Final Report of the Enquete Commission on "So-called Sects and Psychogroups"

New Religious and Ideological Communities and Psychogroups in the Federal Republic of Germany

Translated into English by:

Wolfgang Fehlberg and Monica Ulloa-Fehlberg

Editor:

Deutscher Bundestag
Referat Öffentlichkeitsarbeit
Bonn 1998

Overall production:

Bonner Universitäts-Buchdruckerei

Strauss, A. L.: Grundlagen qualitativer Sozialforschung. Datenanalyse und Theo-riebildung in der empirischen und soziologischen Forschung. Translated from American English by A. Hildenbrand with a preface by B. Hildenbrand. UTB 1776, Munich 1994.

Zinser, H.; Schwarz, G.; Remus, B.: Psychologische Aspekte neuer Formen der Religiosität. In: Veröffentlichungen am Religionswissenschaftlichen Institut der Freien Universität Berlin. Empirische Studien, Vol. 1. Medienverlag Köhler, Tübingen 1997.

III. Sub-project on "Biographies in Christian Fundamentalist Milieus and Organisations"

Prof. Dr Heinz Streib, University of Bielefeld

For this research project, which was set up as a third-party funded project at the University of Bielefeld[15]), contrastive analyses of biographies were drawn up, i.e. the processes of entering, staying in or leaving the fundamentalist Chris-tian milieu or organisation were scrutinised. From a pool of 22 interviews, 12 were chosen in the initial selection process and transcribed as preparation for analysis and comparison using reconstructive hermeneutic methods for the qualitative interpretation of narrative interviews.[16]) Analytical attention was focussed on the relationship between the "religious career" and the biography *"backwards"* (conditions motivating joining and belonging) and *"forwards"* (bio-graphical consequences in terms of transformation, immobilisation and decom-pensation) with special attention being paid to the changes or continuity in the personality, how content the person was with life, his ability to act and his iden-tity in view of conversion and transformation processes during the period of entering, staying with or leaving the group which may have left deep impres-sions.

---

[15]) I had succeeded in enlisting a number of interested and well-qualified academics to conduct and analyse the interviews; most of them were post-doctorate or were in the process of writ-ing their dissertations in sociology, psychology and theology. The names of these helpers, who worked on the basis of contracts for services, were S. Grenz, Cologne; Dr M. Hoof, Wit-ten; K. Keller, Bielefeld; Dr M. Utsch, Hanover/Berlin; A. Wyschka, Gelsenkirchen. I should like to take this opportunity to thank them very much for the time-consuming work in the interpretation groups (small groups) and in preparing the case analyses. For what was at times a very difficult transcription job, I would especially like to thank S. Lipka, G. Ortmeyer and A. Grenz. For his help in co-ordinating the office work, I would like to thank Mr D. Deb-row, and for managing the tapes and transcripts, Ms E. Kaptain, both of whom put in a great deal of work as student helpers.

[16]) Methodologically, we primarily used the interpretation method for narrative interviews devel-oped by F. Schütze, in combination with the sequence analysis method developed by U. Oevermann (On matters of methodology, see also the jointly drafted introduction to the four research projects). The interpretation sessions in the small group were recorded on tape and included as such in summary form in the evaluation reports.

The following summary of results is based on the individual case analyses, which ought to be read first in order to fully understand the results, but which unfortunately, for reasons of space, cannot be presented here.

One of the most important findings that qualitative empirical research hopes to make using narrative interviews is to determine distinct types of biographies. This is done by contrasting and comparing the biographies. In analysing the interviews we have looked at three levels or dimensions as may be deduced from the above outline of the focus of analytical attention:

– the dimension of entry and adaptation methods (α dimension),
– the dimension of the biographical consequences and processing methods (β dimension), and
– the dimension of the underlying motivations in the biography (γ dimension).

