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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / PAI GREENHOUSE

Steve Hassan of Cambridge has devoted his life to fighting cults — as therapist, author, and virtual one-man information center.

Steve Hassan's war on cults

The ex-Moonie says that as the groups have gone mainstream they've become more menacing

By John Koch
GLOBE STAFF

Steve Hassan says that he was prepared to commit murder, "absolutely." Or, if necessary, take a bullet in his own body and die a glorious death.

Hassan was a follower of Sun Myung Moon, a true believer in the South Korean evangelist's Unification Church. He used to literally fall to his knees, kowtowing in Moon's presence.

It was the late 1970s, and the aspiring poet and English teacher had chucked his studies at Queens College in New York and become, in his words,

"a Moonie." According to Hassan, he was favored by top Unification leaders for his discipline and zeal, his persuasive speaking style and success as a recruiter.

He was upwardly mobile in the church, and says he willingly broke laws to raise funds.

"I was told," says Hassan, "the world was controlled by Satan, and that God needed money, and that any way to get people to make donations would help them spiritually."

Hassan says that the Moonies made him what he is today and has been for 20 years.

He is an ardent enemy of groups like Moon's, a self-described cult fighter.

He calls groups like the Unification

“Some of the big groups are multibillion-dollar international conglomerates. It's a given if they wanted me dead, it would be a snap of the fingers. . . . The stress is unbelievable.”

STEVE HASSAN

Church "destructive cults" in his 1988 book "Combating Cult Mind Control," which is still in print. The book has been translated into five languages and has sold more than 250,000 copies. In it, Hassan details the uses of deception in his own recruitment and others's and the mind-control techniques he says robbed him of the power of choice and turned him into a zealous automaton for more than two years. Then, after suffering a near-fatal — but, he says, fortunate — auto accident, Hassan was deprogrammed.

Now, working out of a spacious Cambridge office, Hassan dispenses information and counsel. A virtual one-man information center dedicated to exposing and debunking destructive cults.

HASSAN, Page E4

Ex-Moonie makes career of anti-cult crusade

He is also a licensed mental health professional specializing in therapeutic interventions for cult victims and their families. He claims to have helped thousands of people break the psychological chains binding them to such "destructive cults" as the Unification Church, Transcendental Meditation, the Church of Scientology, est, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, the Boston Church of Christ and Victory Chapel.

In Hassan's lexicon, cult leaders are usually motivated by power and profit and, often, the sexual favors they inveigle from members.

'Hypnotic phenomena'

Hassan, 42, is a dark-haired 6-footer who speaks in a raspy voice uncannily reminiscent of Dustin Hoffman's, and with his round-lensed glasses, he looks like an owlish version of the actor. There's a slight edge to his delivery - an urgency born perhaps when he was a compliantly ambitious Moonie and sharpened by his determination to help people undo the kind of harm he says was inflicted on him as a member of the cult.

Almost no one, he believes, is immune to the deceptive blandishments of one cult or another. A "hypnotic phenomenon" takes place, he says. "It's an induction into an altered state of function where powerful images and feelings are being elicited for the purposes of getting a person's compliance."

Hassan and his allies in the anti-cult movement, like the American Family Foundation, based in New York and Florida, are concerned that although cults are less visible now than in the '70s, they are proliferating dangerously.

"The number of cults and those affected by them are mushrooming," writes Marsha Rudin, director of the foundation's International Cult Education Program, in *The Religious Observer*. She estimates that there are as many as 3,000 groups worldwide and 3 million people who are or have been members. In a recent guest column in the *AFF Journal*, *The Cult Observer*, Paul Martin, an associate of *AFF*, calls destructive cultism "the most under-studied, neglected and ignored mental health and social problem in the world" and estimates that 185,000 Americans join such groups every year. He writes that 25 percent of them will suffer "enduring, irreversible harm."

"The cults that were around then on street corners," Hassan says, "now have businesses and business offices, and people have ties and jackets. The [Hare] Krishnas, for example, don't have robes - they tend to dress up now, wear wigs, suits and ties. The Moonies have the *Washington Times*" - a daily paper in the nation's capital - "the University of Bridgeport and they're the largest waterfront owners in Gloucester."

Although the Unification Church has paid nearly \$100 million to save

the school from bankruptcy, a college accrediting agency last year found no evidence that the church controlled the university.

Not everyone agrees with Hassan, who has enough detractors to have made him think twice before setting up a permanent office. "For years I didn't have an office because I didn't want it to get bombed," he says. He carefully guards his home address, saying that, nonetheless, he has been followed and that his trash has been picked through, presumably by cult operatives.

"Some of the big groups are multibillion-dollar international conglomerates. It's a given if they wanted me dead, it would be a snap of the fingers. One of the reasons I want to keep a high profile," he says, is "for my survival - so that they'll think twice about hurting me. The stress is unbelievable."

