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DOING SOCIOLOGY

Confessions of a professional stranger

Eileen Barker

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts.

(Shakespeare (1623) *As You Like It*, Act II Scene VII)

I never planned to be a sociologist of religion – indeed, I never planned to be an academic. I didn't get an undergraduate degree until I was 32. My desire had always been to go on the stage and at school I studied for A levels in zoology, physics, and chemistry because my parents said they would pay for me to go to drama school only if I had something to fall back on when I realized my mistake. They assumed that, like the rest of my family, I would want to study medicine.

During two happy years at drama school we learnt “the Method,” avidly reading Stanislavski¹ and delving into our psyches to unearth the passions of tragic heroines and murderous villains. But we also learnt how to master a number of basic techniques: how to speak in a variety of accents and dialects; how to sit gracefully in a crinoline; how to project our voices to the back of the “gods”;² how to fire guns – and how to breathe in, then exhale on a laugh. We took classes in ballet, fencing, make-up, falling without hurting ourselves, and slapping faces without hurting the slappee.

I then spent the next five years playing a variety of roles in theaters throughout Britain and, occasionally, overseas. There was, for example, a delightful season in Valetta where I played “sweet little Cicely” in *The Importance of being Earnest* and Frankie Howerd's girlfriend in *Charlie's Aunt*. I little thought that nearly half a century later I would return to give a lecture attended by Malta's President on the topic of “Cults, Sects and New Religious Movements.”

My career came to what I thought would be a temporary halt when my daughter became severely ill. I became a suburban housewife discussing how to make marrow

and ginger jam at Presbyterian coffee mornings. Frustrated, I looked around for a little more stimulation and noticed that the local technical college was offering evening classes in lampshade making and social history. We had enough lampshades so I chose social history. A series of chance encounters, a growing interest in sociology, and getting enveloped by a students' demo while buying tickets at the Aldwych Theatre, resulted in my enrolling for an undergraduate course at the London School of Economics – but still expecting to return to the theater. By the end of three years I was, however, pretty well hooked, and when, a couple of days after the final results came out, I was offered a temporary lectureship, I accepted – and that was the start of a career that was to continue until and beyond my retirement as an emeritus “Professor of Sociology with Special Reference to the Study of Religion” at the LSE.

When people find out about my theatrical past they often assume that I must have undergone some dramatic conversion between two very different worldviews. In fact, the driving forces in my life have not really changed that much. I have always possessed a vulgar curiosity – I enjoyed doing my science A levels because I was interested in how the natural world worked, but I was also interested in how people worked. As an actress not only did I have to search within myself for the emotions that would help me to understand what the character I was portraying might be experiencing, I also had to recognize how the situation in which she found herself would push her one way rather than another. Yet, at the same time, I had to be “in control,” employing the techniques of the trade and constantly aware of what was going on around me, both on stage and in the audience. I had to be both inside and outside the character.

In many ways, this somewhat schizophrenic approach has been replicated throughout my career as a sociologist.³ An important difference when I became an academic researcher was that I did not have to follow a written script,⁴ but I did have to discover how the “actors” I was observing came to play the roles in which society cast them. While engaged in participant observation, I have had to learn how to “pass,” as the ethnomethodologists would say, as a member of the group I am studying – learning the correct vocabulary, and what clothes and body language are appropriate.⁵ Yet, at the same time, like the actor, the sociologist has to be wary of “going native” and becoming completely immersed in the situation. She has to stay alert to what is going on around her.

The analysis and the techniques employed by the social scientist do, of course, differ from those of the thespian, but they should (in my kind of sociology at least) involve both *Verstehen* and a more positivistic approach. As well as trying to develop an empathic understanding of what is going on, the sociologist is likely to want to make generalizations about groups and to assess the probability that certain variables are related to each other in certain ways. To do this, questionnaires, control groups, and statistical manipulation are among the tools of the trade. Just as actors who mumble their lines or distract the audience's attention at an inappropriate moment are not good actors, questionnaires that are designed by someone without both an understanding of the subject and an awareness of the potential pitfalls of ambiguous questions can elicit misleading or even totally incorrect results.

Influences

I have already mentioned that I come from a family of doctors (brother, nephew, aunt, uncle, and stepfather), but, back a generation, my grandfather and great-grandfather were medical missionaries, and before them there was a long line of fiercely devout ministers in the Church of Scotland and some of its sectarian groupings. As a child I was close to my maternal grandfather who had devoted his life to serving the spiritual and physical well-being of others. In particular, he had worked among lepers in India and Africa (my mother was born in a leper colony). Not only had he developed one of the first effective cures for the disease, but he had also fought against the social discrimination that the lepers faced – a challenge far greater, he claimed, than healing their bodies.

