Seekers and Saucers : The Role of the Cultic Milieu in Joining a UFO Cult

Robert W. Balch and David Taylor

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This UFO cult has been much in the news of late. Of special note in this paper is the very positive redefinition of the role of seeker. Also, the puzzling finding that affective ties between converts and group members seem unnecessary for conversion to occur is discussed, along with the similarly disconcerting idea that the group lacks ritual behavior.

Seekers and Saucers

The Role of the Cultic Milieu in Joining a UFO Cult

ROBERT W. BALCH
DAVID TAYLOR
University of Montana

During the early 1970s there was a resurgence of religious interest in the United States. Especially popular were the cults and sects which either drew their inspiration from non-Western religious traditions or rejected the moral relativism of the established Christian churches. Some of these groups, especially the Unified Family and the Children of God, grew so rapidly and transformed their members so completely that they were accused of "brainwashing" and "psychological kidnapping."

One of the most notorious cults captured national attention during the fall of 1975 when over 30 people suddenly disappeared in Oregon after attending a lecture about flying saucers. At the meeting, a middle-aged man and woman who called themselves Bo and Peep offered their audience eternal life in the "literal heavens." Bo and Peep—or the Two, as their followers called them—claimed to be members of the kingdom of heaven who had taken human bodies to help mankind overcome the human level of existence.[1]

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Bo and Peep's prescription for salvation was rigorous. In order to enter the "next evolutionary kingdom," their followers had to abandon their friends, families, jobs, and material possessions. They traveled around the country in small "families," camping and generally leading a spartan existence. Bo and Peep told them they would be taken to heaven in UFOs if they could overcome all their human emotions and worldly attachments—a process they called Human Individual Metamorphosis. The name referred to a "chemical and biological change" that would transform their followers into new creatures with indestructible bodies.

Bo and Peep's UFO cult was one of the remarkable religious success stories of the mid-seventies. Within seven months after their first meeting in Los Angeles, the Two may have attracted as many as 150 followers.[2] The figure is noteworthy, because over 100 of them were recruited in just four meetings held in California, Oregon, and Colorado. The Oregon meeting is not only significant because of the national publicity it received, but because approximately 35 people decided to join afterwards. Most remarkable of all is that the Two rarely gave prospective members more than a week to make up their minds, and, when someone did, it was usually after less than six hours' contact with either the Two or any of their followers. The media speculated about brainwashing, and some ex-members got national coverage themselves when they accused the Two of "mind control." However, the accusation is not only sensational, but incorrect. In the following pages we argue that the decision to join Bo and Peep's UFO cult can only be understood in terms of the unique point of view of the metaphysical seeker, whose outlook is shaped by a religious underworld variously known as the cultic milieu (Campbell, 1972), the occult social world (Buckner, 1965), or the metaphysical subculture (Balch and Taylor, 1976b).

DATA COLLECTION

Shortly after Bo and Peep's Oregon meeting, we joined the UFO cult as hidden observers.[3] During the next seven weeks

we traveled with several different families, observing and taking part in every aspect of their daily lives. Six months later we interviewed 31 ex-members in Arizona, California, Florida, Montana, and Oregon. Locating former members proved to be a difficult task, requiring extensive travel and a considerable amount of detective work. Using simple "snowball" sampling—each informant suggesting additional contacts—we eventually located 37 ex-members, six of whom preferred not to discuss their experiences. Although we did use an interview schedule, all interviews were informal and followed whatever format our respondents preferred. On the basis of the data we collected about cult members during the participant-observer phase of our study, we are confident that our sample is representative of the cult's membership.

Most members of the cult were in their early twenties, although their ages ranged from 14 to 58. There were roughly equal numbers of males and females when we joined, but, for reasons still unclear, a greater number of men was recruited during the time we observed the cult. A large minority had attended college, and the younger members were indistinguishable from college students anywhere in the United States. Their median occupational status was rather low, reflecting the cult's overall youthfulness and the fact that most members had changed jobs frequently, preferring not to be tied down to a routine that would limit their personal freedom.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE UFO CULT

The UFO cult was a loosely organized collection of seekers that depended on the charismatic appeal of Bo and Peep to hold it together. The Two and their followers traveled around the country holding public meetings to tell other seekers about their message. They moved every few days, camping out as they went. Encounters with the outside world were limited to a few highly structured situations. In order to survive, they asked for food, gasoline, and money at stores and churches, but their contact with outsiders was limited to asking for help. Only

rarely did members explain who they were or mention Bo and Peep. Members also had contact with outsiders during public meetings. After the message had been presented, by either Bo and Peep or some of their followers, anyone in the audience could approach members of the cult to have his questions answered. However, the interaction was limited to discussing the message, and the answers given by members of the cult were often so stereotyped that they sounded like tape-recordings.

