

Book Review: I Am Revealed: Behind the Ashram Door

By Robin Barbosa

Reviewed by Gina Catena

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Robin Barbosa shares memories of 3 years she spent with a cultic group during the 1970s, as told decades later during a family Thanksgiving conversation.

The author's cult experience began in 1975 after she completed college when, like millions of her generation, she began an adventurous drive across the USA in a Volkswagen van. After several weeks of uncomfortable van life, she found herself 3,000 miles from home enjoying a free meal at a WORKS center. By 1976, Barbosa had become a WORKS missionary and fundraiser, and would eventually become one of many mistresses to the group's local leader.

WORKS is the pseudonym that Barbosa chose, rather than naming her actual group, World Organization for Righteous King Services, to avoid litigation from the group. Whether the group was, in reality, the Unification Church, International Society of Krishna Consciousness, or another group, the dynamics would be similar for any such cultic group with satellite centers.

When she was a devotee, Barbosa believed that subservience would bring spiritual advancement. With other women, she slept on hard floors. Money was not important for a devotee who arose daily at 4 a.m. for prayer, chores, and public solicitation of donations and recruits. Dressed in modest robes and scarves, underfed devotees caravanned to college campuses, airports, or crowded stadiums to solicit money and dodge law enforcement.

Ultimate directives originated from an overseas spiritual leader called "Sir Supreme" or "King" and were interpreted by her local leader. The author details many layers of competition, such as that between satellite centers, in-group competition between leaders, and that between several women who believed they were simultaneously married to their local leader. She tells her daughters how, when she was a True Believer, she justified illegalities and her own single arrest, to which one daughter interjects from Ecclesiastes 5:10, "Whoever loves money, never has money enough."

By 1979, the author's parents hired a professional deprogrammer. The King Center had previously warned followers to be on guard from deprogrammers. During the first 4 days locked in a hotel room with her parents and the deprogrammer, the author dutifully distracted herself from the planned reeducation with quiet recitation to herself of King phrases. By the fourth and fifth days, she describes that doubts seeped through and her resolve diminished. After 5 days, the deprogramming succeeded. The author then spent 3 months living in a rehabilitation center for cult recovery, where she shared common experiences with others who had left a variety of groups. She eventually returned to her family and integrated into mainstream life.

Years later, as this narrative unfolds in her kitchen, Barbosa claims to have purged lingering effects from her long-ago cult involvement. She expresses gratitude for her parents' investment of time and about \$20,000 for the deprogramming, which she remembers as heart-wrenching for all. Perhaps this explains the narrative's staging as a Thanksgiving conversation.

At times, this reader found it difficult to follow a narrative that jumps between long-ago ashram conversation to biblical commentary, confusing the former cult's spiritual dogma with the author's current religious exclamations. Once I grasped the author's current spiritual perspective, I better understood the sometimes-awkward transitions between simultaneous narratives.

From her experience, the author reflects that cult members are spiritually hungry, seeking to fill a void and find a life purpose. However, she does not address other voids such as social isolation or identity confusion, which can increase one's susceptibility to coercion.

The author concludes by sharing her current spiritual passions through a dream interpretation in which she rejoices in the Holy Spirit to free her from cult shackles, summarizing her own faith in God as personified in Jesus's unconditional spiritual sustenance. A closing epilogue quotes from Psalms and Proverbs, praising loved ones and "God as Yehovah, El Shaddai, Sar Shalom, and Jesus." Her final line: "It would be remiss of me not to ask you to ask God for His living water and see if he does not put His Spirit into you as the GREAT I AM revealed! His abundant love I cannot deny" (p 281).

Writing such a memoir is both honorable and difficult. Ms. Barbosa deserves heartfelt recognition for the effort to share her past, so that others may better understand cult dynamics and recovery. While expressing gratitude for her parents' investment in a costly deprogramming and recovery, the author does not provide resources for others to obtain such help. She does not offer suggestions for those who lack the good fortune of an expensive intervention, other than to invite God's grace.

Readers who seek Christian interpretations of cult involvement and recovery may find reassurance in Robin Barbosa's "I am Revealed, Behind the Ashram Door." Others might be turned off by the author's strong Judeo-Christian proselytizing in the absence of concrete support for cult recovery.

About the Reviewer

Gina Catena, MS, was raised in the Transcendental Meditation (TM) group as an early "child of the Age of Enlightenment." She married and was a parent in the group until the age of 30. After 22 years of childhood and young adulthood enmeshed in the TM culture, Ms. Catena left the group with three children and obtained an education and career while integrating into mainstream culture. She lives with ongoing cult influence through three generations of her immediate family. She contributed to *Child of the Cult* by Nori Muster and *Combating Cult Mind Control* by Steven Hassan and has written articles, given talks, and facilitated workshops for those raised in cultic groups. Ms. Catena is also working on several projects about family influence in cults. She obtained a Master of Science (MS) degree from the University of California at San Francisco, a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Art History, and a Bachelor of Science (BS) in Nursing, with a minor in psychology. She is now a certified nurse-midwife (CNM) and nurse practitioner (NP) in the San Francisco Bay Area.