The process of defining different types is at the centre of our examinations of Christian fundamentalist biographies and distinguishes between three basic types; it starts from the central consideration of the ways people enter into and adapt (α dimension) to fundamentalist Christian religiousness and looks then for typical relationships to other dimensions, in particular to the dimension of biographical consequences (β dimension), and the dimension of underlying motivations in the biography (γ dimension).

1. Three types of fundamentalist Christian biography

If, when reading the interviews, one looks at *how* the respondents arrived at their current fundamentalist religious beliefs, how they found their way into the milieu, what guided them and *how often* they had already changed direction and milieu, one comes to the conclusion that there are significant differences. Taking the criterion of ways in which people enter and adapt it was possible to develop a basic typology from our observations, against which the individual cases could be contrasted:

A. The first type is the *traditionalist* (type A), who has been moulded by a mono-cultural religiousness in the family or milieu and who accepts his cultural niche as fortunate destiny or as ordained by God. Hence, the case characteristics can be described as follows:

 – There is formative, religious socialisation, usually through the family.
 – Religious socialisation determines the manner in which the person enters into, and adapts to, a fundamentalist religious orientation.
 – In this case, conversion to fundamentalism means confirming and accepting or progressively intensifying the religious religiousness that has been passed on by the family or milieu in the form of religious socialisation.
 – Alternative religious orientation is practically never or only marginally considered.

403

– Usually, one can assume that the starting point for the traditionalist's adaptation to fundamentalist religion is the secluded (at least in his subjective assessment) religious enclave.

For this type of socialisation into a certain religion as personal destiny, it is possible to further differentiate by *when* in the person's life the fateful inculturation into fundamentalist religion occurred. Early inclusion by the family is to be distinguished from that happening in late childhood, adolescence or in early adulthood. A collective inclusion after early childhood need not be any less fateful or make the person any less traditionalist; however, as a person grows older it is increasingly unlikely that a set of beliefs might be adopted without any awareness of alternatives or the elective character of the decision becoming more obvious to the person and given serious consideration. Characteristic of the traditionalist is that his subjective horizon – and usually that of the milieu – is largely closed and bound by tradition and any alternatives there might be, which could force the subject to make a choice from various offers, rarely or never come into view, or are simply ignored.

B. Two further types may be distinguished from the first traditionalist type, both of whom might be described as heretical or under obligation to choose. Here "heresy" is not to be understood as having opinions at variance with the officially valid ones, becoming an apostate and therefore being punished by sanctions but in the sense the word is used by P. Berger[17]) as quite simply a modern, as opposed to traditional, method of religious adaptation and, returning to the original meaning of the Greek word, the imperative to choose, even in regard to religion.

I call the first variety the *mono-convert* (type B). The characteristics of the mono-convert are as follows:

– A primary religious socialisation in the family is not evident or negligible.

– The mono-convert is well aware of alternatives and pluralism in religious matters, has perhaps even taken a look at or tested one or the other form.

– However, the mono-convert dedicates himself once and for all to one certain set of religious beliefs – at any rate he wishes to see his decision as a singular event and for others to see it in the same way. Conversion to fundamentalist religiousness means in this case: "Deciding in favour of ...".

– Conversion to a fundamentalist religiousness therefore also means rejecting the previous religious views and conceptions.

Fundamentalist ideology deliberately ignores that the choice is in principle one of many and the undeniable fact that the set of beliefs held by one's own fundamentalist group is only one variation among the pluralist range of religions. This blinkered view is due to the elevation of the authoritativeness of one's own set of beliefs, which adheres to theories of literalism, such as the

---

[17]) Berger, P.: *The Heretical Imperative,* Garden City; New York 1979.

inspired nature of the Word, and thereby claims an absolute truth that puts modern natural science and the humanities – and thus theology in particular – totally in the shade. It is therefore understandable that the fundamentalist mono-convert soon forgets the elective nature of his own decision and becomes convinced that the recently acquired religion is the one and only.