In order to speed up the metamorphic process, Bo and Peep assigned each of their followers a partner, usually a person of the opposite sex. The partnership was the basic unit of social organization. Its purpose was to develop "friction" and, ultimately, awareness of the human qualities each person had to overcome. Although partners were supposed to stay together 24 hours a day, sexual relationships and even friendships were discouraged. They were not only "too human," but they prevented the "friction" that would accelerate the metamorphosis.

Bo and Peep camped with their followers until a month after the Oregon meeting. Then, for reasons still unclear, they went into seclusion, explaining that they would return just before the spaceships came. They never set a date, however, and most of their followers never saw them again. Before they left, the Two divided the cult into several "families" of about 14 members each. Each family was headed by two spokesmen—a partnership appointed by Bo and Peep. However, their duties were never very well defined, and most members preferred a democratic arrangement where everyone had an equal voice. The spokesmen may have been appointed by the Two, but they were still earthly seekers like everyone else. Within a few weeks most spokesmen either had been replaced, or their position had been eliminated altogether.

Each family was completely autonomous, traveling almost constantly, going wherever it felt it was being led. Family members held public meetings of their own as they traveled. Most of them were small, but a few attracted audiences of several hundred people, and some of them were surprisingly successful, even without the charismatic presence of the Two. A meeting in northern Arizona produced nine new members, eight of them from a town with less than 500 people. Another meeting in

Berkeley, California, recruited as many as 20. But generally these meetings produced nothing more than catcalls and insults, or at best interested questions. During their random movements across the country, families rarely kept in touch with each other, and after the press lost interest in Bo and Peep's odyssey, many families had no way of learning anything about other members of the UFO cult.

Despite the importance of partnerships and families, the UFO cult was highly individualistic, a feature consistent with the individual nature of Bo and Peep's metamorphic process. Each member of the cult had to establish a direct psychic connection with a member of the next level, a process the Two called "tuning in." Bo and Peep instructed each of their followers to devote "100 per cent of his total energy" to "the process," which left no time for mundane activities like reading, singing, listening to the radio, or socializing with friends.

While traveling, the preferred arrangement was one partnership per vehicle, to prevent unnecessary social interaction. Although the rule was frequently violated, partners were expected to set up their camp away from other members of their family, and to keep to themselves except during family meetings. Aside from a brief period when members tuned in together before meetings, there was an absence of ritual in the UFO cult. Even this had its origins in Bo and Peep's desire to keep idle conversation to a minimum before meetings got underway. The Two even told their followers not to help each other with everyday jobs like fixing cars and putting up tents. They claimed that helping was not only an "energy drain" for the helper, but denied the person being helped an opportunity to confront and overcome his human nature—whether anger, frustration, fear, or overdependence on others.

Although we have referred to Bo and Peep's following as a cult, the group had a strong sectarian flavor (see Balch and Taylor, 1977). According to Wallis (1974, 1975a, 1975b), the fundamental criterion of the sect is "epistemological authoritarianism." Unlike the leaders of most cults, who recognize many equally valid paths to the top of the spiritual mountain, the Two claimed authoritative and privileged access to the Truth.

In a flyer they prepared for prospective members, Bo and Peep were quite specific about the uniqueness of their message:

> This is no spiritual, philosophic, or theoretical path to the top of the mountain. It is a *reality;* in fact it is the *only* way *off* the top of the mountain.

The cult's other sectarian features, e.g., its self-enforced separation from the world, make sense in light of the fact that Bo and Peep claimed to have the only path to true salvation.[4]

BECOMING A MEMBER OF THE UFO CULT

The recruitment process in the UFO cult was highly structured, and varied little even after Bo and Peep disappeared. If members felt that their connection at the next level wanted them to hold a meeting, they would find a suitable place and put up posters announcing the meeting, usually in "head shops," in health food stores, and around college campuses. After the Two disappeared, speakers for each meeting were selected by other members of the group. During the meeting itself they would be flanked by members of their family, who were called "buffers" because they absorbed the negative energy projected by hostile members of the audience.

