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**What Should We Do About the Cults?
Policies, Information and the Perspective of Inform**

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Contribution to

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History is full of instances in which citizens with a vested interest in preserving the status quo have greeted anything new with suspicion and distrust. This is certainly true so far as new religious movements (NRMs) are concerned. Once alternatives to traditional beliefs and practices emerge, it is not long before the cry goes up insisting that something ought to be done about the ‘cult’ or ‘sect’ that is threatening not only innocent individuals but also the very fabric of society. The Old Testament is full of instances testifying to this; the early Christians were thrown to the lions; the Cathars were burned at the stake; the early days of Islam were hardly conducive to friendly interfaith dialogue; there were the splits between the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Church of Rome; then there was the Reformation, followed by numerous schisms within the Protestant tradition. Early Protestant ‘cult-watching groups’ (CWGs) attacked both the “whore of Babylon” (Hislop, 1916) and heresies such as the Amish, Doukabours, Anabaptists and Methodists. In the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century vigilante groups exposed what they considered to be not only the mistaken theology of groups such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventists and Christadelphians, but also the wicked practices allegedly carried out by Roman Catholic and non-Trinitarian religions – the depraved sexual exploits of nuns and priests, and the polygamous marriages and child abuse of the Mormons being among the more widely publicised evils (Jenkins, 2000). Other faiths have also rejected alternative understandings of their beliefs and practices: Orthodox Jews deny that Reform Jews are really Jewish; Sunnis and Shi’a Muslims have attacked (and still attack) the Ahmadiyya and Baha’i; mainstream Buddhists have rejected Nichiren sects; and so the story continues – and will, no doubt continue as long as there are those who claim to know (or deny) an Ultimate Truth.

The present wave of new religions in the West started to become visible to the general public towards the end of the 1960s, although several had been around for at least a decade (some much longer). By the 1970s, and particularly after the Jonestown tragedy in 1978, there was an increasing number of demands made to local, national or international authorities to do something about the movements. Among the most vociferous voices to be heard were those of a number of CWGs, some of which began to take matters into their own hands, illegally kidnapping members of NRMs in order to forcibly ‘deprogramme’ them. This paper discusses some of the different approaches of the CWGs as they have tried to influence policy, largely by presenting their own images of NRMs. In particular, it focuses on the thinking behind one such group, Inform,¹ and its position in the so-called ‘cult scene’.

I. What should be done?

Opinions about what exactly needs to be done about NRMs vary according to time, place and individuals. For some, the movements and their members should be obliterated altogether; they should be outlawed or “liquidated” (which frequently results in the members going underground, risking imprisonment or even death). A second position is that NRMs should be

¹ Information Network Focus on Religious Movements, www.inform.ac; www.cults-sects-nrms.info;
<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/inform/>

subject to special laws that restrict their practices (not allowing them to become legal entities so they are unable to assemble for religious ceremonies; forbidding their participation in certain jobs or political parties; or denying them the right to proselytise by speaking of their beliefs or distributing their literature).

Yet another position (generally held by the governments of North America, Britain, the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries – and Inform) is that members of new religions should be treated in just the same way as all other citizens in a democratic country.² If the movements or their members break the law they should be tried and punished like any other criminal. If they live within the law, they should not be subjected to special treatment because of their beliefs any more than Methodists or Catholics in contemporary Western society are subject to special regulation purely because of their beliefs. When the Manson Family or Aum Shinrikyo murdered innocent members of the public, it was because of the murders, not because of Manson's or Asahara's religious beliefs, that the law needed to be brought to bear. Those of this opinion accept that new laws or regulations might have to be introduced because of some hitherto unregulated practices undertaken by the NRMs, but this is with the proviso that the new law would apply equally to all citizens, be they members of a new religion, an old religion or no religion. They will also agree that, while not actually falling foul of the law, various groups, including NRMs, indulge in anti-social behaviour. They may, consequently, be of the opinion that the general public should have access to reliable information about the movements not only so that allegedly criminal behaviour can be investigated, but also so that individuals and other groups can reach their own decisions as to how they want to respond to the movements – whether, for example, they would like to join a particular movement, or to engage in interfaith dialogue with it or to rent it a room. Such information could either alert or reassure, depending on different movements, different aspects of a particular movement, and on the values and opinions of those obtaining the information. A mother might, for example, be worried to learn that the NRM her daughter has joined follows a strict vegetarian diet, but is reassured to learn that it promotes celibacy. The girl's father might be unconcerned about the diet, but, hoping to have a grandchild, be upset about the practice of celibacy. Another parent is anxious that her son will not achieve eternal salvation as he has rejected the Christian faith in which he was raised, yet she could be highly relieved that he has stopped taking dangerous drugs.