I did not share my grandfather's faith, but I did respect him and the life that he had led. He in turn gently acknowledged my agnosticism, while suggesting books I might read and engaging me in conversations about thinkers such as Teilhard de Chardin and Mahatma Gandhi, whom he had known and greatly admired. All that was against a background of ten years' incarceration in boarding-schools where I had to attend prayers twice a day and learn the week's collect on Fridays. Originally I attended Church of Scotland services, but I found the Minister, whose sermon always lasted at least an hour, incredibly boring, and when I found out from my Anglican friends that their priest never spoke for more than ten minutes I expressed an interest in the Church of England, and Sunday mornings became more bearable. Thus, by the time I left school, I had become well versed in the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, and I had learnt to appreciate the beauty of liturgical music.

When we had to choose our options for the undergraduate course, the sociology of religion, which was taught by David Martin, seemed more interesting than some of the other courses on offer. I was tutored by Ernest Gellner in my final year and he, more than anyone, introduced me to the enormous variety of religious beliefs that had been held throughout the world and throughout history. Gabriel Newfield opened my eyes to the delights of social and moral philosophy, a course that I was later to teach alongside both undergraduate and postgraduate courses on the sociology of religion.⁶ So far as my reading was concerned, among the scholars who excited me most, and continue to do so, were Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Mary Douglas. I was also greatly influenced by Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality*, and would still, if pushed, call myself a social constructionist.⁷ Another sociologist of religion who played an important role in my intellectual development, and who was to become a close friend until his death in 2004, was Bryan Wilson.

How could they?

Despite the fact that I was given a horrific teaching load, I was expected to conduct research and publish if I wanted to achieve tenure at the LSE – and I did. The debate that was dominating the sociology of religion scene at that time (1970) was over the secularization thesis. While it seemed obvious that aspects of secularization had clearly

gone hand-in-hand with the development of European society, I had been intrigued to learn that approximately half the US population still disavowed the theory of evolution and believed that the world was created pretty well as it is now within the past 10,000 years. I discovered that there were some “creationists” in Britain and decided to investigate. One thing led to another, and soon I found myself studying a wide range of fully accredited scientists who were proclaiming that science proved (or disproved) a wide range of beliefs about the Bible and God. I immersed myself in the writings of these scientists and visited the numerous movements to which they belonged. These ranged from strictly fundamentalist groups proclaiming the literal truth of Genesis, through new age groups pushing the boundaries of science to embrace such phenomena as psychokinesis, telepathy, and dousing, to Marxist groups whose members vehemently eschewed bourgeois science in favor of Science for the People.⁸

When I had been an actress I had not been as interested in playing “straight” roles as I was in taking on “character” parts. This was largely because I relished posing the question “How could they?”, the challenge being to try to understand how another human being could believe things and do things that I would be unlikely to believe and do myself. The scientists I was studying certainly presented me with such a challenge, but I was going to find myself facing even greater challenges as I entered “the cult scene.” This started with an invitation to talk at the Second International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences, which was to be held in London in 1974. My husband, who worked at the BBC, looked up the file on the man who was promoting the conference and discovered that the Reverend Sun Myung Moon was a Korean Messiah who had amassed a vast fortune, had been imprisoned more than once, was reputedly connected with the Korean CIA, and, it was alleged, brainwashed his followers. “You can’t go now!” said my husband. “I can’t *not* go now!” I replied.

The conference was almost disappointingly respectable. There were, however, these smiling young helpers who hovered around us, attending to our every need, and who Ninian Smart and I decided must be the brainwashed “moonbeams” – the term “Moonies” had not yet been coined for Unificationists. A few weeks later, Ninian and I were invited to the Unification London headquarters for a weekend round table on science and religion. Our curiosity having been ignited, we accepted. On their home ground, the members seemed far more “ordinary.” They no longer smilingly agreed with everything we said, and several of them were obviously intelligent and, apparently, in full command of their senses. This was even more intriguing. How could they have come to join the movement when, it seemed, they were expected to give up their university studies and sacrifice excellent career prospects in order to sell flowers and religious tracts for up to 18 hours a day, cut themselves off from family and friends, and marry someone who might not speak the same language but had been selected for them by this Korean Messiah? How could they? An obvious answer, and one that was vociferously promoted in increasingly lurid and sensational media reports, was that this was not their choice – they had been subjected to some sorts of irresistible and irreversible mind-control techniques.

During breaks in the round table discussions, I spent some time talking with a young Unificationist, whom I shall call Andrew. It turned out that he had gained an excellent history degree from Cambridge and was the son of a London University professor whom I knew slightly. Some weeks later, I learned that Andrew had been asking for me at the LSE. I immediately jumped to the conclusion that he might be wanting to escape from the movement and was seeking me out for help. I was wrong. When he eventually found me, he told me that a sociologist of religion, whose only information came from former members and the “anti-cult movement,” was going to deliver a paper on the Unification Church at an international conference. Was there, Andrew wanted to know, any way that I would be prepared to rebut this sociologist’s one-sided accusations?