C. The third type of fundamentalist biography contrasts with the two other types: the *accumulative heretic* (type C). This type is easy to distinguish from the mono-convert, who also has a heretical method of entering and adapting, in that the former's choice does not fall upon one religious form only. The difference may be explained through what is meant by "choice" here: the mono-convert sees his decision as mono-directional, mono-cultural and once only, as the decision to embrace a certain, fairly closed religious system that determines many aspects of life; in the case of the accumulative heretic "choice" is viewed – by the individual as well – as "*choosing*" and usually he means by that *selective* choosing, in other words he by no means adopts all the details that form part of a religious tradition. The characteristics may be named as follows:

– The accumulative heretic moves from one religious or spiritual milieu to the next and may take part in a wide variety of initiation rites.

– Conversion means the rite of acceptance into a certain religious movement and the initiation rituals, which he may well go through several times over.

– Cognitive contradictions between the varying religious traditions are barely noticed and certainly not taken very seriously.

– Open religious milieus are preferred.

– Religious socialisation in the family plays a minor role and is generally not recognisable.

In his process of adaptation the accumulative heretic is able to accept the most varied religious and spiritual traditions at one and the same time and to "borrow" from them – he does so by ignoring cognitive, theological and dogmatic contradictions between them. In some cases the various borrowings and offers taken from religious traditions are explicitly bound into an ontological framework theory; in others a vague thread can be guessed at in the form of an implicit "theory", which guides the search.

The accumulative heretic can be sub-divided into two further types: the *serial accumulative heretic* who – sometimes in restless and fairly rapid manner – changes from one form of religion to the next, abandoning (by and large) the one form before he adopts the next; then there is the *synchronously accumulative heretic* who is sufficiently polytrope to participate at the same time in various movements, philosophies and rituals and ignores the in part massive cognitive contradictions in particularly striking manner. The accumulative heretic, particularly the synchronously accumulative variety, prefers the open

religious milieu which – irrespective of a hard fundamentalist core – leaves subjective freedoms for wide peripheral aspects of life and life-styles.

So far this typology has only looked at the criterion of the ways in which the person enters and adapts (α dimension), the role the other dimensions play in defining the types has not yet been mentioned. This is now to be rectified, although one must state right away that the other two dimensions, the biographical consequences (β dimension) and the motivational background (γ dimension) did not lead to a distinct typology in our analysis process. They have been treated instead – rather more modestly – in terms of the aspect of *connecting lines* between the various dimensions, in other words questions about the cases such as, are there certain biographical details, perhaps experiences in the family during early childhood, which have imprinted the traditionalist? Can basic patterns of motivation be identified which lead to the various types, to the heretic, the mono-convert, the accumulative heretic? Can typical courses of processing and typical biographical consequences be recognised for the individual types?

Here we must note a fundamental, limiting principle, namely that even if we can identify certain basic motivational structures for the affinity to a certain type, it is not permissible to deduce a causal relationship between the basic motivational structure and the affinity to a certain type. The case analyses do not permit such psychologically deterministic conclusions. And even when we are able to identify certain processing routes and biographical consequences for the individual types, we are still a long way from being able to predict in causal, deterministic manner a generalised future for the types or the appropriate milieu. However, to make clearer contrasts between the profiles of the three types, the relationships to their motivational background and the biographical consequences are interesting and illuminating.

2. Motivational profiles for people with fundamentalist Christian biographies

In the sense described above, the motives for entry and membership can be used to further differentiate the typology. As may be seen from the cases studied, the aspect of biographical motivations is indeed relevant (γ dimension).