It is not only relatives who want to gain information about NRMs. There are religious or spiritual seekers, eager to find a movement that will answer questions for which they have been unable to obtain answers from traditional religions. There are evangelical Christians wanting to know about theological deviations. There are social workers, clergy, medical practitioners, counsellors, therapists, lawyers and/or teachers, whose clients, parishioners, patients or students are (or could become) associated with an NRM. Police and lawyers will be concerned about criminal or deviant behaviour; those responsible for national security will want to know about a movement's capacity to carry out terrorist attacks; those responsible for social security issues and mental health practitioners may want to know about hygiene, diet, child labour and various other practices. These and further questions will also be of interest to reporters, writers, scholars, human rights activists and various others who will themselves become suppliers of information to a wider public. And there are persons involved in policy decisions, either as legislators or as administrators or law-enforcement agents charged with the

² A slight qualification needs to be made insofar as some of these European countries have an Established religion, but the difference this makes to how the law is applied to 'ordinary citizens' is of little relevance so far as the issues under review here are concerned.

practical application of the law, who are also eager to obtain information about the movements.

While most of these people will claim that they want to hear the truth about the NRM(s) in which they are interested, several are in fact looking for an evaluative judgement. Some may want to be reassured that a particular religion is ‘good’; others may want to hear that NRMs are all evil or that they have some sort of supernatural powers that force people to join them. Some may want to hear that a charismatic leader has received revelations from God – others that s/he is a fraudulent confidence trickster who disseminates false prophecy. And there is no doubt that people who are looking for such judgements can find amongst the cult-watching groups those that specialise in the provision of negative information and others, including the movements themselves, which produce only positive images.

The vast majority of people who acquire information about NRMs are, however, unlikely to have been actively shopping for any information at all. Their knowledge of the movements will have been gained almost by accident, in a haphazard fashion, through reports in the mass media, or possibly second or third-hand accounts through their personal networks, or, occasionally, a chance encounter with a proselytising member in a public place. Numerous studies indicate, firstly, that the most influential sources of information about NRMs are the media, and, secondly, that the majority of that information is of a negative nature (Bromley and Breschel, 1992; Beckford, 1999; Richardson, 1996; Wright, 1997). This is not surprising when one considers that the media have an interest in attracting and keeping readers, viewers, and listeners, most of whom are likely to be attracted by novel, ‘sexy’, sensational or horror stories. Bad news tends to be good news for the media, *Heartbroken mother loses child to evil cult* is a more compelling headline than *Young man converts to new religion*. Since the media have expanded to include the Internet, where accountability is almost entirely absent, an ever-increasing supply of fallacious rubbish is to be found (Hadden and Cowan, 2000; Dawson and Cowan, 2004; Højsgaard and Warburg, 2005).

It is difficult to assess precisely how much influence the media have on ‘inadvertent consumers’, but there is little doubt that it is considerable and that this can result in widespread support for demands by more active participants to ‘do something about the cults’. In a survey on Religious and Moral Pluralism (RAMP) conducted in eleven European countries, a fifth of the respondents disagreed that Jehovah’s Witnesses should be allowed to practice, even if they kept within the law. When asked about Scientologists, the proportion doubled (39% thought they should not be allowed; 17% were non-committal; and 45% said they should be allowed to practice). There was, however, considerable variation between the countries, Hungarians being most likely and the Dutch least likely to want to ban both movements. Only a third (35%) of British respondents disagreed that “Anyone joining a cult or new religious movement is likely to be generally worse off as a result” (40% agreed, 25% were non-committal).³