The entire presentation generally took 15 or 20 minutes, but in one meeting we observed that the message was delivered in only three minutes. After a lengthy question-and-answer period, those who were sincerely interested in learning more about the message would be invited to a follow-up meeting, usually held in another place on the following day. These people would be asked to leave their names and phone numbers so that they could be contacted later that night. During the first meeting, the location of the follow-up would be kept secret to prevent curiosity seekers from showing up the next day. The follow-up meeting was usually more informal. The message would be restated, and the "prospective candidates" would have a chance to ask any additional questions that had not been answered the day before. At no time during our observations did we see

members of the cult try to convince the audience using "hard-sell" tactics that Bo and Peep's message was true.

Within a few days of the follow-up meeting, those who were ready to join were told the location of a "buffer camp" where the socialization of new members would occur. Indoctrination in the buffer camp was very low-key, consisting of informal discussions around the campfire with Bo and Peep, and once in a while a private audience with them in their tent. After the Two disappeared, family spokesmen took over the job of socializing the new members, but the nature of the process remained the same. Rather than being subjected to intense social pressure and eventual demands for public commitment, new members were encouraged to spend as much time as they could alone with their partners, getting in tune with the next level. Interaction between new and old members was generally confined to informal discussions around the campfire, when the newcomers were encouraged to ask questions and express their doubts and anxieties. Some of these meetings were spent in almost complete silence, as members sat quietly around the fire tuning in, baking potatoes, or just watching the stars.

The most significant feature of Bo and Peep's recruitment strategy was the way it limited interaction between members of the cult and potential recruits. Virtually all such interaction was confined to stereotyped encounters at the two public meetings described above. When a prospective member decided to join, leaving behind his friends, family, and career, he did so on the basis of only a few hours of highly structured interaction with members of the group. Under these circumstances, new recruits almost never established close affective ties with members of the cult before they joined. Furthermore, during those two public meetings, the candidate learned very little about the cult's day-to-day existence. Since the Two believed that everyone had to decide on the basis of the message alone, they often refused to answer practical questions like "What do you eat?" and "Where do you get your money?"

Even after a seeker decided to join, he got very little social support from members of the cult. The buffer camp was usually located a day's drive away from the meeting place, and new members had to get there on their own as a test of their commit-

ment. In one case prospective members were given four days to reach a post office 800 miles away, where they found directions to the buffer camp scribbled in the Zip Code book. Nine people decided to join that day, and all of them got to the camp on time and became members of the group.

The absence of affective ties with members of the cult is especially remarkable considering the importance of this factor in the sociological literature on recruitment and conversion. In their influential study of the "Divine Precepts" cult, Lofland and Stark (1965) argue that "cult affective bonds" are a necessary condition for joining. Yet Bo and Peep could recruit as many as 35 people at once without satisfying this condition.

Lofland and Stark (1965) distinguish between verbal and total converts, with verbal converts defined as those who profess belief and are accepted by core members, but take no active part in the everyday life of the cult. According to Lofland and Stark, "intensive interaction" is necessary to transform the verbal convert into a total convert, who is behaviorally as well as ideologically committed to the movement. They define intensive interaction as "concrete, daily, and even hourly accessibility" to other members which overcomes any remaining uncertainty about the truth of the cult's message (Lofland and Stark, 1965: 873).

Although becoming a member of a deviant religious group is usually seen as the end-product of a long process of social interaction, the entire process in the UFO cult was compressed into a few days. When new members arrived at the buffer camp, they had already made a substantial behavioral commitment to the cult. While some members had little to lose by joining, others left behind good jobs, homes, and even small children. Many new members began telling others about the message even before they reached the buffer camp. The zeal of these "instant converts" often exceeded the enthusiasm of the older members who greeted them at the campground.

We would not deny the importance of intensive interaction in strengthening the commitment of new members, but its role has been exaggerated. New members of the UFO cult were most likely to drop out during the first week after they joined, usually because of loneliness or their inability to cut themselves off

from friends and relatives in the outside world. But the attrition rate for new members is high in most cults and sects, even those that do provide their fledgling recruits with strong social support (e.g., Zablocki, 1971).