I told him that the sociologist, who happened to be Jim Beckford, was a highly respected academic and that, as the Unification Church was so secretive, it was their fault rather than his that his material would be limited. At that point Andrew asked whether I would like to study the movement. He would approach the leadership and ask for permission for me to have access to the members. He didn’t know what my feelings were about his church, but he did know that I listened – and that, it seemed, he didn’t think any other outsider was prepared to do.

It took some time to reach an agreement to do research on my own terms, with independent funding and a complete list of the membership so that I could conduct interviews on a random sample basis.⁹ Before long it was evident that what I had originally thought would be an article was going to be a book, and then it became obvious that the entire monograph would address only what I had thought would be the first chapter – how people came to join the movement.

Individual choice and social determinism

By now it was becoming clear to me that this research directly addressed some of the more challenging theoretical and philosophical issues I have faced as a sociologist of religion – and as a citizen. The explanation that people joined the Unification Church only because they had been “brainwashed” had provided “deprogrammers” with an excuse to convince worried parents that they should pay tens of thousands of pounds in order to have their adult children captured and held against their will until they managed to escape or convince their captors that they had renounced their faith. Although there were undoubtedly gross exaggerations from many of the parties concerned, there was ample evidence that the deprogramming process was involving some very unpleasant procedures with, in some cases, tragic consequences, including both rape and suicide.¹⁰

Part of my undergraduate training had convinced me that value neutrality was an important requirement for any sociological study. Of course, it was never fully attainable, but it was a goal towards which we should strive, taking every precaution to ensure that we were gaining information about the object of our study rather than disseminating information about our own subjective values. At the same time, I had fully taken on board Weber’s distinction between value neutrality and value

relevance¹¹ so that, it seemed to me as a “concerned citizen,” if the Unification Church did indeed employ irresistible and irreversible recruitment techniques, these should be exposed and something done about it – but whatever was done should be done by accountable professionals with proper training, and not by some of those who were employing the dubious deprogramming techniques about which I was learning. If, on the other hand, Unificationists had, as they insisted, freely chosen to join and stay in the movement, then there were good arguments (not least those promoted by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights)¹² why they should be allowed to follow their new-found faith – so long, of course, as they were adults and did not transgress the laws of a democratic country.

Such considerations provided the “relevance” for the research. The “neutrality” meant that the research had to be designed and carried out so that anyone, whatever their personal opinion, would have to reach the same conclusions. Briefly, the fact that I found that 90 percent of those who went through the residential “brainwashing” experience decided *not* to join the movement, and that the majority of those who did join went on to leave it within two years, seriously questioned the proposition that the Unification Church possessed anything like efficient mind-control techniques, however much it may have wanted and/or tried to influence potential converts.¹³ Other variables, such as the individuals’ values, hopes, previous experiences, and expectations of life in non-Unification society also needed to be examined if we wanted an explanation of why people joined the movement. It seemed obvious to me that anyone with access to the statistics would have to agree that the influences exerted by Unificationists were neither irresistible nor irreversible – an opinion I was soon to learn to be somewhat naïve.

But for me there was something more wide-ranging underlying a study of Unification conversions. This involved the free will/determinism debate. Both actors and sociologists are faced with a recurrent exploration of the extent to which, under what circumstances and with what consequences, individuals are affected by and themselves affect the social situation. At one extreme, the social situation could pretty well determine the behavior of individuals; at another extreme, the individuals could themselves pretty well decide what it was that they would do. While I felt I had demonstrated that the social situation provided by the Unification Church did not exert the strong influence that was popularly assumed, this did not mean that it didn’t exert any influence; nor did it mean that other social situations might not exert well-nigh irresistible pressure on an individual. Indeed, through a series of in-depth interviews, I was later to study a convicted terrorist – a woman who, after joining a group with the expectation that by doing so she could help to make the world a better place, had become prepared to kill both herself and others. This research led me to the conclusion that it was a series of social variables that had had the effect of controlling her mind to what, it could be argued, was an *almost* irresistible and irreversible degree.¹⁴

It would, of course, be a mistake to assume that there is a straightforward dichotomy or even a lineal continuum between freedom and determinism. While studying members of closed communities, I have repeatedly been struck by how often they

have insisted that they now felt freer than they had before joining what may seem to others to be an authoritarian group severely restricting the freedom of its members. On the other hand, I have observed groups which proclaim that they embrace total freedom and that everyone can do just whatever they choose when, in fact, these “free souls” may be perceived to be quite severely constrained in a number of ways. These apparently paradoxical situations I have described as, respectively, “the freedom of the cage” and “the cage of freedom.”¹⁵

Indeed, one of the more fascinating aspects of sociology is the number of tensions and juxtapositions that it embraces.¹⁶ To begin with, the social constructionist approach involves seeing social reality as an ongoing process that is constantly changing, yet always relying on something that went before and, thereby, involving more or less continuity, though never total stability. Second, social reality is real in the sense that it exists independently of any particular individual’s volition; but, unlike most of the physical reality studied by the natural sciences, it (social reality) does not exist except insofar as it is recognized by one or more individuals at either a conscious or subconscious level. Third, every individual perceives any particular social reality in a unique way, depending on where they are standing or “coming from”; but at the same time, perceptions of social reality have to be more or less shared – were this not so, society would be well-nigh impossible.