Turning to the United States, Bromley and Breschel’s (1992) analysis of a national survey indicated that a significant proportion of the sample thought that ‘something ought to be done’ about NRMs. ‘Elite respondents’, who might be expected to be involved in policy making and implementation, were more liberal than the sample as a whole, but still many of their number considered more control was needed. When asked whether “It should be against the law for unusual religious cults to try to convert teenagers”, 73% of the general sample and 37% of the elite sample agreed; 63% of the sample (26% of the elite) thought “the FBI should keep a close watch on religious cults”; 62% (39% elites) believed “there should be laws to prevent

³ This was one of the statements I added to the British version of the RAMP questionnaire, so no information is available for the other countries. For further information about the Project, see Allevi 2001; Barker, 2004b.

groups like Hare Krishna from asking people for money at airports”; and 30% (10% elites) agreed that “Followers of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon should not be allowed to print a daily newspaper in Washington D.C.”⁴

Media images of NRMs are not necessarily those that are most useful for policy makers. In any market economy there tends to be a dynamic relationship between producers and consumers. In a competitive situation one can find that supply is frequently oriented towards consumer demand, the product being in part fashioned to meet the actual or assumed wants of the consumer. However, there are suppliers (including sections of the media) who believe in the importance of their product and who will try to convert others to recognising its intrinsic value. In other words, suppliers of information may well have an agenda that leads them (a) to adjust their product to meet a perceived demand, and/or (b) to adjust the demand itself.

II. Types of Cult-watching groups (CWGs)

It would be difficult to exaggerate the variety to be found among the CWGs that have emerged over the past three decades to both create and meet demands for information about NRMs. It is, however, possible to recognise certain systematic differences that are related to the basic policy issues with which a CWG is concerned and to relate these to the information that the group supplies about NRMs. Elsewhere I have constructed a model of the major types of CWGs and discussed several of their characteristics (Barker, 2002). In what follows I shall briefly introduce four types and discuss a fifth in more detail.

First however, it should be recognised that had other initial criteria been employed for defining the types, different models would have resulted. For example, starting from a question about origins or funding might have made relatives, mainstream religions, governmental agencies, the media, and/or academia into the key criteria. These groupings are not, however, internally consistent in the information they supply, nor are they systematically distinguishable from each other – for example, some traditional religions are vehemently opposed to NRMs and produce information that contains only negative aspects (some Orthodox churches fall into this category); other traditional religions (or sometimes the same traditions at other times and places) supply balanced pictures of the religions, indicating similarities as well as differences in their respective belief systems (British Methodists provide a case in point). A similar diversity can be found between governments: Reports commissioned by the Swedish (1998), French (1995) and German (1998) governments differ radically from each other in their descriptions and prescriptions about “what needs to be done” (Richardson and Introvigne, 2001). Gordon Melton has noticed that in the United States the mainstream churches are responsible both for promoting counter-cult literature *and* for preventing the introduction of anti-cult legislation.⁵

A. Cult-awareness groups (CAGs), which are sometimes referred to by themselves and others as comprising the anti-cult movement (Shupe and Bromley, 1980), are perhaps the largest and the most visible type of information centres. These groups are basically concerned about the harm caused by NRMs or, as they often prefer to call them, destructive cults. They are, therefore, primarily interested in the bad actions performed by the movements, while ‘good’ or neutral behaviour is of little or no interest. Their descriptions tend, therefore, to present a very negative image of the movements. While they often originated in response to the anxieties of parents of new converts to NRMs, and continue to offer help to relatives and former members at an individual level, CAGs are also likely to campaign for changes in public

⁴ The *Washington Times* is owned by an organisation associated with the Unification Church.

⁵ Private correspondence, September 2004.

policy which range from warning potential converts of the dangerous characteristics of the movements, to regulating their practices or outlawing them altogether.

Melton has estimated that in the United States alone there are over 400 groups opposed to NRMs.⁶ Among the earliest of these was FREECOG (the Parents' Committee to Free Our Sons and Daughters from the Children of God) and the Citizens' Freedom Foundation, precursors of the Cult Awareness Network (CAN). The latter was to become bankrupt in the mid-1990s when it was unable to pay a million dollar fine after being found guilty of "conspiring to deprive [the member of a small Christian group] of his civil rights of freedom" through its role in an involuntary deprogramming.⁷ This led to the establishment of the 'new CAN', an organisation closely associated with the Church of Scientology and one that, not surprisingly, provides information of a very different nature from that disseminated by the old CAN. CAGs also appeared in most European countries from the 1970s, notably in France, Denmark, England and Spain, some of these later forming a network of like-minded organisations, FECRIS (the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sectarianism), which was inaugurated in Paris in 1994 and granted consultative status with the Council of Europe in 2005.⁸