Above all moulding influences play a role here if the subject has not (yet) been able to satisfactorily work these aspects into his biography and they repeatedly – at times pertinently – recur and demand attention and energy. I call these mouldings – just as G. Noam[18] does – life-themes. Life-themes are rooted in – to some extent traumatic – experiences in the biography so far, which may also

---

[18]) Noam, G.G.: "Selbst, Moral und Lebensgeschichte", in: Moral und Person, Edelstein, W., Nunner-Winkler, G. & Noam, G. (ed.), Frankfurt/M. 1993, 171–199.

be termed self-tensions (W. Helsper).[19]) In some of our cases, for example, one may discern:

– early experience of the loss of inclusion and home (as through the early death of or separation from a parent),
– deficits in the experience of unconditional security and recognition,
– experience of being an unwanted child,
– painful experiences with death or mourning, or
– traumatising experiences with power and powerlessness.

It would seem that these experiences have more than exhausted the psychological resources of the respondents and they occur conspicuously and repeatedly in the biography – and in the biographical narrative during the interview.

Of course life-themes cannot all be traced to experiences and impressions in early childhood but may equally arise during adolescence and adulthood. Nevertheless they can often be interpreted as a reflection of earlier life-themes. Typical examples are the acute experiences of crisis in early and mid adulthood, which our respondents reported and which they see as connected to the start of their religious searching or their conversion:

– suicide attempts (two of our respondents report that they tried to commit suicide as adolescents),
– the crisis of a divorce,
– the traumatic experience of the incurable disease and death of the mother.

In turning towards fundamentalist religions, it was observed, compensation for such pertinent life-themes is sought. If this compensation is found in the new religious beliefs, it is only understandable that a strong affinity arises. The more convincingly compensation is experienced, the stronger the forces which bind the person to the group. This is also relevant to the process of leaving; leaving means forsaking the more or less successful strategies for processing the life-themes.

However, one must again caution against a causal deterministic misunderstanding: not everyone who suffered the early loss of a parent, nor everyone who endured a lack of emotional warmth, who was unwanted or physically abused, later converts to a fundamentalist milieu; nor does every divorce lead to a conversion to Christian fundamentalism.

There is one interesting finding from the contrastive comparisons: if we examine the cases to see what relationships exist between the conversion or affinity to fundamentalism on the one hand and the life-themes and crisis experiences on the other hand we notice that such relationships are most often to be found in the reports by the two types of heretic, the mono-convert and the accumulative

---

[19]) Helsper, W.: Selbstkrise und Individuationsprozeß. Subjekt- und sozialisationstheoretische Entwürfe zum imaginären Selbst in der Moderne, Opladen 1989.

heretic, whereas they barely feature in the biographical interviews with traditionalists. Relationships between motivation and life-themes during the conversion of the traditionalist cannot be discerned from an analysis of sequences and narrative. The relationship between underlying motivation and life-themes thus provides illuminating contrasts between the cases and leads to clearer profiles.

How can this contrast be explained? A comprehensive and conclusive explanation cannot be given here; much remains open for further research projects. However, one can hazard the theory that the difference between the traditionalist and the two types of heretic runs along a line of contrast which separates (sociologically speaking) an adherence to milieu and tradition from the search for new experiences,[20]) the (psychologically speaking) reasons for action based on cognition, conviction and morals from those based on emotions and needs and the (psychoanalytically speaking) impulses of the superego from desire and the impulses of the id.

3. Generative profiles for people with Christian fundamentalist biographies

The three types, already differentiated according to the dimension of the individual's method of entry and adaptation, may be further differentiated in relation to the dimension of the processing methods and thus of the biographical consequences (β dimension). Basically, the whole range of possibilities is open: from transformation to immobilisation to decompensation. On the one hand, there are potential educational processes, opportunities to learn and transformation processes, while on the other hand, there is the danger of stagnation and psychological or social decompensation. Within the context of a fundamentalist group or in a fundamentalist milieu, problems and life-themes that require a solution may be processed either with an increase or a decrease in the individual's ability to act. That has major biographical consequences.

The paths followed by transformations in religion may be interpreted in the context of a model of the transformation of religious styles:[21]) transformation processes can be most clearly seen when individualising and reflective approaches

---

[20]) Cf. Schulze, G.: Die Erlebnisorientierung. Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart, Frankfurt; New York: Campus 1992.

