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Andrea Laisure

Robin Boyle Laisure

St. John's University School of Law

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STAYING SAFE:

Observing Warning Signs of a Dangerous Liaison

By Andrea Laisure and Robin Boyle Laisure

Cults and their connection with human trafficking are ever more timely as a topic of discussion. The insidious crime of human trafficking is spiraling at a fast pace. Human trafficking is the second-largest criminal industry in the world (with the drug trade being the first).¹ An estimated 100,000 to 300,000 American children are considered high risk for trafficking every year.² With the selling and reselling of human labor, trafficking is highly profitable. ICSA's momentous conference on Cults and Sex Trafficking, held in Los Angeles, California (April, 2016), served as a catalyst for researchers and practitioners. At the conference, presenters compared the characteristics of cults with human-trafficking rings.

Recent scholarship has explored further the connections between cults and human trafficking. In particular, Andy Vogler summed up the proceedings of the Los Angeles conference in his *ICSA Today* article "Cults and Sex Trafficking."³ And in her article "Employing Trafficking Laws to Capture Elusive Leaders of Destructive Cults,"⁴ published in a legal periodical, Robin Boyle Laisure suggested that the federal statute criminalizing human trafficking can serve as a vehicle for capturing cult leaders, who operate similar schemes.

Workshops and discussions related to these topics continued at ICSA's Annual Conference in Dallas, Texas (June 2016). Fueled with information she acquired from attending the Dallas conference, high-school senior Andrea Laisure launched a series of presentations to teens and adults in various community settings. The series, titled *Staying Safe*, totalled more than 80 hours and earned Andrea a Gold Award for Girl Scout Troop 1128.

In one of her speaking engagements, Andrea copresented at a panel discussion held October 23, 2016, at the Garden City Community Church (Long Island, New York). The topic for the panel discussion was *Dangerous Liaisons: The Truth About Campus Predators, Toxic Relationships, and Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Teens*. Robin Boyle Laisure, JD, professor at St. John's University

School of Law, served as the moderator. Drawing upon personal experiences and research, panelists provided practical advice to teenagers and parents about staying safe from harm. Presenters were Maureen Griffo, MA, MEd, a former member of a religious-based cult who now spearheads an educational initiative for the International Cultic Studies Association, and Stephanie Spanos, MD, a child psychiatrist who works with teens in clinical settings, in foster care, and in New York City schools.

On May 7, 2017, Robin and Andrea Laisure copresented with a speaker from NJ Safe & Sound (njsafeandsound.org) at the Garden City Community Church on topics concerning human trafficking, cults, and undue influence. Andrea spoke about her lobbying efforts with a local state legislator. The NJ Safe & Sound representative reported success with a bill signed into law that calls for a study on the effects of predatory alienation, which often underlies situations of undue influence. The three speakers then took the presentation to France, where they presented at the ICSA Annual Conference in Bordeaux on July 1, 2017. Together, they provided advice for parents, teachers, medical personnel, and teens on avoiding toxic relationships. The advice they offered is summarized in the following sections

Warning Signs of a Dangerous Relationship⁵

Do any of the following telltale signs apply to your relationship with someone in your life, such as a romantic partner (or friend or employer)?

- Is your partner controlling where you go, what you wear, whom you see, and other critical aspects of your life, such as employment and school?
- Do you suspect that your partner is compulsively lying or do you feel a need to lie to your partner to avoid trouble?
- In private or in public, is your partner treating you with disrespect, or demeaning and insulting you?

- Is your partner using intimidation and threats to get what she wants from you?
- Do you feel that your privacy is invaded when you are talking on the phone?
- Do you feel stalked?
- Is there an unhealthy dependence between you and your partner?
- Is any form of abuse, whether emotional or physical, occurring in your relationship?
- Does this person steer you into isolation by dissuading you from socializing with friends and being around your relatives?

Warning Signs That a Friend or Family Member Is Suffering

Often, people do not self-disclose that they are in a relationship where any of the above is occurring. These are some of the telltale signs of such a relationship: [Note: Some of these signs may also indicate other conditions, including health issues. Appropriate professionals should be consulted.]

- Appearing fatigued or having insomnia, without explanation;
- Showing drastic changes in appetite and eating habits;
- Having difficulty making decisions—e.g., cannot think for one’s self, not even for seemingly small matters, such as deciding among choices of clothing;
- Demonstrating loss of memory about recent events, names, or places;
- Responding with hypersensitivity to seemingly small matters;
- Showing symptoms of moodiness, frequent crying, depression, or anxiety;
- Insisting on isolation, or the opposite—having difficulty with being alone; or
- Reflecting a change in behavior that seems uncharacteristic, such as an increase in risk-taking behavior.

What to Do if You Are in a Controlling or Abusive Relationship

- Talk to someone you trust, which could mean calling an anonymous hotline or contacting medical personnel;
- Take a break from, or break off the relationship before it destroys you;
- Limit contact once the relationship is severed;
- Take legal action if necessary, such as obtaining an order of protection that will give authorities the right to arrest the abuser if he comes near you.

How to Respond to a Friend or Family Member in Such a Relationship

- Do not rescue, or promise to rescue—doing so is dangerous, and leaving the abuser is something your friend should do on his own.
- Listen to everything the friend or family member says, and retain descriptive details, such as where he was, what he said, what he wore.
- Report suspicious information to either local or national hotlines or to the police. Many hotlines provide assistance for domestic violence and for human trafficking.
- As a friend to one who is controlled or abused, do not judge the person for staying with the partner.
- Encourage the person to leave his partner, but do not be demanding. ■

Notes

[1] LifeWay Network Inc., PO Box 754215, Forest Hills, NY 11375; www.LifeWayNetwork.org

[2] LifeWay Network Inc., PO Box 754215, Forest Hills, NY 11375; www.LifeWayNetwork.org

[3] *ICSA Today*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2017, pp. 12–16.

[4] *Oregon Review of International Law*, 17; 205 (2016).

About the Authors



Robin Boyle Laisure, JD, Professor of Legal Writing at St. John’s University School of Law, lectures on topics concerning cults and the law. Her articles include “Employing Trafficking Laws to Capture Elusive Leaders of Destructive Cults” (*Oregon Review of International Law*, 2016), “Current Status of Federal Law Concerning Violent Crimes Against Women and Children: Implications for Cult Victims” (*Cultic Studies Review*, 2002), “How Children in Cults May Use Emancipation Laws to Free Themselves” (*Cultic Studies Journal*, 1999), and “Women, the Law, and Cults: Three Avenues of Legal Recourse—New Rape Laws, Violence Against Women Act, and Antistalking Laws” (*Cultic Studies Journal*, 1998). In 2005, she received the Faculty Outstanding Achievement award from the President of St. John’s University, and she is on the Editorial Board of *ICSA’s International Journal of Cultic Studies*.



Andrea Laisure graduated from the Garden City High School in New York in June, 2017 and will be attending Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania in the fall. In conjunction with her Gold Award Project (Girl Scout Troop 1128), she has spoken to audiences of parents and teens in the United States and abroad about staying safe from toxic relationships. ■