Thus it is that a social phenomenon, such as a new religious movement, will be viewed in a different light by different people. Members of the movement will share certain perceptions that will differ more or less discernibly and systematically from those of non-members; and within the group, leaders’ perceptions will differ from those of rank-and-file members. If the social scientist hopes to present a rounded picture of a social phenomenon, it is necessary to try to understand it from as many different viewpoints as possible. In some cases these different perceptions will conflict with each other quite sharply. However, while one would expect different individuals and different groups with different interests to present different images of the new religions (or “cults” or “sects”), and while it is the task of the sociologist to describe these different images rather than to judge them, it did seem to me that when I came across descriptions that were demonstrably wrong, these ought to be denounced.

Making a difference

As a student, I had accepted as pretty well self-evident, that scientists should be careful not to contaminate their data, although it had to be recognised that just by asking questions or by living in a closed community of which one was not oneself a member, one was almost bound to affect the people one was studying. While there could be situations in which one observed without being observed, it was difficult to believe that this was always, or even usually, the best way to understand a movement that had unusual beliefs and practices. When I first started studying the Unification Church, I would try to place myself in a situation where I could watch and listen without drawing attention to myself – washing-up dishes provided one such

opportunity. After some time, however, I would interact more obviously with the members and it was then that I would make mistakes and be corrected, thereby having drawn to my attention things that I might otherwise not have noticed.¹⁷ A parallel could be drawn between someone learning a language from a textbook and then actually using it in the company of native speakers. A third stage in my participation was once I had felt I had mastered sufficient understanding of the movement to be able to ask questions without being fobbed off with evasions or accusations of not being able to understand.

But there was an important lesson I was to learn just when I was starting to congratulate myself that I was really beginning to understand the Unificationists and was finding that things I had first thought to be strange now seemed perfectly normal. My husband and I happened to meet a couple of members while we were on holiday. We chatted to them over coffee, then made our excuses and left. "They weren't that bad, were they?" I said to my husband, who had always expressed a deep suspicion of the movement. "They were all right," he said, "but you – you were really weird!"

I was completely taken by surprise. There is, of course, a sense in which we all behave differently in the company of different people. One does not behave as one does with fellow students in the company of an elderly maiden aunt, but I had not realized the extent to which I had "changed gear." My husband's reaction raised my awareness of how important it is for sociologists to recognize changes in their perception as the worldview of those they are studying grows more familiar. This is partly because the researcher's job, like that of the actor, includes the task of communicating to others for whom such worldviews are unfamiliar and/or incomprehensible. Allied to this, I was to learn that just merely reporting or reproducing the perceptions and/or behavior of Unificationists was not sufficient to enable others to understand them. I was also to learn that when I tried to "make sense" by too accurately reproducing the point of view of those I was studying, I was to find myself being accused of "being one of them."¹⁸ I eventually realized that it is sometimes necessary to "translate" in such a way that one is *not* reproducing the original behavior. An analogy that may be drawn from the theater is that the really brilliant actor portraying a bore will be riveting rather than boring as he portrays what it's like to be a bore far more convincingly than if he himself were giving a boring performance.

It was through trying to explain to non-members why Unificationists might believe and do the things they believed and did that I increasingly found myself "making a difference" in the "cult scene." I was mediating between Unificationists and relatives who had not spoken to each other for years; I appeared on radio and television programmes; I was called as a witness both for and against the Unification Church. At first, I had told myself that I would give the same answer (my truth) whichever side asked the question. Soon, however, I realized that it was different questions that elicited crucially different answers, and that one side was not going to ask the same questions as the other side would ask. But, whoever had called me as a witness, I was likely to be "making a difference." And of course, as I published my

findings, I was disseminating an image of the Unification Church (and the many other new religious movements I came to study) which often differed radically from the images that the movements promoted of themselves – or those disseminated by the media or the various “anti-cult groups” that had emerged in opposition to the movements.¹⁹

However, I reasoned that part of the *raison d'être* of any social scientist is to present his or her findings to a wider public. Indeed, it would be ridiculous *not* to want to present one's findings. One could even argue that the problem was not so much that one's findings were affecting the scene as that one's findings were *not* affecting the scene. And then, in the mid-1980s, I was to take a further step in my “making a difference” by becoming a fully fledged, proactive member of the “cult scene.”