[21]) Cf. Streib, H.: "Religion als Stilfrage. Zur Revision struktureller Differenzierung von Religion im Blick auf die Analyse der pluralistisch-religiösen Lage der Gegenwart, in: *Archiv für Religionspsychologie*, Vol. 22 Göttingen 1997, pp. 48-69; idem: "Fundamentalismus als religiöser Stilbruch (Inaugural lecture at the University Bielefeld, May 1997), http://www.tgkm.uni-bielefeld.de/theologie/ dozent/streib/antritt.htm; idem: "Religious Transformation Processes in the Context of Fundamentalist Milieus and Organisations (Paper for the World Congress of Sociology 1997 in Cologne), to be published in: E. Scheuch & D. Sciulli (eds.): Annals of the International Institute of Sociology, Vol. 7, currently available at http://www.tgkm.uni-bielefeld.de/theologie/dozent/streib/köln.htm.

to the treatment of religion are re-discovered or once again become the primary pattern of orientation.[22]) This leads (initially) despite a stubborn adherence to the core elements of fundamentalist ideology – to rebellion against any submission to the authorities for doctrines and rules in the hierarchy of the groups, whether they be called apostles, elders or pastors. When transformations take this course, the unavoidable consequence is usually leaving the fundamentalist group.

If one examines our material for these types of processing method and biographical consequences, one soon discovers that all three varieties are present. In some cases, decompensation is recognisable; in many cases, the initial problems which were responsible for the person turning to the fundamentalist group have been perpetuated unprocessed; in other words, they have been adjourned. However, contrary to common prejudice, our sample documents include a number of cases where transformational processing did take place in the context of the fundamentalist milieus and groups, which led to more self-confidence, greater self-assertion and more differentiated approaches to, and dealings with, other people and with religion and religious conceptions.

Can transformational biographies be matched to specific types? Does this occur more frequently with specific types? The match is not as contrastive as for the relationships portrayed in the previous section, but tendencies are clearly visible. Transformational processes are barely seen with the traditionalist or not at all, whereas they do appear in the mono-convert and are frequent for the accumulative heretic. This can be explained by the way in which the traditionalist enters the fundamentalist milieu: people who enter a fundamentalist organisation because it is their destiny and they are bound by tradition are likely to find less freedom of action or opportunity for development; if on the other hand someone has converted of their own free will – and is largely motivated by the desire for experiences and satisfaction of needs – such as the heretic, he is more likely to undergo transformation. With respect to the process of leaving the group it is also evident that someone who has been placed by destiny in a certain fundamentalist religious setting – at whatever age – finds it far more difficult and painful to leave the group. Huge disappointment, rejection and hatred are often to be observed. The mono-convert displays these reactions in a milder but still recognisable form. The difficulties and traumatisation probably stem from the fact that the affinity of the traditionalist placed in a group by destiny (and in slightly milder form the mono-convert) is usually directed to the more closed groups or organisations, the so-called *high-tension groups*[23]) of a fundamentalist character. The accumulative heretic in particular prefers the more open group, the milieu that is not tightly closed and does not demand total

---

[22]) Cf. Fowler, J.W.: Stages of Faith. The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning, San Francisco: Harper&Row 1981, [Translated into German as: Stufen des Glaubens. Die menschliche Entwicklung und die Suche nach Sinn, Gütersloh 1991].
[23]) Cf. Bainbridge, W.S.: The Sociology of Religious Movements, New York 1997.

acceptance of all the ideological views, the dogmas, rituals and rules but which allow a large amount of freedom provided one adheres to the minimum consensus – that is, however, compulsory. This makes the process of transformation and of leaving much easier.