THE SOCIAL WORLD OF THE METAPHYSICAL SEEKER

We believe that social scientists have overemphasized the importance of cult affective bonds in recruiting new members, because of the dominant conception of the cult as a *deviant* religious organization. For example, Yinger (1970: 279) refers to cults as "religious mutants, extreme variations on the dominant themes by means of which men struggle with their problems." Because cults are deviant groups in a skeptical rationalistic society, many social scientists have assumed that the people who join them require a tremendous amount of social support to draw them in and insulate them from a hostile disbelieving world. However, if the seeker lives in a social milieu where the movement's assumptions make sense, and if he defines joining as the logical extension of his spiritual quest, then it is easy to understand how he could join a "deviant" religious cult without first establishing social ties with those who already belong. We will begin our discussion by characterizing the life style of Bo and Peep's followers before they joined the cult. Then we will explore the social world of the metaphysical seeker, showing how that style of life is an integral part of a cultic milieu where joining a cult is not only tolerated, but often encouraged.

THE PROTEAN STYLE OF THE METAPHYSICAL SEEKER

In his discussion of the "protean man," Lifton (1970) describes the dilemmas confronting men and women in postindustrial society. In response to "historical dislocation" and the "flooding of imagery" produced by rapid change and mass communication,

Lifton argues that modern man has adopted a protean style, named for the Greek mythical figure, Proteus, who could change his form at will.

> The protean style of self-process is characterized by an interminable series of experiments and explorations—some shallow, some profound—each of which may be readily abandoned in favor of still new psychological quests. [Lifton, 1970: 319]

The description seems to fit members of the UFO cult very well, especially their "strong ideological hunger" (Lifton, 1970: 319) and pattern of shifting allegiances.

Before joining Bo and Peep, members of the UFO cult had organized their lives around the quest for truth. Most described themselves as spiritual seekers. After listing all her previous spiritual "trips," a woman who joined the cult when we did remarked: "Until I started talking to you, I never realized how much shit I'd been into." The woman, then 21, said she ran away from home at age 15 "to find the truth," and she had been searching ever since. An older member aptly characterized their perennial quest as a "bumper car ride through a maze of spiritual trips."

True to the protean style, most members of the cult moved frequently and had relatively few material possessions and social commitments. Their emotional ties with the conventional American style of life were generally weak. Hardly any of them had ever voted, and most of them were uninformed and unconcerned about contemporary social and political issues. A disproportionate number were remnants of the counterculture who preferred to avoid commitments that would unduly restrict their personal freedom. One man captured the protean flavor of his life when we asked him what he had given up to follow the Two:

> I gave up a lot to come on this trip, man. I gave up my record collection, a set of tools, my old lady. But it's not the first record collection I've given up, and it's not the first set of tools. And I've had eight old ladies.

Although a significant number of cult members had given up good jobs and comfortable homes to join the cult, most had

not. For some of the younger members, the material aspects of life in the cult were not very different from what they had experienced before they joined. For example, one new member had just dropped out of the Christ Family, a small sect that wandered barefoot from town to town, begging for its food and lodging. For him the transition to Bo and Peep's nomadic UFO cult was easy. Many others had been traveling around the country with backpacks or in remodeled vans, rarely staying anywhere for more than a few weeks at a time.

Even those who made substantial material sacrifices to join were not strongly attached to their possessions. A member who joined after selling his house for five dollars explained: "For me it was easy. I'm single. I just had some property to which I never felt any attachment anyway." Some of those who appeared to have made the greatest sacrifice had been gradually divesting themselves of their material possessions long before they met the Two. In one instance publicized by the Oregon press, a middle-aged couple supposedly abandoned their house and family to join the cult. Actually one of their sons came with them, and, even before they ever heard of Bo and Peep, they had quit their jobs, sold their home, and moved into a commune, where they were living when they decided to join.

The protean style of Bo and Peep's followers is important, because weak attachments to extracult relationships and activities make one available for membership. Other things being equal, a man with a good job, a family, and a respectable position in the community is less likely to join a flying saucer cult than a single male living alone or in a commune, with few material possessions and a strong penchant for change and excitement. To a great extent, the reason is the different degree of social constraint in each person's life.

