

## Volume XX - (2019)

### Book Review: Free Maree

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*Journal of Unification Studies Vol. 20, 2019 - Pages 273 - 277*

#### *Free Maree. By Maree Gauper*

In her book released this year entitled *Free Maree*, New Zealand-born Maree (Mah-ree) Gauper describes how in 1983 her family and friends, with the help of costly “deprogrammers” from the United States, forcibly attempted to de-convert her from the Unification faith. She had been a member for over six years.

With deft use of dialogue, Gauper does a credible job of airing the opposing viewpoints surrounding the controversial “cult” era of the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, she gives the other side a more than decent hearing. With the occasional injection of wry “down under” humor into a quite un-unfunny situation, the reader’s desire to learn whether she succumbs or regains her freedom builds up well.

Maree’s story is engaging to say the least. Here, after all, is a 25-year-old woman on the threshold of a lifetime adventure with a fine young man that most parents would be proud to welcome into their family were it not for the fact that he also happened to be a “Moonie” (as Unification members were then derisively called) who is kidnapped and subjected to day after day of intense bullying for having chosen to follow an unpopular faith. John Biermans, another Unificationist who faced a similar ordeal, summarized deprogramming as “confining (people) against their will and subjecting them to prolonged emotional and psychological pressure until they renounce the (belief system) of which the deprogrammer disapproves.”<sup>[1]</sup> Victims were typically informed from the outset that this campaign of counter-indoctrination would continue until they recanted no matter how long it might take.

In these days of hyper-individualism where we grant people carte blanche to do almost anything they want, Maree’s book might almost seem like a work of fiction. But it did happen, and not in some totalitarian or dictatorial country like China or Saudi Arabia but New Zealand, a country that has always prided itself on its commitment to democratic values. It is also sobering to remember that Maree’s ordeal was not an isolated incident. Thousands of other new religionists across much of the supposedly free world were similarly “deprogrammed” during the height of the anticult war. And, make no mistake, war it was, waged by vested religious interests, Marxist anti-religious ideologues, and complicit parents. It is still happening in Japan, though public opinion became much less sympathetic following the exposure in 2008 of a 12-year incarceration of a Unification man by his family and deprogrammers.

Though Maree is relatively kind towards her family in the telling of her story, the fact remains that deprivation of liberty is a human rights violation of the worst kind. And when it involves the suppression of a religion simply because someone disagrees with it, keystones of modern democracy, freedom of ideological thought, speech and association, are violated.

On a personal level deprogramming is also obviously deeply traumatic. It took Maree over thirty years to be able to come to terms with her experience sufficiently to relate it in detail. Biermans likened it to a “ripping out or stripping of one’s most cherished beliefs and ideals.” He re-labelled deprogramming “faithbreaking,”<sup>[2]</sup> which is a more apt portrayal of the processes involved. As Biermans’ parents were to later state, “Deprogramming is a degrading, dehumanizing, thoroughly evil practice that is being done by unprofessional opportunists that exploit parents’ love for their children.”<sup>[3]</sup>

How was this vigilante movement able to operate for as long as it did? It was because of a widespread state of media-inspired public alarm concerning the hordes of purportedly misled and brainwashed youth who were then joining numerous “strange” new religions. While new religions often did take actions that were not well advised and that deserved questioning if not condemnation, with a very small number of them such as the suicidal Jim Jones’ People’s Temple being unmitigated disasters, they were also the object of a huge amount of false innuendo and exaggeration.

There has been great concern of late over Fake News. If there is one thing we should learn from Maree’s story, it is that Fake News is nothing new. What is Fake News exactly? It is “information” that is embellished out of all proportion or so twisted out of context that it is turned upside down to become something that was not. Fake News also utilizes omission. It propagates one side of a story, the side it wants everyone to believe, giving just token, if any at all, reference to opposing viewpoints. Not only were the practices of many new religionists taken out of context to highlight their “strangeness,” but the “brainwashing” claims upon which deprogrammers justified their deprivations were deliberate distortions of the everyday imprinting and influence processes to which the human condition is subject from birth and perhaps even before birth.

Maree obviously sees her mother, a convinced, practicing Catholic, as having been the driving force behind her kidnapping. As Maree tells it, her mother had been trying for years to persuade her to disaffiliate, regularly sending her the latest dirt the media had “uncovered” on Unification founder, Sun Myung Moon. She also once falsely claimed her daughter had stolen her camera in the hope that the Australian police would arrest and extradite her back to New Zealand, no doubt preparatory to a deprogramming attempt then.

