Psychological characteristics of members of new religious and parareligious movements

Von TADEUS DOKTÓR

In recent debate concerning new religious and parareligious movements of oriental origin, the questions concerning psychological health and personality traits of their members often appears as one of the most hot topics. Although the majority of studies reveal that participation in these groups has rather positive than negative effects, there are also reports that it is totally deleterious (Richardson, 1985).

Among many personality traits, narcissism, meaning in life and anxiety are often reported as related to participation in these groups.

Narcissism is sometimes seen as a characteristics of the oriental culture and religion (Schjelderup and Schjelderup, 1932; Spratt, 1967). According to some authors, new cults and therapies foster and legitimate narcissistic trends already present in our culture as a consequences of modernization (Lasch, 1979; Hunter, 1981). Clinical analyses of personality of some members and ex-members of oriental religious and parareligious movements reveal its narcissistic character structure and relationship with the leader (Lang, 1980; Deutsch, 1975, Gascard, 1985).

It was also observed that MMPI profiles of members of new religious movements reveal strong although not pathological narcissistic traits (Kuner, 1984). Narcissism as measured by Narcissistic Personality Inventory developed by Raskin and Hall (1979) is also negatively related to intrinsic religiosity (Watson et al., 1984).

Many theories of religion argue that among the most important functions of religion is providing the individual with an organized framework within which his life takes on greater meaning and purpose. According to Victor E. Frankl (1976), the essence of human motivation is the “will to meaning”: that is to say, the will to orient one’s self, to to understand, to interpret and to direct one’s life in a meaningful way. The vacuum of perceived meaning in personal existence (not necessarily of religious character) may lead to a specific form of psychopathology, called by him, the noogenic neurosis. On the basis of his conception James C. Crumbaugh and Leonard T. Maholick (1963, 1964, 1969,) designed an attitude scale (Purpose in Life Test) to measure the degree to which the individual experiences the condition of existential frustration described by Frankl and reported significant differences among diverse groups, normal and abnormal, in America. Stones and Philbrick (1980) report a significant increase in the scores of PLT four months after joining the Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna and Jesus People in South Africa.

The relation between religion and anxiety appears to be ambiguous (Bergin, 1983). One of the possible explanations may be that different forms of religiosity are differentially related to anxiety. Bergin, Masters and Richards (1987) found that intrinsic religiosity is negatively correlated with anxiety whereas
Extrinsic religiosity positively. According to Marc Galanter (1978) participating in new religious movements causes a "relief effect" due to which the symptoms of neurotic distress are decreasing. Anxiety as measured by Cattell Anxiety Scale (IPAT) is reported to decrease with the practice of Transcendental Meditation technique (Ferguson and Gowan, 1976).

Nearly all of the existing psychological studies on members of new religious and parareligious movements are being done in the western countries. Recently these movements start their activity in eastern Europe (Doktor, 1991) but there are no systematic studies of this relatively new phenomenon.

The aim of this investigation is to test the hypothesis that narcissism and meaning in life among the members of new religious and parareligious oriental movements is higher than among the general population and that they will grow with the time of membership. The relation of anxiety to participation in these groups should be a reverse one.

New religious and parareligious movements could, however, hardly be treated as a homogenous entity, also in relation to to the traits which are the subject of this study. One of the differentiating factor could be their doctrine. In the case of hinduism the godlike characteristic of the self as well as many other attributes of its doctrine and practice are more prone to narcissistic interpretations than other religious traditions (Spratt, 1967). So it could also be expected that members of hinduistic movements are more narcissistic than members of new religious and parareligious movements coming from other traditions.

New religious movements are also differentiated as their structure and the style of participation is concerned, so we could expect significant differences between scores on meaning in life and anxiety among members of the two types of these movements, which differ markedly in formulations of their goals and in the level of demanded engagement – religious and parareligious movements. Participation in movements of a religious character which formulate their goals in religious terms, have a more coherent social structure and demand more engagement from their members and propose more global systems of meaning should be connected with higher level on meaning in life and lower level on anxiety than participation in parareligious movements which are loosely structured and use concepts and methods of religious origins to fulfill secular goals such as health or personality development.

Method

PLT, NPI and IPAT were distributed among 95 members of five oriental religious and parareligious movements (24 persons practising zen buddhism, 21 members of Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga, 17 practitioners of Rebirthing, 17 members of the Polish Transcendental Meditation Society, and 16 participants in a Tai Chi course after two months of its duration) and among 41 subjects from a control group.