THE ROLE OF THE SEEKER IN THE CULTIC MILIEU

Although the protean style fits most members of the UFO cult, we must avoid the trap of relating macroscopic structural conditions to the microscopic world of individuals without specifying the intermediate links in the causal chain. From

Lipton's description of the protean man, it would seem that individuals respond to the structural dislocations of our time as if they were social isolates, completely out of touch with other alienated members of our anomic society. However, alienation is a collective phenomenon. As Zygmunt (1972: 256) points out, men tend to become "alienated together."

Before they joined, members of the UFO cult shared a metaphysical world-view in which reincarnation, disincarnate spirits, psychic powers, lost continents, flying saucers, and ascended masters are taken for granted. This world-view, which Ellwood (1973) calls the "alternative reality," has a long history in the United States. It is perpetuated by a cultic milieu that exists in virtually every large community in the country. This milieu consists of a loosely integrated network of seekers who drift from one philosophy to another in search of metaphysical truth. We have entitled this section "The Role of the Seeker" because the concept of role places the individual seeker squarely in this social milieu. Within the metaphysical social world, the seeker is not disparaged as a starry-eyed social misfit. Instead, he is respected because he is trying to learn and grow. Members of the cultic milieu tend to be avid readers, continually exploring different metaphysical movements and philosophies (Buckner, 1965; Campbell, 1972; Mann, 1955). Whether in a tipi in the Oregon woods or a mansion in Beverly Hills, their evenings are often spent with friends and acquaintances discussing metaphysical topics like psychic research, flying saucers, or Sufi mysticism. A significant part of their lives is devoted to the pursuit of intellectual growth, however undisciplined that may be in conventional academic terms.

There is a common expression in metaphysical circles: "There are many paths to the top of the mountain." The seeker believes the quest for Truth is a highly individual process. As a long-time seeker in the UFO cult put it: "It looks to me like we're all trying to find the way. But what works for me, what's a test for me, may not mean shit to you." The long climb to the top of the mountain is usually a zig-zag course, as the seeker tries one path after another on the way up, always open to new ideas and alternatives.

Like Lifton's protean man, the seeker has a processual identity which changes continuously throughout his life. To stop exploring is to stop growing. Life is seen as an infinite series of "growth experiences," and the language of personal growth, like Christian's concept of humility, can be used to cope with almost any crisis. No matter how much he had given up to follow Bo and Peep, every one of the ex-members we interviewed defined his membership in the cult as a good growth experience. While a cynic might argue that this is nothing more than a convenient rationalization for a stupid mistake, it is clear that the quest for growth is part of the seeker's vocabulary of motives (Mills, 1940) that is learned and shared in the cultic milieu.

Many members of the UFO cult received strong support and encouragement from their friends when they considered joining the cult. Even many of those whose friends and relatives were very skeptical reported that no one tried to hold them back: "They told me, if that's what you feel you have to do, then you had better do it. It doesn't matter what we think."

Although it should be obvious, it is also worth noting that seekers get married, have children, and socialize their sons and daughters into the cultic milieu. As one member, whose mother was an avid follower of Edgar Cayce, told us, "I was raised on this stuff." The youngest member of the UFO cult was an extremely bright boy of 14 who had joined the cult with his parents. For over a year before hearing the message, he had read extensively about mysticism, psychic phenomena, health foods, and spiritual healing. He had been socialized into the occult social world, and the role of the seeker, even before he had the chance to experience the unsettling social dislocations described by Lifton.

The social nature of the alternative reality suggests that we need to reformulate the conventional image of the seeker. Our conception of the personally *disoriented* searcher "floundering about among religions" (Lofland and Stark, 1965: 869, 870) should be replaced with an image of one who is socially *oriented* to the quest for personal growth. Seekership constitutes a social identity that is positively valued by the individual and his significant others.

A closer look at the alternative reality of the metaphysical social world can help us understand how the Two could recruit so many followers in such a short time without providing prospective members with affective bonds to the group.

BO AND PEEP'S APPEAL TO SUBCULTURAL VALUES

Although Bo and Peep's message sounded bizarre to practically everyone who read about it in the newspapers, it was firmly grounded in the metaphysical world-view. Bo and Peep put together an eclectic mixture of metaphysics and Christianity that many seekers found appealing because it integrated a variety of taken-for-granted beliefs, including flying saucers, reincarnation, Biblical revelations, and the physical resurrection of Jesus. (See Balch and Taylor, 1977, for a more complete explanation of the cult's belief system.) One of the Oregon recruits described his reaction to the message this way: "There were so many truths, man. I listened to Bo's rap, and I'm thinking, yeah, I've heard that before. He told me a lot of things I already knew, but he put them all together in a way I'd never thought of."

