behavior, cults resocialize vulnerable individuals.

"After they've been in a long enough time, the groups try to convey to the new members that they won't be able to return to the outside," Singer explains. "One of the major cults says, 'Returning from here to the world will be like eating your own vomit!' The new members are both afraid to leave the group because of personal failure and afraid that the group may come after them and bring them back. Most are relatively debilitated from long hours of cult work every day, and, eventually, they get to feeling very bad because they start to become aware of the deception that was practiced upon them to get them in. But by then, they have been in so long that they have almost no easy life to return to. So the choice usually is to stay.

"What I'm trying to paint is a picture of many, many pathways to social and psychological manipulation, to restricting reflective thinking, to restricting secondary associations, and to keeping the person highly focused on the leader while they're in these groups."

The Unification Church is not alone when it comes to using deception and mental maneuvers to recruit and keep members, according to Singer and others. Although the followers of Lord Krishna, the Hare Krishnas, reserve their hard sell for the selling of their literature and incense, they can be heavy proselytizers whenever a possible recruit comes by. Critics (most noticeably Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman, authors of the book "Snapping") claim that the constant chanting of their mystical incantation or mantra ("Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare") invokes an unquestioning mental state. Others contend that a horrendous work schedule plus a no-meat, no-eggs, no-fish, low protein diet keep members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in a constantly repressed condition.

The Divine Light Mission is supported by the sale of converts' possessions and gifts, and by the tithing of "preemies" (i.e., devotees). Counter-cultists say that the meditative "knowledge" techniques practiced by its congregation are consciousness-altering methods that harm a susceptible mind. At the heart of DLM philosophy, in fact, is the idea that rational thought prevents human beings from reaching God. Some former members have claimed that they were brainwashed by being bombarded with the group's doctrine. Others have reported such cognitive disturbances as memory loss and an inability to read without "trancing out" — going into a meditative state.

Margaret Singer believes that the Church of Scientology, the Children of God, The Way International, the Tony and Susan Alamo Christian Foundation, the Love Israel family, and the Body of Christ all rely on coercive conversion methods. Others have also suggested that many "Me Generation" movements, such as LifeSpring, TM, and est, can influence an individual's thought processes.

Father Kent Burtner, a Dominican priest who counsels former cult members and their parents, believes that the best way to view all of these groups is to place them on a continuum that runs from positive support of the person to mind destructiveness through the use of deception and abusive behavior modification techniques. "When you get to Moon and his Booneville, California, training camp, there is no question about the subterfuge and trickery going on there," he says. "But when you look at some of these fringe 'human potential' groups, then you get into this really fuzzy zone. Within this gray area, there may be a case and time where an individual's freedom is totally betrayed and another case where an individual's freedom, given slightly different circumstances, is not. You really have to judge it on a case by case basis."

What is significant about these movements, according to Father Burtner, are the psychological techniques that have been used to convert and control followers. "I don't care whether it's someone leading a Catholic charismatic prayer group or if it's Sun Myung Moon — whether they're into a 'socially acceptable' form of spirituality or not — if they start using methods that deprive individuals of their ability to make a free choice, they're acting in a tremendously destructive way towards the person," he says. "And that, to me, is an objective evil."

Who Joins and Why

If these groups are so harmful, why would anybody enter one? In studying cults, social scientists have come up with a number of reasons to explain their popularity with today's youth and