

Freedom and deprogramming - Review of Maree P. Gauper's *Free Maree! When Faith, Family, and Freedom Collide* - Bernard Doherty - July 2019

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Word to us. Worship, he argues, offers the possibility of counter-formation that opposes the impacts of economic liberalism while acknowledging that we cannot evade its reality. This reshaping will be likely to lead to action in the public sphere, but the form that takes will differ from time to time, and place to place, so that no standard formula can be offered. The book's afterword highlights the centrality of lament as an appropriate mode of worship in the face of the inescapable reality of wealth.

In the face of the profound and inescapable challenge that wealth presents to Christian discipleship, at least as much in Australia as it is in Ireland, Hargaden has provoked me to think afresh about the issue from a profoundly theological vantage point. As the latest in the 'Theopolitical Visions' series, the volume fully delivers on the promise to open up new vistas on public life through theological engagement with political theory.

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Freedom and deprogramming

Gauper, Maree P. *Free Maree! When Faith, Family, and Freedom Collide*. Columbia, CA: Self Published, 2019. Paperback, 224pp. ISBN 9781733586207.

Both in Australia and internationally, the period of the 1970s and early 1980s witnessed widespread social concern about young people abandoning normal career paths and their birth religions to join a variety of "cults" (scholars prefer the less pejorative New Religious Movements or NRMs) and become missionaries and lay workers in these often controversial groups. Chief among these groups was the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity—better known by the pejorative eponymous name of

the “Moonies,” or in the shortened form the Unification Church—and its Korean founder the Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012). Throughout this decade the Unificationists and their high profile leader achieved an inordinate amount of negative media coverage for their public fund-raising and evangelism, conservative anti-communist political stance, and their mass weddings. However, more than anything else, the Unification Church became the subject of accusations of “brainwashing” young recruits and turning them against their families. As a result they became probably the largest target group for the practice of “deprogramming”—a euphemism for the forced removal and deconversion of those with undesirable religious or political beliefs. It is on reflecting on her own experiences during this period that Maree Gauper has penned this autobiographical piece of creative non-fiction.

Gauper’s memoir, however, differs considerably from the large genre of popular books published on so-called “cults,” former member autobiographies, and “misery memoirs” by offering a rare glimpse into the life of a “cult” insider who has remained an insider ever since. Here the reader is able to listen to a long-standing member of the Unification Church describe her experiences from her own perspective, explaining her conversion, marriage, and the attempts of her family to have her deprogrammed; and to hear how the extensive outside opposition to alternative religions affects the people who choose to join them and their relationships with family and friends. The story is told in an asynchronous narrative that shifts the reader between the ten-day detention Gauper underwent in August 1983 to literary vignettes covering her upbringing, her initial encounter with and conversion to the Unifications Church, and her marriage to Bob, a fellow American Unificationist.

Raised in a working-class and conservative Irish Roman Catholic family in New Zealand, Gauper’s narrative tells of her teenage years as a talented musician struggling with self-esteem issues related to her weight, before her challenging move to study music and English at the University of Otago in Dunedin and her struggles to retain her religious convictions in a share-house with a group of often aggressive atheist fellow students. It was on a backpacking holiday in Australia that Gauper, like many other idealistic young people in the period, encountered missionaries from the Unification Church in Adelaide’s Rundle Mall and found herself drawn to these missionaries and their beliefs. Far from sinister and pseudo-scientific

“brainwashing” motifs that one finds narrated in many books by former members of the Unification Church, what one sees here is an idealistic young woman who formed a friendship with several missionaries and was genuinely drawn to their belief system.

From the beginning of her involvement in the Unification Church, however, Maree’s devout Catholic family had concerns and the bulk of this narrative focuses on this conflict—particularly Gauper’s fraught relationship with her mother and the family’s decision to eventually bring in two American deprogrammers in an attempt to make Maree leave the Unification Church (not their first, as her mother had previously attempted something similar in Australia). Having relocated back to New Zealand, Maree was lured into a car with the assistance of several non-Unificationist friends and subjected to ten days forced detainment in a house on the Whangaparaoa Peninsula north of Auckland.

The narrative of what occurred over this ten-day period is discomfiting: a 26-year-old woman is subjected to intense psychological coercion to abandon her adopted faith. These chapters give a taste of some of the extended harangues Maree was subjected to by a pair of self-appointed deprogrammers with absolutely no mental-health training. Here Gauper records, in extensive detail, the kinds of amateur techniques used in attempts to undermine her adopted faith, ranging from forcing her to watch critical videos about the group to producing other (successfully deprogrammed) former members to share how they came to doubt their beliefs and abandon the Unification Church. Fortunately, Gauper was not subjected to the physical violence that sometimes accompanied deprogrammings overseas. After police eventually (and somewhat reluctantly) escorted her from the house, Maree decided not to press charges for kidnap, though her case did become a minor *cause célèbre* in New Zealand over the following weeks.

On a more hopeful note, Gauper’s book paints a more positive picture of a group of idealistic young people seeking to live out and witness to their adopted faith. One may not agree with all aspects of Unificationist theology and practice, but Gauper makes a telling observation when she contrasts the norms of the group with the growing permissiveness that marked much of the 1970s counterculture. While many other young people were experimenting with drugs and promiscuity, Gauper and her fellow Unificationists were seeking to promote and live out a chaste lifestyle centred on strong marital and familial bonds—a lifestyle, incidentally, not far removed from

those being promoted by many other uncontroversial Protestant and Roman Catholic groups at the same time. Indeed, while the Unificationist practice of matching couples from sometimes vastly different cultures and marrying them in large ceremonies has often drawn raised eyebrows (e.g. in the 2012 documentary, *Married to the Moonies*), it is worth pointing out that Gauper and her husband Bob have now been happily married for 36 years and remain committed to their Unificationist faith—albeit now Maree plays the organ for a local Episcopalian congregation and several other local churches in their Californian home town.

As a piece of autobiographical creative non-fiction, this book faithfully captures a period of time during which religious intolerance and fear of the religious other led otherwise good people to take drastic measures and involve themselves in the dubious practice of deprogramming—a practice which is mercifully far less common today—though sadly still promoted by some organisations. It also shows how a hostile media (who often lionized deprogrammers as benevolent vigilantes) and negligent attitudes amongst law enforcement allowed deprogrammers to go largely unpunished—particularly in Australia and New Zealand. To Gauper's credit, however, the book concludes in an irenic spirit and narrates how slowly Maree was able to forgive her family for her ordeal and rebuild a relationship with them.

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