Despite its roots in the taken-for-granted beliefs of the cultic milieu, Bo and Peep's message had many unique features, e.g., the physical nature of the metamorphic process and role of UFOs in transcending the human level of existence. Yet, as Wallis (1974, 1975a, 1975b) points out, the cultic milieu is epistemologically individualistic, acknowledging many paths to spiritual enlightenment. In the metaphysical social world anything is possible. As one of our informants reminded us, it was not too long ago that Buck Rogers, spaceships, and ray guns were science fiction. Since then we have put men on the moon and sent a spaceship to Mars, and laser-beams are now being contemplated as military weapons. In a world that changes as rapidly as ours, he said, one cannot afford to close one's mind to any possibility, even spaceships from heaven. Not many seekers were completely convinced by the Two when they heard the message, and many remained skeptical as long as they belonged to the cult, but they set aside their doubts. Another

ex-member captured the openness of the metaphysical seeker when he explained that the "willing suspension of disbelief" is an essential part of any genuine spiritual quest.

Although Bo and Peep claimed that their metamorphic process was the only way of getting to heaven, whenever they spoke to an audience they couched the absolutism of their message in language designed to appeal to the open-minded tolerance of the seeker. They agreed that there were many equally valid paths to the top of the mountain, but they added that only a UFO could get the seeker *off* the mountain into the kingdom of heaven that lies far beyond this planet.

In spite of the cult's sectarian characteristics, even Bo and Peep's "process" was a direct outgrowth of the epistemological individualism of the cultic milieu. The Two called their process Human Individual Metamorphosis to emphasize the uniqueness of each individual's transformation. The psychic connection established with the next level was unique for every member of the cult, and no two individuals had the same attachments to overcome. Nor would they require the same experiences to complete their metamorphosis. As members were so fond of saying: "The process is an individual thing."

Bo and Peep also appealed directly to the value of personal growth. It was a central part of their cosmology. According to the Two, Earth is only one of many "gardens" throughout the universe that supports life. All life forms are in a constant state of flux, evolving slowly but steadily to higher levels of consciousness. The Two compared Earth to a school, and mankind to its students. As human beings advance through a procession of lifetimes, they learn from their experiences, moving up through the grades from kindergarten to graduation time.

Bo and Peep said that by abandoning his past and making a connection with the next level, the seeker could accelerate his growth to the point where he would actually convert himself into an androgenous being. Even at the next level, there is no finality or perfection as there is in the Christian's heaven—only more growth. They said that not even God is perfect, because perfection means stagnation. As one member put it succinctly: "Growth is life."

THE SUBCULTURAL BASIS OF THE MOTIVATION TO JOIN

The value placed on personal growth in the metaphysical social world helps account for the motivation to join the UFO cult. The prevailing image of the religious seeker is a social misfit who experiences one crisis after another before he finally joins a cult or a sect in order to cope with his problems. There is no doubt that most members of the UFO cult had experienced "psychic deprivation" (Glock, 1964) before they joined. In a typical account, a young woman described the spiritual vacuum of her life before Bo and Peep: "I could get high so many ways—drugs, music, scenery, people—but I still felt an emptiness. I never felt that fullness, that rock-bottom solidness I was looking for."

However, most social scientific studies of cults are overly reductionistic in their focus on the personal problems of cult members. They ignore the extent to which psychic deprivation is generated by the role of the seeker. One of Lofland and Stark's (1965) subjects aptly described the seeker's dilemma when she said: "The more I search, the more questions I have." The top of the spiritual mountain is an elusive goal, continually receding the higher the seeker climbs. The seeker is supposed to grow by asking for tests and learning from his experiences, but growth is subjective and hard to define. As one member explained: "You never know if you pass a test." In short, the motivation to continue searching is built into the role.

As the seeker goes through life, he is attuned to signs that might give his quest some direction. An axiom of the alternative reality is that nothing happens by pure coincidence. Things happen because they are meant to, and it is the seeker's job to ferret out the hidden meaning in everyday events that might reveal his role in the cosmic plan.