I had been worried for some time about what seemed to me unnecessary suffering due to inappropriate actions being taken on the basis of ignorance or misinformation about the so-called cults. At the individual level, there was the trade in deprogramming; at the societal level, there was a “Waco” waiting to happen.²⁰ The tipping point came when I was attending a meeting of Britain's largest anti-cult group, FAIR,²¹ at which some former members were describing their experiences of their respective groups. The audience was becoming irritated because the speakers were denying that they had been brainwashed or even manipulated, claiming instead that they had believed their groups could offer them something, but then they had moved on to other things. The chairman tried to pour oil on troubled waters by asking the former members if there was anything they would like to say that would be helpful for relatives. At this point, a woman stood up and started shouting “we don't want to hear this! We don't want to hear this!” And, indeed, it was clear that the audience did not want to hear anything that might threaten their image of the movements.

Repairing to a nearby pub with the chairman and one of the former members, I declared that “something needed to be done.” My companions agreed, but, it seemed, if something were to be done, then it was I who ought to be doing the something. To cut short a long story,²² I founded Inform (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements), an educational charity with the aim of providing information that was as objective and up-to-date as possible about minority religions. My hope was that we could direct enquirers to some of the work that was being done by social scientists throughout the world. The British government and mainstream churches supported (and continue to support) the venture.

The “cult wars”

I hadn't expected everyone to applaud, but the response was overwhelming. Sections of the media exposed me as a “cult lover” and members of anti-cult groups wrote to their MPs, fed the media stories about me (almost all of which were either silly and/or untrue), and a petition was presented to 10 Downing Street. Some of this was pretty bruising, but there was a sense in which it was also rather invigorating. At Inform we never know who will be at the other end of the telephone. What might

at first seem an innocent enquiry has not infrequently turned out to be either a new religious movement or an anti-cultist trying to trick us into saying something that would discredit Inform. In a way, however, this may be seen as having a positive effect on our work as we have had to be careful that anything we say can be backed up and that neither "side" would be able to accuse us of not giving an objective and balanced account.

The so-called cult wars had been raging since the mid-1970s and, although they involved a variety of protagonists, one set of virulently opposing "sides" consisted of two types of "cult watchers" labeled by their respective opponents as "anti-cultists" (which included the deprogrammers) and "cult apologists" (which included academics). As I have already intimated, one of the reasons that I set up Inform was to combat the anti-cultists and their generalizing descriptions of all the cults as dangerous pseudo-religions involved in financial rackets and political intrigue, indulging in unnatural sexual practices, abusing their women and children, using irresistible and irreversible brainwashing techniques, frequently resorting to a variety of criminal activities, and likely to commit mass suicide. Partly as a reaction to the attacks that I underwent as a result of my work, I was building up a picture of "anti-cultists" that consisted of just as many sweeping generalizations as those of which we were accusing them. A few of the British anti-cultists had entered into dialog with me, but this was always on a one-to-one basis with the individual concerned explaining that they would get into trouble if their colleagues found out that they had any kind of association with me. The British anti-cult groups were, unequivocally, Inform's enemies.

However, ten years after Inform had opened, I came to the conclusion that if I really wanted to understand the cult scene, it was necessary for me to try to understand the anti-cultists, in much the same way as I was trying to understand the movements that they opposed. With some trepidation, I grasped the nettle and wrote to the Executive Director of the American Family Foundation (AFF),²³ requesting permission to attend their 1998 annual conference in Philadelphia. Somewhat to my surprise, I received a courteous response saying that I would be welcome. Still very nervous, I arrived at the conference hotel and almost immediately received a phone call asking me to go up to the Presidential suite for a drink with some of the AFF officers. It seemed that they were as curious about me as I was about them.

By no means all the other participants were as friendly. Several were openly hostile, and included attacks on sociologists in general and me in particular in their talks.²⁴ However, both the Executive Director and the President and several of the other participants made a point of being kind to me. Recognizing that they were asking "How can she?" just as curiously as I was asking "How can they?," I suggested that we should spend a day before their next annual conference with four of "them" and four of "us" discussing our different perspectives. This was agreed and resulted in my learning a great deal. We certainly didn't reach agreement on all, or possibly even most, of the subjects we raised; but we had an interesting and informative day exploring a number of controversial issues. Just one of the realizations with which I came away was that they were primarily concerned with asking the question "What

harm do the cults do?” while we were more interested in the question “What do new religious movements believe and do?” There was certainly some overlap here, but just recognizing how we were coming from somewhat different directions helped both sides to understand, and even respect, some of what it was that at least some members of “the other side” were doing.

Since that time, I have had numerous contacts with “anti-cult groups,” not only in America, but also in various European and Asian countries. Perhaps the two most important lessons I have learnt are, first, that, as with new religious movements, one cannot generalize about these “cult-watching groups”; and, next, like new religious movements, they can change quite radically over time. However, the British groups continue to attack me, with the current Chairman of FAIR complaining in the European Parliament and various other places about the British government’s using Inform as “its principal source of advice,” which, he says, is responsible for “the total lack of official action to restrict or discourage the activity of cults, or to warn students and others of the dangers of becoming involved”²⁵ – an accusation I tend to find more flattering than plausible.