Typical of anticult rationalization, Maree’s mother condemned cultists, among other things, for lying or not being completely upfront at all times. Yet she thought nothing of lying and using subterfuge to achieve her own ends. A few new religions, mainly the Hare Krishnas (which has lately been transforming itself along very interesting lines) and the Children of God (which was never very large to begin with and has now all but disappeared), did utilize lying as a matter of philosophy in dealing with the public. However, the Unification group did not have such a philosophy, and the vast majority of members made a brave effort to be upfront even in face of likely rejection and persecution. Problematic were the unreasonable pressures put on fundraisers that caused some to cut corners, and the operations of a particular Unification branch in California that developed its own alternative version of Unificationism. But even the allegations against these, when the circumstances are examined in detail (which cannot be gone into in a short book review like this) demonstrate more fabrication and distortion than fact.

Reliable statistics on the success rate of deprogramming are very hard to come by. My impression is that the longer someone has been in a group, the less likely the deprogramming attempt is to succeed (unless the group had begun to fall apart, which many of them did). This is not because the victim was brainwashed beyond redemption, as deprogrammers liked to claim, but because they had been in the group long enough to have encountered most of the quirks and inconsistencies that deprogrammers catalogued in their strategy of sowing doubt concerning the group’s bona fides.

We soon learn in life that people are riddled with inconsistency. Nobility can walk hand in hand with meanness and stupidity. Our decisions to support one political party, or one charitable organization, or one religion, or

one product over another, are usually based on our perceptions of proportion (natural attraction or antipathy also play a part as advertisers well know). We may never lose sight of the ideal, but meanwhile select either the lesser of various evils or the better of various goods.

Did Maree see everything that happened in the Unification Church as ideal or disagree with all the deprogrammers' negative statements? Do all Unification members agree with everything their leaders and fellow members do? The answer is emphatically no. But if we reject every person or idea or product or organization because it is not perfect, we would be left with nothing. Despite the actions of some very bad priests and numerous other shortcomings, Roman Catholicism remains the largest single religious organization in the world. People generally do not throw out the baby with the bathwater but implement internal reform to eliminate problems.

The justifications for faithbreaking, aka deprogramming, fail on a number of counts, some of which have been touched on above. The worst of its failures is its intention to deprive a person of a free and open future. Had Maree's faithbreaking attempt been successful (beware the spoiler here), she may or may not have achieved a satisfying non-Unification future. What her deprogramming put at risk was the life she gained by staying in the faith. By her report, and also typical of numerous other Unificationists I have observed, her Unification life has been different but never dull, always intellectually and spiritually challenging but also jam-packed with spiritual, community, emotional, vocational, intellectual and physical fulfilment. A Unification life may not be a coddled one, but for many that is part of its attraction.

Furthermore, one does not need to resort to intervention to shield someone from such hardship, because when a person can no longer cope or matters become too inconsistent, they self-select out of the group. There are many more former or inactive Unificationists around than active ones, although as the group enlarges the burden on individuals eases and membership turnover is reducing.

Contrast Maree's Unification life with the legacy of the self-centered Me philosophy that was unleashed with the Swinging Sixties. It has been one of rocketing mental dis-ease and disease, a multitude of self-harmful behaviors and addictions, relationship breakdown as the norm, and an alarming rate of suicide. There are now hundreds of studies that have found that actively religious people are happier, more stable and more productive than the average person. The deprogrammers that operated in the West tended to be secularists who had little use for religion (not to mention the law). The journalists of the "cult" era also largely believed religion to be a fool's prerogative, and that new religionists were just more ignorant than the old ones. Anticultism's chief impact was giving religion as a whole a bad name, and the repercussions of that have been so unfortunate that we may soon have to concede that people like Maree were the only ones who actually knew what they were talking about.

—Dr. Alexa Blonner<sup>[4]</sup>

### *Notes*

[1] John T. Biermans, *The Odyssey of New Religions Today: A Case Study of the Unification Church* (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellon, 1988), p. 62.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., pp, 88-89.

[4] Dr. Alexa Blonner is a member of the Australian Association for the Study of Religion. Her book on religious trends entitled *Reimagining God and Resacralisation* was published by Routledge in 2019. Dr. Blonner was a Unificationist during the 1960s. Ironically, the "cult controversy" that erupted a decade later brought her back in touch with the Unification movement to check things out for herself, and she has kept close tabs ever since. This expanded into an active interest in religion generally and the eventual study of it at an academic level