B. Counter-cult groups (CCGs) share with the CAGs a negative attitude towards NRMs, but they are primarily worried about what they deem to be the theological errors of the movements. For them the danger lies not so much in bad actions as in wrong beliefs. Their descriptions of NRMs focus on what (according to their own beliefs) are heresies, and they tend to ignore those aspects of belief that they share with the movements, even (perhaps especially) when it might seem to the outside observer that the similarities far outweigh the differences. One example of an American counter-cult group is the Protestant evangelical Watchman Fellowship, which describes itself as a "Ministry of Christian discernment, focussing on cults and religious movements", among which older sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons feature prominently alongside the Church of Scientology, the Unification Church and the New Age.⁹

There are still places in which official policy imposes severe sanctions for heresy. In countries like Iran, Sudan and Saudi Arabia the death sentence for apostasy from Islam is part of the law. In Moscow, where the Jehovah's Witnesses have been "liquidated", the court called expert witnesses to show that the Witnesses do not espouse a 'correct' interpretation of the Bible (Belyanin et al, 2000). It is, however, unusual in contemporary Western society to find policy makers turning to CCGs for their brand of information. Those who are interested in counter-cult descriptions are likely to be fellow travellers who share their beliefs.

C. Human Rights groups (HRGs) may point to ways in which an NRM could threaten the rights of its members or others, but it is more common for them to publicise information about abuses to which minority religions have been subjected by the rest of society. Some HRGs, such as the Belgian-based Human Rights without Frontiers,¹⁰ operate largely through the Internet; the Norwegian-based Forum 18 and the British

⁶ Private correspondence, September 2004.

⁷ *Jason Scott Plaintiff v. Rick Ross, Mark Workman, Charles Simpson and Cult Awareness Network Defendants*, US District Court, Western District of Washington at Seattle, C94-0079C, 29 September 1995.

⁸ <http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/AdoptedText/TA05/EREC1697.htm>;
<http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc05/EDOC10652.htm> "European Federation of Research and Information Centres of Sectarianism (FECRIS): request for consultative status with the Council of Europe", *Recommendation 1697 (2005)*, Doc. 10652, 16 July 2005, adopted at the 935th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies (13 July 2005).

⁹ <http://www.watchman.org/>

¹⁰ <http://www.hrwf.net>

Keston Institute, both monitor freedom of religion in communist and post-communist countries.¹¹

Other organisations, such as Amnesty International and the OSCE have a wider scope, but include minority religions in their remit. Clearly HRGs are of relevance to the public management of religious diversity, as it is the implementation of policy or lack of adequate safeguards to protect movements from human rights violations that are of concern here, but they tend not to produce information about what the movements are like so much as what might be done to them.

D. Cult-defensive groups (CDGs) provide positive information about NRMs and negative information about the movements' opponents. Mention has already been made of the New CAN,¹² and, indeed, most of these groups are either run by or given considerable support by the movements, although, as was the case with the Association for World Academics for Religious Education (AWARE), scholars may be encouraged to conduct scholarly research in the expectation that this will be at least less negative than the statements disseminated by the media or CAGs. CAP (Coordination des Associations & Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience), which is associated but not confined to the Church of Scientology, has run a strong campaign on its website against FECRIS.¹³ Despite the abundance of information that CDGs might offer, however, they tend to be treated with suspicion by potential customers, including policy makers, who are likely to believe, and almost certainly will have been told by the movements' opponents, that the information is no more than a whitewash. Indeed, several of the anti-cultists will apply the label 'cult apologist' to any individuals or groups that do not condemn the new religions outright, regardless of the truth or falsity of the information.

E. Research-oriented groups (ROGs) have in common a desire to produce reliable and balanced information about what the NRMs do and believe, and they share a belief that the scientific method should be employed in the collection and analysis of data. There is one ROG, Inform, about which I shall elaborate in some detail, partly because it was set up with the express intention of being a resource that would supply information which is as objective as possible, drawing on the methods of the social sciences, and partly because, as its founder and Chair, I have first-hand knowledge of its history and present functioning. Before this, however, I would like, firstly, to point to the variety to be found amongst ROGs, and, secondly, to indicate briefly something of the rationale behind the methods of the social sciences and how an appreciation of these can contribute to the construction and implementation of policy decisions.