Whose side are you on?²⁶

I am often asked by students how I manage to gain access to new religions, but in fact this is a problem I have encountered remarkably seldom. Interestingly enough, it has often been the most vilified that are the most prepared, if not eager, to tell someone their side of the story. Of course, they may not tell you the truth – they, like everyone else, are certainly unlikely to tell you the whole truth. However, listening to former members and various other informants can help one to build up a fuller picture. This can, however, give rise to some serious methodological misgivings.

In a keynote talk given at an ICSA conference, Steven Mutch²⁷ cited with approval my statement that “it is important to understand the movements from a variety of perspectives, which, themselves, need to be understood as part of the ongoing process of the situation.” However, he then went on to declare that it is “difficult for any individual scholar to attempt successfully to gain access to a controversial NRM and at the same time study the accounts of leavers.” This, he argued, is because a researcher who has engaged with either party cannot expect to have any “street credibility” with the other. What is needed is a methodological division of labor, or what Mutch calls a triangulated approach, with different individuals or groups having to choose to specialize in *either* “leaver research” or “invited-access research,” and then a third party (such as the ICSA) “combining the two approaches.”

Mutch has a point – to be labeled as either a cult apologist or a cult critic can make access to “the other side” difficult. But while it can be difficult, it is certainly not impossible. And, whenever it is possible, it is, I believe, desirable.

Quite apart from the fact that one cannot simply add up two extreme images of a social phenomenon to get the “real” picture,²⁸ to accept Mutch’s dichotomous

perspective of there being only two sides is to accept “their” perspective. There are now many people whom I first met when they were members of a movement who have long since left, yet have kept in touch with me over the years. Although some leavers are undoubtedly antagonistic towards their erstwhile movement, by no means all leavers are; many now maintain perfectly amicable relations with those who remain in the movement. Furthermore, even when there is antagonism between leavers and current members, it does not follow that researchers are necessarily denied access to one side because they have researched the other. My own work over the past few decades provides plenty of empirical refutations that such must necessarily be the case.

Right from the beginning of my research into the Unification Church I made it clear that I intended to speak to former members and others who were opposed to the movement. This seemed to be accepted without much question. But it has not only been Unificationists who have accepted that my research involves interactions with opposing sides. The Exclusive Brethren, whose reading of the Bible supports their Doctrine of Separation, which involves their cutting themselves off from the rest of society as far as is possible, have invited me into their schools and homes (although I always have to eat in a separate room).²⁹ Not only are they well aware that I have interviewed several former Brethren who have been “put out” or “withdrawn from” since their departure from the movement, the Brethren have arranged for me to talk to the relatives of some of these former members (with whom they themselves will have no dealings).

The Family International, formerly known as the Children of God, which I have studied in considerable depth (interviewing members at length and staying in several of their Homes around the world), is another movement that has always been well aware of my contacts with former members (including those who are active in “anti-cult” groups). Among the occasions when my contact with “both sides” was abundantly clear, was one when I arranged for a mother, who had left the movement in its early days, to spend a day in my kitchen with her daughter, who was still in the movement and with whom she had had no contact whatsoever for 14 years.

To take just one further illustration out of the numerous examples from which I could draw,³⁰ I have been a participant observer at Falun Gong gatherings and interviewed several of its practitioners at length, including those who have been granted asylum in the West after having been detained for “re-education” by the People’s Republic of China, where the movement is consistently referred to as an “evil cult” (*xiejiao*); and I have stayed on the campus of the Chinese People’s Public Security University in Beijing, where, on three separate occasions, I have given ten-day-long courses on social science methodology to police cadets and staff. I have also interviewed former practitioners who are now responsible for “re-educating” practitioners in China, as well as a number of government officials and representatives of the official Chinese Anti-Cult Association. Again, both the practitioners and their opponents knew I had contact with the “other side” yet seemed eager to respond to questions that explicitly drew on allegations I had heard from their opponents.³¹

There are, of course, people on “both sides” who refuse to have anything to do with me or Inform – but many of these people refuse to have contact with *any*

outsider. For this reason it is sometimes assumed that covert research is more productive than overt research, and there are some cases in which this can be persuasively argued.³² However, quite apart from ethical and psychological issues, my experience has led me to believe that in most cases it would be not only unnecessary but also likely to be methodologically counter-productive to go undercover and pretend to join. Once accepted in the researcher role, one is granted permission to question in ways that would be unthinkable for a covert researcher – female members are frequently separated or discouraged from interacting with male members, and rank-and-file members might have little opportunity to question or even observe those in leadership positions.

Another “methodological risk,” one that I have already mentioned and have frequently been warned about is inherent in living with a religious community (or a tribe or any group that one wishes to study), is that of “going native.” One could, however, argue that by associating with a large variety of people holding opposing perspectives one is less likely to “go native” than if one immerses oneself exclusively within what Mary Douglas would term “a strong group control” situation.³³ Be that as it may, neither I nor any of the Inform staff have ever felt the slightest inclination to join any of the scores of movements we have studied.

