

From follower to citizen

Sonya Jouglà (France), clinical psychologist, co-founder of the university diploma on cult influence at the Paris-Descartes Faculty of Medicine.

1 The cult period

- *“Now that you're out, everything's fine”*
- *“Forget it, turn the page”*
- *“Think of something else”*
- *“Eat, have fun, life is beautiful” etc.*
- *“It's for your own good, what I'm telling you...”*

These are the words that a follower from a cult usually hears...
Advice that comes from all the people around them, from their acquaintances, their friends, or their family.

Their experience is quite different...
Although out of the cult, the ex-follower remains **paralysed** for a long time by **cult alienation**, which keeps them under **its control**.

In order to understand the psychological trauma experienced by the follower, it is necessary to first address the reality **of alienation through the cult**.

Alienation through the cult

Alienation through the cult is a dispossession of the self.

The mental space of the follower under influence is completely **invaded**.
They are no longer a master of their thoughts, nor of their psyche.
There is a **capturing, an appropriation** of the other by which the guru reduces the follower to an **object**.

The cult has turned the follower from a subject into an object.

A/ The different ways out of cults

The ex-follower will leave in different ways:

Exclusion by the courts

- When the cult is **disbanded**
- When the guru is **imprisoned**

Exclusion by the guru

- When the follower rebels, when he or she tries to **overrule** the guru, he or she is automatically put out of action by being excluded.
- In case of illnesses, psychiatric disorders (e.g.: delusions, hallucinations, etc.)
- Or when there is **public disorder**, which can cast the cult or the guru in a négative light.

Conscious exit of the follower

- Exit through **doubt**, which is the beginning of **awareness**
- By a break **decided** by the follower, **when their personal ethics exceed their state of submission**
- By the state of **love**, (in love with a person outside the cult, or “leaving together” with a follower of the cult)

The alienation through the cult will last for **many years** after the follower has left.

**It is not because the follower has left the cult
that the cult has left the follower**

- The follower had to make a very long journey **to leave** the cult
- The journey will be just as long **to re-enter** the reality of life.

B/The different behaviours of the outgoing follower

The follower remained imprisoned in the cult for years where everything was standardised, imposed, **decided and chosen by the guru.**

In response to this subjection, and **to suffer less**, the follower will opt for **different compensatory behaviours:**

- 1st/ **Forget**, stay in **denial**, refuse to talk
- 2/ Joining another group, being the guru of another cult, **overtaking the guru**
- 3/ Living in a **debauchery** of all that was forbidden in the cult, pleasures, sex, sleeping, smoking, drinking, living in the pleasure of **disobedience**
- 4/ Living in the desire of an **unrestricted life**, undertaking everything in an unbridled way without awareness of the **limits of reality**
- 5/ Joining an **association**, or founding an association to help cult victims
- 6/ **Sublimation**, staying within the **sacred**: sacred dance, alchemy, sacred songs, humanitarianism etc.
- 7/ **Understanding the manipulation process**, no **need to be guided**, no need to be protected, no need to manipulate, access to **autonomy** of thought and action
- 8/ **File a complaint** against the guru

When a follower leaves their cult, **anger at the guru** may lead them to **want to press charges.**

And the people close to the victim, who are **not under the influence**, (associations, professionals, family, friends) **tend to believe** that a trial would be beneficial and **liberating** for the victim.

Unaware of the significance of alienation through the cult, they do not hesitate to encourage it, to do their utmost to decide to file a complaint.

A premature trial, immediately after leaving the cult, represents a **great danger** for the former follower.

It is very important not to “encourage” the victim to file a complaint

- Filing a complaint **cannot be done on leaving** the cult without putting the follower in **psychological danger**.
- It requires a long period **of withdrawal and reconstruction** beforehand, helped psychologically by a cult specialist
- On the other hand, alienation through the cult cannot be cured by **“good words”** or **“getting better with time”**

2nd Out of the cult

The ex-follower will be confronted with a whole host of existential forces that oppose their decision to break free.

