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MEDIATING TO SETTLE CONFLICTS IN CULTIC GROUPS

Suggesting Some Useful Methodologies

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE: MY EXPERIENCE

Over last fifteen years I've had experiences in **three different fields** in attempting to mediate among conflicting groups and/or people.

The mediation process will be described in **three different contexts**

MEDIATION: THREE DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

1. **Parents** concerned and **children** affiliated
2. **Families** and **NRMs** whom children joined
3. **NRMs'** **satisfied members** and **hostile ex-members**

PARENTS CONCERNED AND CHILDREN AFFILIATED

- **Mediation and settling conflicts is not possible because one of the parties involved (a child) is absent and does not want to speak about his/her affiliation**
- **It is only possible to support families in order to avoid the end of dialogue and to keep every family members united despite of one of their affiliations**
- **The success of this support strategy depends on many different factors. Families usually give their feedback (more or less positive)**

FAMILIES CONCERNED AND NRMs

- **Attempting to contact the NRM when a family has asked for help because of their children' affiliation**
- **In this case I have also asked for help because NRMs do not usually trust people involved in cult victim assistance.**
- **The organization I contacted was CESNUR (**Center for Studies on New Religions**). NRMs in Italy trust CESNUR because they are not involved in helping cult victims**
- **CESNUR accepted to help me in a few cases**

FAMILIES CONCERNED AND NRMS

POSITIVE RESULTS:

- **NRM gave to CESNUR some useful information about the person involved (not private information)**
- **This Information was useful to calm down the husband worried for his wife**
- **One of the NRM's leaders agreed to meet the husband to reassure him and this in fact happened**

SATISFIED MEMBERS AND HOSTILE EX-MEMBERS

- **During past five years a few satisfied members of NRMs contacted me asking for help**
- **They were very afraid because they became the target of angry ex-members and “media terrorism”**
- **After checking the Internet they found my website and contacted me**
- **Before contacting me they tried to contact other people or associations involved in this field**
- **These people/or associations refused to listen to them or attacked them more and more in their websites**

SATISFIED MEMBERS AND HOSTILE EX-MEMBERS

POSITIVE RESULTS:

- **I could compare ex-members and members' stories**
- **This comparison made me aware that the information we receive (from any side) must be carefully checked**
- **I realized that the extreme anti-cult action can cause a lot of suffering to people who are not dangerous for anyone**

SATISFIED MEMBERS AND HOSTILE EX-MEMBERS

NEGATIVE RESULTS:

- My attempt to mediate to start a dialogue between the two fighting camps each other was unsuccessfully**
- The only one action I could start was to spread correct information about these religious groups by my website and media in order to spread more balanced information**
- My last attempt in this direction caused me serious charges (now definitively dismissed) by the police and the closing of my website**

BURTON, DOOB AND KELMAN'S STUDIES TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION

- **BURTON'S EXERCISES IN "CONTROLLED COMMUNICATION"**
Face-to-face communication among parties in conflict may contribute to conflict management and resolution
- **LEONARD DOOB AND "FERMEDA WORKSHOP"**
Burton and Doob bring together representatives of nations or national ethnic communities involved in an active conflict for face-to-face communication in a relatively isolated setting
- **KELMAN'S PROGRAM ON INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT ANALYSIS & RESOLUTION [PICAR]**
Summarizes both approaches and attempt to integrate them

KELMAN'S PROBLEM SOLVING WORKSHOP IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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.

WORKSHOP IS:

- 🕒 A learning experience**
- 🕒 A training laboratory**
- 🕒 A context that permits communication with relatively little commitment and risk**
- 🕒 A context in which individual is moved to pursue and express ideas that would be unacceptable in other settings and he feels free to do so without worrying**

WORKSHOP SITUATION AND NEW INFORMATION

There are three sources of new information in the workshop situation from which potential participants may acquire new learning and insights and a common language and frame of reference for analyzing specific conflict situations:

- New information about the perceptions and intentions of the other side**
- New conceptual framework for the analysis of conflict, which may be applicable to their own situations**
- New insights into the nature of conflict**

The social scientist can encourage the participants, they can ask leading questions, suggest tentative hypotheses to explain the nature of the conflict.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND CULTIC CONFLICT CONTEXT

I think that the main ends of Burton, Doob and Kelman's workshops could be shared also in cultic conflicts. As they experienced, the communication gives people the opportunity, freedom and impetus:

- To move away from a rigid reiteration of stereotyped position and from efforts to justify their own sides**
- To absorb new information**
- To revise their perception and engage in a process of creative problem solving**
- To create the conditions for effective problem solving: to this end participants must learn to communicate with each other in new ways**
- To revise perceptions distorted by a long story of conflict**

CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND CULTIC CONFLICT CONTEXT

- ★ I think that the main difference between the workshop experiences described before and the situation in which we must face the conflict is that we must face real life and life is not a workshop.
- ★ Nevertheless, I also think, according to my personal experience, that in some cases face-to-face communication can help us to mitigate or settle cultic conflicts
- ★ I have experienced this process in my own life and in my attempt to help people involved in cultic conflicts: parents and children, members and ex-members, religious movements and ex-hostile members, concerned parents and religious movements etc.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND CULTIC CONFLICT CONTEXT

- ★ Regarding this point, I would like to emphasize that a conflict, any kind of conflict, never has an unique cause.
- ★ Cultic conflicts always have **many** causes and the "cult" could be only one of the causes involved.
- ★ Our role in helping people is to facilitate this movement: 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.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND CULTIC CONFLICT CONTEXT

- ★ Face-to-face communication can be useful if it is facilitated by a **mediator** figure who does not have any intention to force or attack anyone
- ★ The mediator is the **key figure** in this context. I think that his/her main characteristic should be the respect for a human being, without any discrimination
- ★ In conclusion, some Burton's words can help me to sum up my idea about conflict and mediation. I think we should learn **"TO SEE THE CONFLICT AS A PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED AND NOT AS A CONTEST TO BE WON"**

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