Concluding remarks

Both as an actress and as a sociologist of religion I have enjoyed a rich and interesting life. I have met literally thousands of people who see and understand things in ways that frequently conflict quite fundamentally with the ways I see and understand things. With a growing awareness of the wisdom embodied in Kipling’s aphorism “What do they know of England, who only England know?”,³⁴ I have traveled throughout the world and encountered numerous different cultures that have confronted my taken-for-granted assumptions of what is the “natural” way of behaving.³⁵ Of course, not all my experiences have been ones that I am eager to repeat. I wasn’t entirely enamored with cleaning Moonie loos – but somebody had to do it and I was there. More seriously, we underwent a very uncomfortable period at Inform when the Crown Prosecution Service demanded we should reveal information that had been given to us in confidence. Determined to resist this, we went to court where, fortunately, the judge decided in our favor. But this was after we had had to pay over £20,000 in lawyers’ fees.³⁶

But no one has ever suggested that the sociology of religion is an easy option – well, no one who has any idea of what may be involved. Anyone who has an idea of what is involved must surely consider that it can be one of the most challenging of occupations – and one of the most interesting – and one of the most fun.

Notes

1 Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1937).

2 The “gods” is a term referring to the seats furthest from the stage in the highest balcony or circle in a theater.

- 3 Eileen Barker, "Brahmins Don't Eat Mushrooms: Participant Observation and the New Religions," *LSE Quarterly* June (1987):127–152.
- 4 I had, however, appeared in plays which relied quite heavily on improvisation, particularly when I was working with the Theatre Workshop at Stratford East.
- 5 Eileen Barker, "You Don't Get Marxists in Fundamentalists' Boots: A Comparative Exploration of Self as Implicit Religion," in *LSE on Social Science*, ed. Helen Sasson and Derek Diamond (London: LSE Books, 1996).
- 6 I can become absorbed in the intricacies and twists and turns of philosophy, and since childhood I have enjoyed mathematical and logical puzzles, such as Martin Garner's "Mathematical Games" column in *Scientific American*; one of the more treasured compliments that I have been paid was by a PhD student inscribing his book with the claim that I had taught him how, but not what, to think. But while I certainly consider clear, imaginative and open thinking to be necessary tools in the sociological endeavor, these are only tools and, taken by themselves, cannot help us in our journey of discovery as to what is actually (as opposed to potentially) going on "out there" in the "real world."
- 7 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: Everything that Passes for Knowledge in Society* (London: Allen Lane, 1967). While still a student, I met the psychologist Richard Gregory, which resulted in my becoming, and remaining, interested in, his and various cognitive neurologists' constructionist approach to perception. Richard L. Gregory, *Seeing Through Illusions: Making Sense of the Senses* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Eileen Barker, "The Objective Study of the Subjective or the Subjective Study of the Objective? Notes on the Social Scientific Study of Religious Experience and the Social Construction of Reality," in *The Comparative Study of Religious Experience in Taiwan*, ed. Yen-zen Tsai (Taipei: National Chengchi University, Taiwan, 2012).
- 8 Eileen Barker, "Thus Spake the Scientist: A Comparative Account of the New Priesthood and its Organisational Bases," *The Annual Review of the Social Sciences of Religion* 3 (1979): 79–103.
- 9 Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Brainwashing or Choice?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).
- 10 Ted Patrick and Tom Dulack, *Let Our Children Go* (New York: Ballantine, 1976); David G. Bromley and James T. Richardson (eds), *The Brainwashing/Deprogramming Controversy: Sociological, Psychological, Legal and Historical Perspectives* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983); Eileen Barker, *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (London: HMSO, 1989), Appendix III. It should be noted that by no means all deprogrammers demanded large sums or were responsible for physical violence. Nonetheless, they were involved in illegal kidnappings. It should also be noted that the practice is practically never carried out in the West nowadays, although it continues in Japan and some other countries. Willy Fautré (ed.), *Japan: Abduction and Deprivation of Freedom for the Purpose of Religious De-conversion* (Brussels: Human Rights Without Frontiers International, 2011) [<http://www.hrwf.net/Joom/images/reports/2011/1231%20report%20final.pdf>] (accessed May 3, 2012).
- 11 Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Free Press, 1949).
- 12 Article 18: Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.
- 13 I have, furthermore, since discovered that the vast majority of the first cohort of second-generation members have left the movement.
- 14 Eileen Barker, "In God's Name: Practising Unconditional Love to the Death," in *Dying for Faith: Religiously Motivated Violence in the Contemporary World*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed and Marat Shterin (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 49–58.
- 15 Eileen Barker, "The Cage of Freedom and the Freedom of the Cage," in *LSE on Freedom*, ed. Eileen Barker (London: LSE Books, 1995a), 103–118.
- 16 Eileen Barker, "The Scientific Study of Religion? You Must be Joking!," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34(3) (1995b): 287–310; also pp. 7–25 in *Cults and New Religions*