First of all

- **Doubts**, hesitations, back and forth about their decision to leave the guru
- **Overwhelming guilt**,
*“I betrayed the guru and the mission, the invisible Masters
I am Judas”*
- **The shame** of having lived through all this humiliation, this submission without rebelling
- And an avalanche **of fears** which invade them permanently

Fear-related beliefs

Do not abandon victims of cults alone in the wild

Leaving the protected world of the cult, finding oneself outside, means for the victim **plunging into an abyssal void, into chaos, into nothingness...**

A number of **paralysing fears** run in a loop in the victim's head hindering their ability to think and act:

A/ Fears coming from the guru

- Fear of the hell of **banishment**
- Fear of **karmic** condemnation to live several lifetimes of **wandering**
- Loss of the guru's **love**,
- The guru **sees all, knows all**, he knows all my thoughts
- Fear of the “**power**” that the guru says he “has”
- Fear of reprisals from the guru
- They still feel energetically **connected** to the guru long after their exit
- Stockholm syndrome for some followers

B/ Fear of the Invisible,

- Fear of the Invisible Masters who are idolised in all cults
- Gods of one religion or another, “existing” in the cult
- Fear of **retaliation**
- Fear of **sanctions from** the Invisible
- The follower feels continuously watched by the Invisible
- The followers **are tracked** by the injunctions of the guru and the Invisible Masters who return in loop and obsess them

C/ Fear of other followers

- **Reprisals**, harassment of the remaining cult followers
- Scornful rejection, humiliation, **sanction of isolation**

The ex-followers who have left the cult are systematically pointed at and labelled by the other followers (who have remained in the cult):

- These ex-followers are considered as “black sheep”, as “pariahs” whom the guru forbids them to associate with on pain of exclusion
- They are called **apostates**
- **Renegades** who have denied their “religion”, their faith

D/ Beliefs

- Some keep faith with their god
- Others **no longer believe**
- All feel they are **traitors**
All say: “*I am Judas*”
 - depending on the guru's beliefs, their betrayal focuses on different protagonists:
 - *“I denied the Holy Spirit*
 - *I betrayed Jesus, the Virgin,*
 - *the archangel Melchizedek,*
 - *the Prophet etc. »*
- Many feel **abandoned, orphaned**
- Sentenced to **eternity**
- Outcast from their group

3rd Diving into the outside world

The exit is often very **brutal**

All the known reference points and values that were given by the cult no longer exist and **suddenly collapse**.

The ex-follower sometimes has an **aversion** for this outside world and the human beings that inhabit it.

Sometimes, they even feel **disgust...**

The former follower is in pain:

- from **disorientation, mental confusion**
- They have a misunderstanding of this **unknown** world
- The outside **scares** them

- They are unable to make **choices**
- And to make **decisions**

- **The ex-follower has no desire,**
- Without instructions, **they don't "know what they must do"**

This inability is all the more striking when it comes to victims **born into the cult**

They are people

- who have no autonomy
- **no life experience**
- and who are unable to carry out the acts of daily life **alone**

The psychological state

A/ The former follower is unable to talk about their cult experience:

- They are locked in an **exacerbated mistrust**
- They have **no confidence** in others, who are all **bad** (as the guru says)

- With a deficit of **self-confidence**
- And a **lack of self-esteem**

- They have difficulty recovering their **critical sense, in thinking**
- They are unable to **discern**
- Their life has no **meaning**, they feel empty, **and useless**
- **They are walled up in an isolation that drives them crazy**

B / Appearance of obsessions, phobias, OCD

- Emergence of recurring nightmares
- **Hallucinations**
- **Of mystical delusions**
- Invasive obsessions
- **Avoidance** strategies
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder**

C/ The ex-follower is confronted with everything they thought they were escaping by joining the cult

- They find all **the avoidance of their previous problems** linked to this outside world that they wanted to escape
- And face to face with **current and painful** realisations about their path in the cult:
 - *“I thought I was free, I thought I was an insider, one of the chosen ones” “I had such a beautiful mission”*
 - *“I wasted 30 years of my life”*
 - *“How could I believe all that nonsense... “*
- Anger and **shame towards themselves,**

The suffering is often intolerable, how can it be stopped?