4. 'Thomas': A clear case of an accumulative heretic

As an illustration, we would like to present at least one interesting case which shows both accumulative heretical and transformational features. However, the case of "Thomas" is one of the contrastive cornerstones of our typology, and one should note that our sample contains some completely different cases. Thomas has nevertheless been selected for a brief presentation because his biography clearly illustrates two of the more conspicuous findings in our study: (1) We have observed a new type of accepting religious offers, one might say a new type of religious socialisation, represented by the accumulative heretic. (2) Within the new religious and Christian fundamentalist milieus, we have not only seen decompensation processes, but also learning and transformation processes, and the accumulative heretics are especially well placed to benefit. Both these aspects are well illustrated in the case of Thomas.

Thomas was born in 1949, and at the time of the interview he was 48 years old. He spent his youth and vocational training during the late sixties and seventies in a northern German city. After graduating from secondary school, Thomas started teacher training (biology at grammar school/sixth form level) and completed both academic and practical training. He did not find a teaching position, however, and survived the next 20 years on a variety of odd-jobs such as driving a taxi, selling goods at open-air markets, etc. At the time of the interview, he was living with a woman, her two children and their own eight month old baby. I should like to summarise some of the stages in Thomas' religious biography and present them in the form of quotations from the interview.

Thomas' account of why, as he puts it, he *"sought or found certain groupings or sect-like or fundamentalist groups"* starts during his student days when he was introduced to meditation by one of the people in his flat-sharing group and he directed his *"search for more intensity, for a kind of liberation from stress"* towards forms of meditation.

Years later, Thomas had by now completed his studies, a friend introduced him to Bhagwan. He reports: *"I think it was during my practical training ... er ... it was near the end of it and there was tremendous pressure and you had to cope with all that and, and (draws breath) I had this y- yearning and he did this liberating ... er ... meditation with Bhagwan (...) and ... er ... I'd kinda heard of that and went to this farm and (draws breath) well did this, this meditation, dynamic meditation ...".* And due to his own initial experiences, he thought: *"Well I can do that too; I need to get rid of something, too (...) 'course it was curiosity as well (draws*

breath), this Asian meditation ... er ... (draws breath), and that it was so dynamic and then all quiet, I found that sort of nice".

Thomas spent 3 to 4 years involved in the Bhagwan movement, living in various communes in southern Germany. Thomas named two reasons for leaving this milieu. Firstly, the ideology of the Bhagwan followers had grown too narrow for him, and he felt hemmed in and oppressed; and secondly, for him sex meant being faithful, and he could not get used to the idea of free sex.

Some years later, after his girlfriend had left him and gone to India, he had lived a reclusive life in the Black Forest, looking after an elderly farming couple. Thomas then returned to his home city in northern Germany where a girlfriend from his youth introduced him to a group that he called the Bio-energetics Group, but which in fact practised extreme forms of experiments in group dynamics. Reporting on this, he said: *"...and then we did these tough exercises fasting, group locked in fifty, sixty people, shut up in a gymnasium for a week (draws breath); three days without food, and three days without anything to drink, and one week of nothing to eat (draws breath); keeping awake day and night; no sleeper a real voluntary internment, so to speak".* Apart from this annual workshop, he said "once or twice a week, we did those exercises in this group in the evening". Despite these negative recollections, Thomas had also kept some pleasant memories: *"They have parties where they celebrate New Year; that's like a big family (draws breath); and you know people and dance with them a lot going on, with this group you were together a lot (draws breath); might perhaps er find a girl (draws breath) er (breathes out); yes, that's what the attraction was."*

Following the death of the leader, Thomas left this group and lived a quieter life for some years, singing in a Protestant Church choir, supporting himself with taxi driving and market stalls. Then he met a Scientology recruiter on the street and took a personality test. And – unlike an acquaintance who participated for a short while and quickly left the organisation, Thomas said of himself, *"Yes, I did this test and sort of stayed on, although I didn't really want to go (...) (draws breath), but when I was there, I said to myself, well what [...] what have they got and then I felt a bit curious and of course this (draws breath) desire again to (clicking noise with tongue) ... er ... to find redemption liberation from the past from a very oppressive past yes, that was it, and they promised me something; they also did a sort of therapy (...) the first experience is helpful of course, a liberation to start with (draws deep breath) ... er ... if you sense a certain deficit in your life, life".*

