

# **MEDIATING TO SETTLE CONFLICTS IN CULTIC GROUPS**

## **Some Useful Methodologies**

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**University of El Jadida - 20/09/2012 – Discussion after the presentation**

### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this presentation is to discuss some useful methodologies of mediation to settle conflicts between religious/spiritual groups, families and society. This paper covers nearly 18 years of experience in this field and gives an overall evaluation of my experience in attempting to mediate among conflicting groups and/or people.

First of all, I would like to share with you my experience talking about the mediation process in three different contexts. Secondly, I will try to speak about the Kelman, Burton and Doob' studies. These scholars studied the Conflict Resolution Theory, the Controlled Communication and the Face to Face Communication.

Finally, I will try to discuss whether or not their studies can be applied to a Cult Conflict Context in which parents and children, members and ex-members, religious movements and groups supporting victims (or anti-cult groups) are involved.

## **INTRODUCTORY NOTE: MY EXPERIENCE**

I started to work as a volunteer with a Catholic association in 1993 and, from 2000 until now, I have been setting up a support and counseling centre in Rome, Italy, for all those troubled, directly or indirectly, by experiences associated with cults: the Counseling Online Center [www.dimarzio.it](http://www.dimarzio.it).

At first, I used to receive requests for information and help **only** from families, members going through a crisis or former members of religious groups, journalists and law enforcement authorities. Over the years, I also began to receive contact and requests for information and help from people affiliated with religious and spiritual movements, such help usually being asked for when these people became the target of attacks from different sources.

## **ROLE PLAYED BY GROUPS SUPPORTING VICTIMS**

In Italy cult victim support associations are kept going by many volunteers driven by a great sense of abnegation and a sincere wish to help others. Their role is to reassure people, to help in coming out of state of suffering and recover other affective relationships. However, the positive action of these organizations is often made useless or seriously affected by methodological errors, which I have witnessed myself and which I wish to point out in order to improve care activity<sup>1</sup>:

- Reliability of Data Concerning the Extent of the Cult Phenomenon
- Training of the operators

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<sup>1</sup> Raffaella Di Marzio, *Facing the 'Dark Side' of Cults - Balance of Fifteen Years' Experience* [http://www.cesnur.org/2010/to\\_dimarzio.htm](http://www.cesnur.org/2010/to_dimarzio.htm)

- Oversimplification
- Using unilateral sources
- Brainwashing the “brainwashed”?

The length of this paper does not allow a thorough discussion of each of these methodological mistakes; so I’ll speak only about one, which I think is the most important: I call it “**oversimplification**”.

## **OVERSIMPLIFICATION**

Oversimplification means to simplify (something) so much that a distorted impression is given. For example, the problem of the individual and his or her family is not situated in the complex context of the personality and of family dynamics. It is extrapolated and dealt with as if it were a problem of its own, as if going into or leaving the “cult” could be understood without taking into account the person as a whole and in his inter-personal relationships.

No attempt is made, therefore, to understand what failed to work in the groups of reference of that individual **before** affiliation, what it was that the person did not find in his or her family and in the Church he or she belonged to, which drove him or her to seek for realization elsewhere.

The oversimplification is a mistake also because I’ve experienced that there are situations and conflicts which have different and overlapping causes, and it is unlikely that a problem of relationship can be attributed to a single cause, especially a cause external to the person affected. In fact, thanks to this way of facing conflicts it is possible to assign every “fault” to the new group of reference, which at present seems to respond to the expectations of the individual, that is the “cult”, a term which has now become a stereotype useful for lashing out against groups and associations which may also be entirely harmless. “Cult” is a term used by the media which, instead of practicing journalism, carry out “media terrorism”.

Really, the oversimplification makes complex problems easier to solve, but I think that, doing so, the conflicts are not solved, they are only avoided.

## **MEDIATION: A COMPLEX SOLUTION FOR A COMPLEX PROBLEM**

I think that a complex problem requires a complex solution. This solution, according to me, could be the mediation process, because it works thanks to the efforts of all the people involved to solve the conflict. Over the last 18 years, I've had experiences in three different fields in attempting to mediate among conflicting groups and/or people. I'll describe the mediation process in three different contexts.

### **1) Parents Concerned And Children Affiliated**

Mediation and settling conflicts is not possible if one of the parties involved (the child or the parents) is absent and does not want to speak about this problem. It's only possible to support families in order to avoid the end of dialogue and to keep every family member united despite one of their affiliations.

The success of this support strategy depends on many different factors and I often cannot understand or check at a later time the effects which the support work has produced on the family nucleus or on the individual. I can know it when families give their feedback, more or less positive.

### **2) Families Concerned and NRMS**

In this situation it is very important to attempt to contact the NRM when a family has asked for help because of their relative's affiliation. In this case I have also to ask for help because NRMs do not usually trust people involved in cult victim assistance because of very aggressive anti-cult campaigns caused by extreme anti-cult movements.

CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions), in Italy, is the only organization I could contact because NRMs trust it. CESNUR could become, in this situation, a "second mediator" because of its specific role, in Italy, as a Center for Studies on New Religions. NRM could give CESNUR some useful information.

In some cases correct and reliable information has allowed me to solve the conflict in a few days. The solution was easy: ask the movement if that person really joined the group. Sometimes the parents are afraid without any reason: they are afraid that their child is brainwashed by a dangerous cult. On the contrary, the truth is that the child never really joined a religious group.

When, instead, the affiliation really occurred, it was possible to arrange some meetings

between NRM's leaders and worried parents in order to help people to better understand the situation and to face it successfully.

### **3) NRMs and Groups supporting victims**

During the past five years, some satisfied members of NRMs contacted me asking for help. They found my website after checking the Internet, and contacted me. They were very afraid because they became the target of attacks in the media, on Internet, in books written by former members, on radio and TV, etc.