Unholy profit

The Church of Scientology is high on Hassan's list of actively destructive cults. "It's hard to pick what I want to say that's critical of this group because there's so much," he says. It exists, he says in essence, for unholy profit.

Asked for a comment on Hassan, the Boston branch of the Church of Scientology contacted its New York public affairs director, John Carmichael. "I've watched what Hassan does," Carmichael said on the telephone from New York, "and his mind control theories are the same rubbish that's been rejected by the courts. His theories are debunked. He's a pseudo-expert, a phony," who "preys on people's fears." Carmichael faxed the *Globe* more than 20 pages of documents including an affidavit from Arthur Roselle, stating Hassan had aided in kidnapping and imprisoning him in 1976 for the purposes of deprogramming him.

"I flatly deny I ever kidnapped, abducted, coerced or hurt anyone in any way," Hassan says. According to Hassan, with the cooperation of Roselle's parents and close friends, he counseled Roselle out of the Unification Church in 1976. And although Roselle later rejoined, "no charges have been filed against me by him or anybody else - ever," Hassan says. "This has been perpetuated around the world for 20 years and used to indoctrinate groups of cult members to fear me."

After Carmichael's call, the *Globe* received an unsolicited telephone call from Peter Ross, Carmichael's counterpart in the Unification Church. Two other people, saying Carmichael had contacted them, called to raise questions about Hassan's ideas on cults and mind control.

Ross was "surprised he [Hassan] is taken seriously," he said, laughing. "I try to restrain my Irish irreverence," he said on the telephone from California, "but with Steve, it's a difficult task."

Ross, also director of Unification Church legal affairs, wrote in a five-page memo to the *Globe* that "Hassan's theories can best be characterized as 'junk science,'" and that he has been carrying on a "vendetta" against the church.

While his critics cast doubt on the concept of mind control, Hassan says that the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual "has a category that talks about brainwashing and cults, and it's just disinformation to say mind control is not an agreed-upon theory."

"There is ample evidence that you can indoctrinate people into belief systems: Cult groups do it all the time," said psychiatrist and Harvard Medical School professor Dr. Alvin Poussaint when asked recently about the phenomenon of mind control. However, Poussaint prefers the term "brainwashing" to describe the "authoritarian indoctrination" that can radically alter and "control" human behavior. "There's such a thing as being brainwashed," he said, "without being incarcerated." Poussaint also said he knows of students in the Boston area who have been affected by religious cults.

Noelle Crosby believes a church identified by Hassan as a destructive cult drove her to a breakdown and ruined her young life. Crosby, 27, grew up as a sometime member of the Victory Chapel Christian Fellowship Church, then in South Dennis, Cape Cod. Now living west of Boston, she is struggling to reassemble her life in part through therapy with Hassan, a life she says was "shattered" by the church and its pastor, Paul Campo.

She permitted this reporter to audit her initial counseling session with Hassan, which included her mother, Nancy Crosby, also an ex-member of Victory Chapel. The church, part of a worldwide network, has been the subject of highly critical exposes, in the *Cape Cod Times* in 1995, and on Boston's WHDH-TV in 1992.

Noelle Crosby, who speaks thoughtfully about her past, describes a fearfully exposed and monitored existence. Her entire family - mother, brother and older sister - were members of the church, making it especially difficult and painful for her to follow her impulses to leave its authoritarian grip.

After her father died while she was in high school, Noelle says Campo told her, "Your father is burning in hell and so will you if you don't stop what you're doing." She says she was publicly rebuked before the congregation for "backsliding," and identified as filthy before God. She says feeling dirty in the eyes of the Lord and "no good" led inexorably to a nervous breakdown when she was 21.

She left the church twice by the time of her hospitalization; soon afterward, she was prohibited from returning because the church considered her a danger to other members, according to her mother. She wasn't able to graduate with her high school



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/PAT GREENHOUS

After a near-fatal car accident cult fighter Steve Hassan was deprogrammed, but he says it took him a year to feel like part of society.

class, and without the support of her family, which remained in the church longer than she did, Noelle says she "made a mess out of things." Breaking into tears, Noelle wonders "how to stop the mentality they [the church] instilled in me - [they] said my life would amount to nothing without the church. All my regrets!"

"God was turned into this mean, rigid thing," Noelle's mother says. "The control of your mind was the worst. You were a different person. I believed our whole purpose on the planet was to get people to be saved - and the only way to be saved was to come into Victory Chapel." Nancy Crosby, who says she was not making a lot of money at the time, was paying the church approximately \$40 a week in tithes and was "always asked for money" in addition to that.

She left the church in 1991, after Noelle's final break with Victory Chapel. The mother says her own departure was prompted by Noelle's hospitalization, which was caused by "emotional and mental abuse" perpetrated by the church and Campo.