Thomas reported that his basic approach to Scientology was reserved and pragmatic: *"It's interesting exactly what, what can you offer me"* and *"you want something to do with money what can you offer me, that's the attitude I took, er holding back, just look .. look and see".* Indeed, Thomas was liberated during intensive therapeutic processing in this group from a childhood trauma connected with a fall and still praises the group for this. During the interview, Thomas took a long hard critical look at his membership in Scientology and

repeatedly emphasised how unpleasant it was to be subjected to the lie detector. Obviously, this did not upset him sufficiently to make him leave the group of his own accord.

He did not manage to leave until the next stage of his religious career; once again this started by chance: *"Then I read somewhere 'Gospel Meeting', and so I went, and that was actually [...] a Free Protestant Church [...] in the city centre (clicking noise with tongue) and so I went".* Thomas was attracted by a young lady who told him about her experiences with Jesus and how her faith had helped her and her report moved him to go again. The intensity of experience was heightened by the atmosphere in this gospel Church. Thomas recounted: *"people dancing freely, hands in the air or singing loudly and er not like I used to sing in Church but (draws breath) well they sang [..] and the atmosphere was ... it smelled of sweat, and I thought 'hey, what's this? It's like being in a body-building gym. Why does it smell like this?' At any rate, this ... this atmosphere really grabbed me, and I had to go to the toilets because I thought you can't start crying right here".* Finally, when a woman he met there had explained to him that Scientology is a dangerous sect Thomas decided to go and hold a farewell conversation the next day, to cancel a cheque and never again to take up one of Scientology's offers.

At the time of the interview Thomas' life and religiousness have reached calmer waters. He is living with a woman with whom he has an eight month old baby, in addition to the two children the woman already had. Thomas reflects about the children's religious upbringing, reads to them from a children's bible, talks of responsibility in the family and faithfulness to one's partner and is able to reject in biblical and theological terms, giving reasons, his time with the charismatic group and with Bhagwan. Taking a quotation from St. Paul, who calls himself a prisoner of Christ, he explains that he had decided against this course: *"In that respect ... er ... if that's being a Christian, and if that's what I understand a Christian to be, then I'm not one any more; I'm not a disciple of Jesus in that sense (draws breath) ... er ... but I wouldn't then say that Christianity is the worst thing there is, but I would say I said yes to that point, and I felt liberated there, but I also said (draws breath) ... er ... I can say that in this sect – I really do use the word sect for Scientology – that helped me, and with Bhagwan that helped me because everyone's different, and I have a good friend, and she says (draws breath) I've picked out bits from all over, this from anthroposophy, that from Bhagwan, that from (draws breath) er .. [...] ...you collect little mosaic pieces er of experiences in life and (draws breath) insights and ... and mm (draws breath) ... and ... er ... I learnt something from all of them, and I have no regrets (draws breath), and er the bad thing is, I would say ... er just the constraints of the group when you've joined and when they get too strong and take over your personality".*

Finally, a few remarks on where Thomas' biography fits into the framework of my typology. Thomas is a typical example of an accumulative heretic, who has suffered no harm during his chequered religious career, his religious tourism, which took him through meditation groups, Bhagwan groups and communes,

through an extreme form of group dynamics, through Scientology offers and then to a charismatic group. His own conclusion ("I picked out bits from all over") is congruous with our analysis of his narrative. Decompensation cannot be detected; Thomas has benefited and learnt a lot through processing his life-themes and undergone a transformation – first and foremost in that he can now cope much more realistically with his illusionary hunger to be unconditionally loved by someone and that he steers away from group constraints before it is too late. The following verdict is justified by the interview with Thomas: Thomas' life-themes, both his search for someone who loves him unconditionally and his vehement aversion to group constraints have been processed and transformed in the context of his accumulative heretical wanderings, which took up 20-25 years of his life.