Most of the ex-members we interviewed reported a series of coincidences just before they joined which convinced them that Bo and Peep's message was true. Consider the case of a 22-year old woman who joined in a small Arizona community where she had been living for several months. She had been feeling restless

and thought about moving on, but she had no particular destination in mind. Then one night during a violent thunderstorm, a lightning bolt suddenly lit up her room while she was asleep. As she sat up with a start, only half awake, she had a fleeting vision of an open doorway suspended in the air directly in front of her. At the time the meaning of the vision escaped her, but a week later she met two members of the UFO cult who told her about an open doorway in the heavens that would allow them to leave the planet aboard UFOs. The coincidence of her restlessness, the vision, and the sudden opportunity to join the UFO cult was compelling evidence that she was meant at least to take a closer look at Bo and Peep's message.

The seeker is understandably open to metaphysical teachers who might be able to clarify some of the confusion surrounding his spiritual quest and accelerate his growth. In the world of metaphysics there is a premium on hidden wisdom, whether Kabbalistic lore, tales of astral visits with ascended masters, or messages from benevolent space brothers. Metaphysics is the study of things beyond the realm of normal human experience, and the more obscure the hidden mysteries, the more the seeker needs a teacher.

Whether consciously or not, metaphysical teachers often maintain their authority by exploiting the seeker's insecurity. A skillful teacher can effectively suppress the open expression of doubt by implying that his students will comprehend his obscure metaphysical teachings according to their level of spiritual awareness. Like the villagers in the story of the emperor's new clothes, not many students are willing to risk revealing their ignorance by challenging a man they and their fellow seekers consider a master of the hidden mysteries.

Bo and Peep played on the insecurity of the seeker in much the same way. They compared their followers to twelfth graders who were about to "graduate from the planet" because they had evolved as far as they could in their present human form. Supposedly the rest of mankind was unable to understand their message because it was still plodding along through the other 11 grades.

THE ABSENCE OF CONVERSION IN THE UFO CULT

Members of the UFO cult were not converts in the true sense of the word. Conversion, according to Travisano (1970: 600-601), refers to the "radical reorganization of identity, meaning, and life. . . . In conversion, a whole new world is entered, and the old world is transformed through reinterpretation. The father sees his bachelorhood as youthful fun; the convert sees his as debauchery." However, members of the UFO cult did not undergo a serious rupture of identity when they became "total converts" to Bo and Peep's message. Instead, they defined "the process" as a logical extension of their spiritual quest.

Unlike members of more sectarian organizations such as some Jesus movement group who define their lives before "accepting Christ" in very negative terms (Richardson et al., 1972), Bo and Peep's followers tended to look favorably on their pasts. The following remark is typical: "This information clarified everything we had been into before. It's like the next logical step."

The continuity between participation in the UFO cult and the role of the seeker in the cultic milieu stood out most clearly when members became disillusioned with the process and considered dropping out. Their disillusionment was accompanied by discernible changes in their everyday speech. Many words, phrases, and conversational topics unique to the UFO cult began to disappear from their talk. They stopped talking about UFOs and the physical nature of the metamorphic process, and began to emphasize how they had grown from their experience in the cult.

In a manner consistent with the protean style, most ex-members of the UFO cult insisted that Bo and Peep, however misguided they appeared in retrospect, had accelerated their spiritual growth by helping them overcome their mundane attachments:

> The most important thing is the process of becoming. Don't get hung up on the future. Just let it be. It doesn't matter what you call it—the process is the path, the way, the Tao. All the great teachers were saying the same thing—Jesus, Lao Tzu, Buddha, the Two. . . . The process is whatever you want it to be as long as you're free of attachments.

Paradoxically, the openness that allowed so many seekers to suspend their doubts and follow the Two also facilitated the process of dropping out. For example, one ex-member recalled something his partner told him just before he decided to leave the cult:

> He said over and over again just before I left the trip: "We have to keep an open mind about this thing, man. The Two may not be who they say they are, but that's not important. The Two aren't important."

His comment is significant for two reasons. First, it illustrates the seeker's protean adaptability. It was fairly common for members to argue, just before they left the cult, that Bo and Peep were no longer important. The Two had merely brought them some useful information, and now that they had learned all they could from the process, it was time to move on, to overcome even their attachment to Bo and Peep. Second, his comment reflects the common belief that even a charlatan may have something to offer. A reporter once asked a member what he would think if Bo and Peep's message turned out to be a hoax. "Then I will still have grown," he replied.