Before contacting me they tried to contact other people or associations involved in this field, that is groups involved in supporting victims or anti-cult-movements. These people/or associations refused to listen to NRMS members or attacked them more and more on their websites. Why? Because they are a "cult", that is a "criminal organization which brainwashes its members". I consented to listen to these "brainwashed" people and I understood that they were not brainwashed at all.

On the contrary, such cases afforded me the opportunity to compare the recollections and experience of people who are still affiliated with those of hostile former members, concerning the same religious group. I found this opportunity which I chanced upon to be very stimulating, since it opened up new horizons of awareness and made my research richer. This comparison made me aware that the information we receive (from any side) must be carefully checked. Moreover, I've realized that the extreme anti-cult action can cause a lot of suffering to people who are not dangerous for anyone.

My attempt to mediate to start a dialogue between the two fighting camps was unsuccessful. It is very important to stress that, in some cases, the mediation failed because the group supporting victims refused to cooperate and to speak with NRMs members who, on the contrary, were available to speak.

So, the only one action I could start was to spread correct information about these religious groups by my website and media. Moreover, my last attempt in this direction caused me serious problems from extreme anti-cult movements in Italy, that is a real dangerous persecution from 2008 until now.

## **BURTON AND DOOB'S STUDIES TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION**

We've looked at a bit of my experience. Now I would like to expand on what I have said above. I will do it speaking about the Kelman, Burton and Doob' studies. I can just sum up the main points regarding the subject of this paper and, in particular, the Kelman's workshop experience.

First of all I would like to stress the importance of Burton's Exercises in "Controlled Communication" and Doob's "Fermeda Workshops". These scholars brought together representatives of nations or national ethnic communities involved in an active conflict for face-to-face communication in a relatively isolated setting and both experienced that face-to-face communication among conflicting parties may contribute to conflict management and resolution.

### **KELMAN's PROBLEM SOLVING WORKSHOP IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

Kelman summarizes both approaches and attempts to integrate them. The problem-solving workshops carried out by Kelman and his colleagues, is an approach to conflict resolution anchored in social-psychological principles. It brings together politically involved members of conflicting parties for direct communication, facilitated by a panel of social scientists with expertise in group process international conflicts and the particular region in which the conflict takes place.

The ultimate goal of interactive problem solving is to promote change in individuals through face-to-face interaction in small groups as a vehicle for change in the larger conflict system. The problem-solving workshops is a microprocess that is intended to contribute to the macroprocess of conflict resolution.

According to Kelman, participants' behavior in the group may reflect the nature of the relationship between their communities and the self-perpetuating pattern of interaction that they have adopted.

### **CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND CULT CONFLICT CONTEXT**

I think that the main ends of Burton, Doob and Kelman's workshops could be shared also in cult conflicts. Obviously, the workshop experiences described above and the situation in which we must face the conflict are very different. Real life is not a workshop. Moreover,

Kelman was studying international conflict, a very different field from cult conflicts. Nevertheless, I think, according to my personal experience, that there are at least two very useful ideas we could apply to cult conflicts: the face to face communication and the mediator figure.

### 1) **Face To Face Communication**

This is the most important idea. Face-to face communication, as the three authors named above say, can give people some useful opportunities. For example:

- **To move away from a rigid reiteration of stereotyped position** and from efforts to justify their own sides.

This is a very common situation when we have to face conflicting relationships between parents and children affiliated to cultic groups. Parents, after asking anti-cult groups for help, are very often convinced that their children have been brainwashed by the cult and it is very difficult to reassure them about this matter even if it is clear that the children are totally free and responsible for their action and choices.

- **To absorb new information** in order to understand the perceptions and intentions of the other side, to achieve new insights into the nature of conflict and to learn new conceptual framework for the analysis of conflict which may be applicable to their own situations.

Applying these ideas to cult conflict I would like to stress that it is very important and useful to give new and reliable information about the religious group in order to:

- Revise parents' perception distorted by a long history of conflict very often caused by anti-cult and media propaganda
- Engage in a process of creative problem solving

Doing so, people involved in cult conflicts can learn to communicate with each other in new ways in order to create the conditions for effective problem solving. As Burton says, I think we should learn "**To see the conflict as a problem to be solved and not as a contest to be won**".

### 2) **Mediator Figure**

I think that if we want to help people we must facilitate this behavioral change: to move from the roles of antagonists, in which neither party dares to yield a point, to the role of collaborators searching for a positive-sum solution to a common problem. I have experienced this process in my own life and in my attempt to help people involved in cult conflicts: parents, children, members, ex-members and religious movements. In this context the face-to-face communication can be facilitated by a mediator figure.

The mediator, involved in the process of conflict resolution, is the key figure. He can encourage conflicting people to ask leading questions and suggest tentative hypotheses to explain the nature of the conflict. I think that he should not have any intention to force or attack anyone and his main characteristic should be the respect for a human being, without any discrimination.



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## **CONCLUSION**

Nevertheless to try mediating in cult conflict situations is a very difficult task, I've realized, in the last eighteen years of experience, that there is no simple way to face these kind of problems.

On the basis of my experience, I've realized that groups and associations providing help to cult victims have a great responsibility both for the fallout of their actions on individuals and social groups, but also because the press and law enforcement authorities investigating controversial groups refer to them as a source of information.

Perhaps operators are not always sufficiently aware of this enormous responsibility they have, nor are they aware of the very serious consequences which a mistake in intervention or wrong advice can cause to people, families and society.

For this reason I consider that we have the moral duty of multiplying efforts in order to improve the results of our action without causing any discrimination or creating new victims.

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