5. Summary

If, as we did, one looks not only at the means by which people enter and deal with the groups (α dimension) when analysing and contrasting the various case histories, but also at the ways the experiences are processed and the biographical consequences (β dimension) and makes cross-references, one sees that the results are not only decompensation processes (which people are in danger of believing applies to all fundamentalist religious groups and psychogroups in line with the hypothesis on their dangerousness). Equally noticeable is a non-decompensating immobilisation and failure to address the problems and life-themes which ought to be worked on. And this stagnation often results in a large measure of subjective contentment with life on the part of the individuals. However, transformation processes which lead to greater independence are also observed.

One could not expect from the outset that the processes of decompensation v. transformation would be distributed to varying degrees among the cases. The case analyses let us dare to assert that the people whose lives run a traditionalist Christian fundamentalist course are more likely to display decompensation[24] or stagnation[25]. If the biographies of traditionalists – including those in *high-tension groups* who react to the constrictions they feel – start to show transformational developments,[26] centrifugal forces are unleashed which result logically in the person leaving the group.

One may further hazard the assertion that the mono-convert is a type that inclines to immobilisation and transformation. Transformation is recognisable here as the self-confident acquisition of cognitive superiority[27], as ego boosting

---

[24] Cf. the case analyses of 'Sarah' and 'Helene & Kurt'.
[25] Cf. the cases analyses of 'Ruth', 'Daniela' and 'Waltraud'.
[26] As in the cases of 'Sarah' and 'Helene & Kurt'.
[27] Cf. the case analysis of 'Monika'.

and self-confidence that is able to defy the people of authority in the community[28]) or which may manifest as the pragmatic everyday relaxing of religious demands.[29])

A final assertion we venture is that, particularly in contrast with the traditionalist, the accumulative heretic is open for transformational processing with positive effects on his/her further life and for transformation processes. Even if the accumulative heretic can per se show both possibilities, stagnated life-themes and the transformational processing of them, we found two important cases in our sample[30]) in which transformational processing can be shown and one in which[31]) no transformation may be perceived. However, we must not fail to recognise their efforts to process the pertinent and virulent life-themes and their hope for a solution in each successive new milieu. The accumulative heretic displays an unmistakable ambivalence – between compensatory religious offers which repeatedly end in disappointment on the one hand and the progressive and creative processing of the life-themes on the other hand, which finally extricate themselves from the vicious circle of permanent searching.

Our study was designed to provide some findings on the way in which the actions of the individual and his need for meaning and form interact with the group offers and structures in the Christian fundamentalist milieu. Working with biographical qualitative interviews this study had a good spotlight on subjectivity and the subjective opportunities to process and shape biographical details; we were able to identify such subjectivity in the case analyses – including subjectivity that can develop as transformation potential in the midst of the fundamentalist milieu. The case analyses thus lead one to suppose that the psychological resources and processing skills which the subject has acquired and applies to his fundamentalist religious career influence what happens to him or her in the fundamentalist milieu and that it does not depend only on the milieu or the group.

IV. Sub-project on "Drop-outs, Converts and Believers: Contrasting Analyses of Why Individuals Join, Have a Career and Stay in, or Leave, Far-Eastern Groups, Movements and Organisations"

Dr Albrecht Schöll, Comenius-Institut Münster

1. Introduction

This project studies the biographies and careers of currently active and former members of Far-Eastern groupings, particularly of those organisations which first

---

[28]) Cf. the case analysis of 'Ute'.
[29]) Cf. the case analysis of 'Hilde'.
[30]) Cf. the case analyses of 'Thomas' and 'Christian'.
[31]) Cf. the case analysis of 'Ulla'.