For most of Bo and Peep's followers, then, becoming a member of the UFO cult did not constitute the rejection of one identity for another. Instead, their decision to follow the Two was a *reaffirmation* of their seekership. Whenever one identity grows naturally out of another, causing little disruption in the lives of those involved, the term "conversion" is inappropriate. Perhaps prospective members of a religious cult only need strong social support from existing members when a radical substitution of belief systems is required.

CONCLUSION

While there is no way of knowing how successful Bo and Peep would have been with different recruitment methods, it is clear that the absence of social interaction between members and would-be recruits is not necessarily a fatal omission in recruiting

members to a contemporary religious movement. However deviant it might appear to the outside world, a religious cult is not necessarily deviant within the social world of the metaphysical seeker. Even if it were, there are powerful norms that encourage an open-minded assessment of deviant beliefs and discourage condemning others for doing what they think is best for themselves. When a religious seeker also has few social commitments and material possessions, most of the major restraints against joining a deviant religious cult are absent. To a great extent, even the motivation to join such a group is generated by social-psychological forces operating in the cultic milieu.

The curious pattern of recruitment in Bo and Peep's UFO cult underscores the importance of studying religious cults in their social and cultural context. The process of becoming a member may vary greatly depending on the social milieu from which a cult draws its members, and the extent to which membership requires a transformation of one's social identity in that milieu.

NOTES

1. Before their "awakening," the Two apparently led rather ordinary lives. Bo, who was 44 at the time of the Oregon meeting, had been a music professor at a university in Texas, and later a choir director for an Episcopal church. Peep, 48, had been a professional nurse. After meeting in a Texas hospital in 1972, they opened a short-lived metaphysical center specializing in astrology, spiritual healing, theosophy, and comparative religions, where they first began to suspect their higher purpose on the planet. During the next three years they spent much of their time traveling together, deliberately isolating themselves from the rest of the world in order to learn more about their mission. It was not until the spring of 1975 that they recruited their first followers at a private meeting in Los Angeles.

2. Estimating the size of Bo and Peep's following at any given time is hazardous, because members were scattered across the country in small families, and no one, not even the Two, kept track of the number of people recruited. While estimates of the cult's size at the peak of its popularity range up to 1,500, there were probably never more than 200 members, and 150 is probably more realistic. These figures are based on our own calculations as well as estimates made by members themselves.

3. Although we were aware of the ethical objections to covert observation, we decided to join the cult as hidden observers for pragmatic and methodological reasons. Pragmatically there was no other way to study the cult effectively, because although members spoke freely with reporters, they generally limited their comments to the "party line" dictated by the Two. We believed the only way we could get accurate data about the cult

was to join it ourselves. Our judgment was supported by the sharp contrast we observed between daily life in the cult and the way members presented themselves to the outside world (Balch and Taylor, 1976a).

The pragmatic considerations that led to our joining as hidden observers dovetailed nicely with our ethnographic methodological orientation. As Barkun (1974: 43) points out in his recent study of millenarian movements, research that offers an "inside" perspective is all too rare in the study of religious cults. The works of Festinger et al. (1956) and Lofland and Stark (1965; Lofland, 1966) are conspicuous exceptions. They are notable not only because they are unusual, but because of the significant contributions they have made to the study of religious movements.

In addition to allowing us to enter the "backstage region" of the cult (Goffman, 1959), we believed our decision to join as hidden observers would enable us to see the world through the eyes of Bo and Peep's followers as no other method could. Several months later, when we more openly interviewed members who had dropped out of the cult, our "inside" knowledge of the group's beliefs, organization, and membership helped us focus our questions and contributed to the excellent rapport we enjoyed with our respondents. As one ex-member said of another social scientist who had tried unsuccessfully to study the cult: "He didn't even know what questions to ask."

It is worth noting that we encountered no hostility when we revealed our "true" identities prior to each interview, and no one refused to be interviewed because of the deception. In fact, we were asked to contribute a chapter to a book about the cult that is being written by several ex-members.

4. At this writing the UFO cult still exists, and its sectarian features are more pronounced than ever before. Bo and Peep rejoined the remnants of their following sometime during the early months of 1976. Since their return, the cult has stopped recruiting and has become very secretive, disappearing almost entirely from the public view. These changes are described in Balch and Taylor (1977).

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