- Movements. A Reader*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson (London: Blackwell, 2003) [<http://zjshkx.com/Upload/Article/2008-1/Barkerpaper1995.pdf>] (accessed May 3, 2012).
- 17 Barker, "Brahmins Don't Eat Mushrooms."
 - 18 I have been accused of being not only a "Moonie," but also a Krishna devotee, a Scientologist, a creationist, and an anti-cultist – all of which imputations would have elicited ridicule from the "genuine articles."
 - 19 Eileen Barker, "Watching for Violence: A Comparative Analysis of the Roles of Five Cult-watching Groups," in *Cults, Religion and Violence*, ed. David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 123–148.
 - 20 Stuart Wright (ed.), *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
 - 21 Founded in the UK in 1976 as Family Action Information & Rescue, FAIR changed its name in 1994 to Family Action Information & Resource when deprogramming, which several of its members had advocated and taken part in, had become seriously questioned. Then, in 2007, it changed its name again to The Family Survival Trust.
 - 22 Eileen Barker, "INFORM: Bringing the Sociology of Religion to the Public Space," in *Frontier Religions in Public Space*, ed. Pauline Côté (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001), 21–34; Eileen Barker, "Misconceptions of the Religious 'Other': The Importance for Human Rights of Objective and Balanced Knowledge," *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 1(1) (2010): 5–25.
 - 23 The AFF changed its name to the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) in 2004.
 - 24 A renowned diva of the anti-cult world deliberately turned her back on me in an otherwise empty elevator when I wished her a good morning, while a well-known deprogrammer actually spat at me!
 - 25 Tom Sackville, "Why Cults are Bad," *The Spectator*, May 29, 2004.
 - 26 This was a question addressed to me by a Scientologist lobbying outside an ICSA conference I attended.
 - 27 Stephen Bruce Mutch, "Cultism, Terrorism, and Homeland Security," *Cultic Studies Review* 5(2) (2006): 169–197. Dr. Mutch, a lawyer of the Supreme Court of New South Wales and an Honorary Associate at Macquarie University, is an active patron of the Australian Cult Information and Family Support Inc., founded in 1996 by "parents and family members of loved ones caught up in abusive groups."
 - 28 This is the "fairness" that the media frequently claim to achieve by inviting two extreme antagonists to present their respective "truths," assuming that the truth lies "somewhere in the middle" when it may do nothing of the kind. It might again be argued that the law also assumes that there are just two opposing sides, but it assumes that the truth lies with only one of these.
 - 29 "Be not diversely yoked with unbelievers; for what participation [is there] between righteousness and lawlessness?" (II Corinthians 6:14); "But now I have written to you, if any one called brother be fornicator, or avaricious, or idolater, or abusive, or a drunkard, or rapacious, not to mix with [him]; with such a one not even to eat" (I Corinthians 5:11, trans. J.N. Darby).
 - 30 Eileen Barker, "Stepping out of the Ivory Tower: A Sociological Engagement in 'The Cult Wars,'" *Methodological Innovations Online* 6(1) (2011a):18–39 [<http://www.pbs.plym.ac.uk/mi/viewissue.html>] (accessed May 3, 2012).
 - 31 Eileen Barker, "A Sociological Approach to Cultic Studies," in *International Forum on Cultic Studies (Shenzhen 9–11 January 2009) The Harms and Social Administration of Destructive Cults*, ed. CASS (Shenzhen: Centre for the Study of Destructive Cults, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2009b), 113–133.
 - 32 Laud Humphreys, *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* (London: Transaction, 1975); Matthew A. Lauder, "Covert Participant Observation of a Deviant Community: Justifying the Use of Deception," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 18(2) (2003): 185–196.

- 33 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966); Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1970).
- 34 Rudyard Kipling, "The English Flag," *The National Observer*, April 4, 1891.
- 35 Eileen Barker, "But Who's Going to Win? National and Minority Religions in Post-Communist Society," in *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irena Borowik and Grzegorz Babinski (Kraków: Nomos, 1997), 25–62; Eileen Barker, "Religion in China: Some Introductory Notes for the Intrepid Western Scholar," in *Social Scientific Studies of Religion in China: Methodology, Theories, and Findings*, ed. Fenggang Yang and Graeme Lang (Leiden, and Boston, MA: Brill, 2011b), 109–132.
- 36 The case involved a guru who was eventually charged with rape, partly because Inform had persuaded some of his many victims who had spoken to us to go to the police, a fact that stood us in good stead when, fortunately for us, the judge also ruled that the Crown Prosecution Service should pay our costs. In the event, the CPS refunded only part of the fees we had had to pay. Then, to our considerable relief, the government made up the difference, agreeing with us that we would be unlikely to obtain important information in the future if our informants thought that we would readily hand over confidences without their permission.