its members, and has become little more than propaganda.

Although the UUA is now claiming it has always been a “covenantal religion,” rather than a liberal religion, this false claim reflects a concerted effort to eliminate freedom of individual **thought**. “Covenant” is but the UUA’s covert way of “creating something,” that Rev. Frederic Muir says, “has eluded Unitarian Universalism: a doctrine of church.”¹⁹ As Muir explicitly stated in his 2012 Berry Street Lecture to UU ministers, “We cannot do both covenant and individualism.” Becoming a covenantal religion is the means of ridding itself of individualism. As mentioned, during the 2016 UUA General Assembly, the moderator held up one of Muir’s books while announcing a new task force on re-covenanting, “charged with changing the culture of the UUA from one of a member services administration to one of mutual covenanting.” In 2018, a UUA Study Action Issue was approved stating, “Decentering whiteness calls us to decenter individual dignity for our collective liberation.” And, in a 2019 *UU World* article, UUA President Susan Frederick-Gray wrote that covenant is the “antidote to individualism.” Statements like these are enough to prove both the purpose of this term and that it has only been widely used to define Unitarian Universalism in recent years. As Hassan says, in a cult “Individualism is fiercely discouraged” and groupthink takes over.

In the UUA, the use of logic itself is highly discouraged. Talk about thought control! A 2019 letter condemning me and my book states, affirmed by hundreds of UU ministers states, “a zealous commitment to ‘logic’ and ‘reason’ over all other forms of knowing is one of the foundational stones of White Supremacy Culture,” and “Ideas and language can indeed be forms of violence, and can cause real harm ... The predictable ‘freedom of speech’ arguments are commonly weaponized to perpetuate oppression and inflict further harm.” Another public letter of condemnation states, “We cannot ignore the fact that logic has often been employed in white supremacy culture to stifle dissent, minimize expressions of harm, and to require those who suffer to prove the harm by that culture’s standards.” Reason and thinking for ourselves is out, church doctrine is in.

Finally, the **emotional** control exhibited by the UUA is enforced by a growing culture of fear, shame, guilt, and punishment. People fear being “called out” as a racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, and so on, and are rewarded for signaling their own virtue by calling out others or by joining in the public flogging of dissenters. We don’t have time to go into the new and flawed ideology at the center of UUism today. Suffice it to say that it is itself a racist and segregationist ideology that believes, as Coleman Hughes says in his new book, *The End of Race Politics*, “race matters in a deep and enduring way ... race is central to improving our society²⁰ ... that sharp racial classifications are a necessary part of a just society ... [that] ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’ encompass far more than descriptions of skin color and ancestry ... [and] encompass all kinds of stereotypes—stereotypes about thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, habits, and character.”²¹ At the same time, the emotions of people with identities that have been historically marginalized are treated as if they have emotional supremacy, and that arguing with them is itself racist and harmful. So, fear, shame, guilt, and illogic are the means of emotional control that has become indicative of UUA culture. My issue with the UUA, however, is not this ideology, but that those of us who disagree with it are no longer free to say so. Discourse has been replaced with demonization. And that’s why I believe the UUA, by any definition, has become a mind control cult.

So, what’s the takeaway from all of this? To answer this, I want to turn again to the wisdom of Steven Hassan who recovered from a cult himself and has years of experience helping others do so. He doesn’t consider himself a deprogrammer, but is simply, as he puts it, “involved in helping group members think for themselves and make their own decisions.”²² Nobody wants to be in a cult. Becoming part of cult is more of a boiling frog situation—mind control is the boiling water that slowly overtakes them without them ever being aware of what’s happened. Yet, Hassan says, “I have come to believe that human beings are all born with an authentic self as well as a desire for love, fairness, truth and meaning. It is something that no group can program out of a person and therefore there is always hope for real healing.”²³

That’s our role now, as religious liberals, to remain true to our commitment to individual worth and dignity and to maintaining communities where people are truly free to think and express themselves, and to promote the same for the entire world. The UUA has become a mind control cult, but we remain freethinkers and, at least technically, our congregations remain autonomous from any church authority. Because of our continued presence in the world, we will be here to help others “think for themselves and make their own decisions” again, should they escape the clutches of mind-control, whether it’s by leaving the UUA, or waking up from other cults, be they religious, political, or secular; or caught in the cult of one person—a malignant narcissist—who has overtaken their ability to think and act for themselves. It doesn’t take much to understand the whole world is at war right now over which idea will dominate, rather than realizing there can never be just one dominant idea, and that to find peace we have to tolerate, maybe even learn from, our differences. That’s what liberalism is about and that’s why we’re here, to uplift our common humanity and dignity by fostering freedom, reason, and tolerance so that all of us can become our best selves.

¹ Hassan, Steven. *The Cult of Trump: A Leading Cult Expert Explains How the President Uses Mind Control* (p. 41). Free Press. Kindle Edition.

² Ibid.

³ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

⁴ Ibid., p. 229.

⁵ Ibid. p. 20.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Fromm, Erich. *The Art of Loving* (p. 20). Open Road Media. Kindle Edition.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 42-43.

⁹ Ibid. p. 20.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

¹¹ Hassan, Steven. *Combating Cult Mind Control: The Guide to Protection, Rescue and Recovery from Destructive Cults* (p. 42). Freedom of Mind Press. Kindle Edition.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Orwell, George, *1984*, Signet Classics, Harcourt Inc., Penguin Group (USA), 1949, p. 256.

¹⁴ Hassan, *ibid*, p. 109.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 38.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 83.

¹⁹ "From iChurch to Beloved Community: Ecclesiology and Justice," presented by Rev. Fredric Muir at an annual meeting of the UUMA just prior to the 2012 General Assembly in Phoenix, Arizona.

²⁰ Hughes, Coleman. *The End of Race Politics: Arguments for a Colorblind America* (p. 18). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

²¹ Ibid., p. 22.

²² Hassan, *ibid.*, p., 25.

²³ Ibid., p. 168.