**The easiest way... is to go back to the cult...
to go to another cult...
to find another cult...

or to commit suicide...**

3/ Helping a person leaving a cult

First of all, some traps to **avoid**:

**Do not attempt to reconnect the former follower
with their family**

- **Do not try to convince the ex-follower, do not reason with him/her**
- **Do not criticise the guru, the doctrine, or the cult**
- **Do not want to take the place of the follower**
- **Do not try to fit the follower into a new “mould”**

A/ The ex-follower has a number of existential and vital needs

- They need time: the **time** of the ex-follower is different from **real world** time
- **They need humanity**
- They need to **find their humanity**
- They need to be **listened to**, heard and **believed**,
- Need to listen **without judgement**
- They need a **supportive receptacle**
 - for their muzzled voice
 - for their emotions
 - for their feelings
- They need **to be included**

B/ They need to find meaning

Cult trauma is an experience that **makes no sense:**

- Need to make sense of their **experience** when they were in the cult
- Finding meaning through **understanding** the cult process
- And find meaning in their life **outside** of the cult

C/ The former follower feels completely stateless

- 1st/ They were **expatriated** from their country of birth by the guru and **cut off** from the world to which they belong
- 2nd/**Immured** in the **doctrinal world** of the cult
- 3rd/**Precipitated** out of the cult into a world that is completely **alien** to them

D/ Reconnecting with the practice of daily life

The **followers born in the cult**, more than any other follower, require a fundamental help in learning **simple activities of** daily life that they do not know.

Mundane actions that sometimes they have never even heard of or experienced in their lives:

- Writing a cheque
- Calling somebody
- Using the Internet
- Cooking
- Doing paperwork or administrative paperwork etc.
- Many do not have social security or an identity card
- Driving a car, taking the train etc.

E/ Administrative and financial assistance is vital

- They need help with all the administrative procedures that are incomprehensible to the followers
- Many of our followers do not have social security
- Do not have a health insurance card
- And have never had a paycheck

- How to find an apartment?
- Work?
- And even clothes?
- Or food?

F/ Difficulty in reconnecting with themselves

But the most **distressing difficulty**, the most **panic-inducing even**, which remains **painful and terrifying for a very long time**, remains for the follower their **difficulty to reconnect with themselves**:

- The difficulty in **recognising oneself** as a complete **human** being
- To recognise their body, one's own image
- To regain their self-esteem
- To break the silence and the straitjacket of **submission**
- To **reconnect with their emotions**
- To be autonomous, responsible

- **To belong to oneself again**

**Without the recognition of their suffering by society
and without having been recognised as a victim of the
influence of cults**

**the former follower cannot find
their identity
and cannot project himself into a possible future**

G/ Learning to take limits into account

- Considering the limits of **reality**, the limits of **human life**
- And learning to know their **own limits**

H/ Resuming the thread of one's life beyond the trauma

- By drawing on the past **before the time in the cult**
- And by updating that past
- **By incorporating** the cult trauma so that it is no longer a **foreign body**
- And by resuming the thread of their life **beyond the trauma**

I/ Reclaiming one's place in one's personal history

Reintegrating oneself in one's personal life history:

- In their **affective** history: reconnecting with old friends, with their **loves**
- Reintegrating oneself in one's **family** history
- And in their ascending and descending **genealogy**

J/ Finding their place in society

- As an individual, **adult, autonomous, responsible**
- **Existing** alongside **others in society**
- Returning to the social contract
- Having democratic values, respecting the freedom of others
- **Existing** as a **citizen**
- **Being a citizen, being part of a country and the world**

K/ The ability to deal with the guru

**The ex-follower is definitively out of the grip of the cult
when standing upright,**

**when they are a person in their own right, and a
free and autonomous citizen,**

and can face the guru