"Total trash and garbage," Campo said when he was contacted by phone at his home on Cape Cod even before hearing specifically what the Crosbys told the *Globe*. "I'm not interested in talking to you guys: You're always anti-church. I'm not into responding." Campo said before ending the conversation.

"I walked in pretty good person," Noelle says, referring to the church, "and walked out a mess."

"Something serious happened to us," says her mother.

Hassan agrees: Something serious happened to him, too, as a member of the Unification Church but by breaking away with the help of deprogramming and then studying the process of his own recovery, Hassan

evolved a course of therapy to address cases like his own and Noelle's.

The 1976 automobile accident that hobbled Hassan also saved him, he believes. In his book, he writes that it, "began breaking the Moonies's hold over me. . . . First, I could sleep, eat, and rest. Second, I could finally see my family. My parents and my . . . sister Stephanie had been judged 'satanic' by the Moonies, but I loved them and wanted to convert them. Third, I could slow down and think, being away from the group's constant reinforcement. Fourth, my parents decided to have me deprogrammed. Fifth, I had a cast on my right leg from my toes to my pelvis, so I couldn't move without crutches. I could neither fight nor run away."

. . .

Implanting phobias

Over the course of a contentious, often agonizing six days, during which Hassan briefly considered killing his father, a group of three ex-Moonies and a counselor convinced him he had been manipulated in much the same way Chinese Communists brainwashed citizens and dissidents in the 1940s and '50s. It took him a full year, Hassan says, to feel reintegrated into the world of normal society.

He characterizes his therapeutic method as family-centered. "I use the family and friends [of clients] to devise a set of interventions designed to get the person to agree to meet with me and former members for a period of time. The goal is to share information with them about mind control and to process their experience of how they met the group and, step by step, how they came to be converted, as well as to discuss key experiences in the group. Also, I help to de-phobitize them, because implanting phobias is one of the universal mind control techniques that these groups use on members to make them irrationally afraid of ever leaving the group or, in some cases, of even questioning the group."

In addition to such "exit counseling," Hassan works with ex-members of cults, like Noelle, to help them reconstruct a strong identity, an "alternate psychic reality" to the group mentality they adopted and to the sense of personal failure that, according to Hassan, plagues people in the wake of cult involvement.

Hassan believes Noelle's "prognosis is very good, but it's going to take a long time." Part of the problem for her and many others like her, he says, is that they have "been dealing with mental health professionals who are ignorant about cult mind-control issues." These clinicians "are often missing the obvious," he says. "To most therapists, the symptoms look like depression, suicidality, even schizophrenia. They don't have the training to understand this phenomenon, and most therapists don't even bother to ask, 'Were you ever involved with a high-demand group of any kind that caused you emotional turmoil?' That one question could make all the difference in the world."

Boston University's chief religious officer, dean Robert Thornburg, considers cult activity on campus a serious problem. Groups including the Hare Krishnas and the Boston Church of Christ have practiced "duplicious recruiting and destructive mind-control thought processes," he said in a phone conversation.

"You can look into the eyes of a 20-year-old and see a blank, vacant stare, like the whole personality has been squashed. For all practical purposes," he said, students like this in the grips of what he calls "destructive religious practices" are "zombies."

"I see it a lot," said Thornburg, who characterizes Hassan as "a very competent workman in the psychological aspects of of mind control. Most therapists are useless because," he said, "they don't understand how anyone could be trapped in that foolishness."

Thornburg lauds Hassan for laying out his therapeutic program in his book and for "doing exactly what he says he does," he said. "He is about the only one I would trust as a referral" for this kind of counseling, he said.

Hassan's current projects include writing a book, more personal than the first, about his life as cult-member-turned-cult-antagonist, and pumping life into his Center for the Freedom of Mind. He calls the center, which has nonprofit status but, as yet, neither staff nor funding, a resource where families could get objective information about groups they suspect are exercising undue influence upon loved ones.

Hassan says the work he does exacts a "horrible" toll on his personal life, and while he remains firmly committed to it, he's not as "almost mindlessly" zealous as he admits he was when he began opposing the Unification Church two decades ago. "I've gotten to the point where I don't feel like I am the world's salvation, and I can't help everybody who calls me - I'm just a guy trying to make a contribution."

Hassan says the strain he feels has sources beyond the constant fear of reprisal. One is "dealing with people who are told to be afraid of me - they're told [that] by different cult groups, different charismatic figures who are threatened by being exposed." Another source of strain is "dealing with people who are incredibly traumatized and literally hysterical.

"I've burned out hundreds of times in the last 20 years, to the point where I just want to crawl under a rock and become a waiter," Hassan says.

In fact, he's not about to retire or change professions.

For Hassan, mind control is "a phenomenon central to the issue of our survival as a species."

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