III. Variety of Research-Oriented Groups

Perhaps one of the most important distinctions within the ROG category concerns the amount of active involvement the group has in the public dissemination of information. To take one example, the Danish RENNER (Research Network on New Religions) is a university-based network of researchers which states explicitly that it is not an information centre: "We do not maintain archives, data bases or libraries. We are not a hotline for distraught parents or persecuted representatives of new religions. We do not serve as consultants for local and national authorities nor do we take part in debates in the mass media".¹⁴ Individual RENNER scholars do, however, sit on a committee that makes recommendations to the government concerning whether or not a particular movement can conduct its own marriage ceremonies.

¹¹ <http://www.forum18.org/>; <http://www.keston.org/>

¹² <http://www.cultawarenessnetwork.org/>

¹³ <http://www.coordiap.com/gb.htm>

¹⁴ <http://www.teo.au.dk/html/renner/RENNER.htm>

Furthermore, the information produced by its members and available through conferences and, especially, publications, is generally of a high standard and drawn on by ROGs with more contact with the non-academic world. At the other end of the continuum, the Lithuanian New Religions Research and Information Center (NRTIC) has as its primary objective “the provision of objective information about NRMs in order to enable people to act responsibly; decreasing social tensions that arise as a result of the activities of NRMs”.¹⁵

The original aim of the Italian CESNUR (Centre for Studies on New Religions) was to create a professional association for Western scholars specialising in NRMs. However it became increasingly proactive in disseminating information, and now, as well as organising international conferences, it has a resource centre open to the public, and CESNUR’s Director, Massimo Introvigne, has been responsible for the publication of a series of small books on various NRMs in Italian, although several have been translated into English. Most conspicuously in the public domain, CESNUR’s website provides a mass of material concerning NRMs and the political controversies to which their presence gives rise.¹⁶ Another website that provides invaluable information about NRMs is that created by the late Jeffrey Hadden, which is now being updated by a team of scholars under the general editorship of Tim Miller and Douglas Cowan.¹⁷ The oldest and largest of the research facilities providing information about NRMs is ISAR (the Institute for the Study of American Religion), which is housed at the Davidson Library of the University of California, Santa Barbara. It comprises over 50,000 volumes and several dozen filing cabinets of pamphlets, news clippings and other ephemera, which have provided many of the basic ingredients for a vast number of encyclopaedias and other books authored and edited by the Institute’s Director, Dr J. Gordon Melton.¹⁸

IV. The social scientific study of NRMs

Scholars of religion are interested in who believes what under which circumstances and with what consequences. They are interested in the variety of answers that different movements give to questions of ultimate concern, such as “Is there a purpose or meaning to life?” “What happens after death?” “Is there a God?”¹⁹ But, unlike theologians, they do not attempt to pass judgement on the answers. The scholar may want to place the beliefs within a particular tradition or traditions, noting how they differ from other streams, and asking what the likely consequences are of these differences. They will want to find out about variations in the beliefs and practices of individual members and how these differ from the official doctrines. They will examine the movements’ rituals, the sorts of food the members eat, the clothes they wear, where they live, how they organise themselves, what sorts of leadership and authority structures they have, and how negotiable these are. Questions will also be asked about attitudes and behaviour towards women, children, education, money, and the outside world – and many other details too numerous to mention here.²⁰ And, importantly, social scientists do

¹⁵ NRTIC leaflet.

¹⁶ www.cesnur.org

¹⁷ www.religiousmovements.org

¹⁸ See, for example, the *Encyclopedia of American Religion* (6th edition, 2000); the *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* (5th edition, 2000); the *Encyclopedia of African American Religion* (1993); the *New Age Encyclopedia* (1990); the *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America* (2nd edition 1994); and the *Encyclopedia of the World's Religions: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices* (4 volumes, 2002).

¹⁹ Some NRMs, such as the Raelians, refer to their movement as an atheistic religion.

²⁰ For a fuller list of questions that scholars might ask of new religions and their relationship with the rest of the world, see Barker 1982.

not confine themselves to looking at the movements in isolation, but they are also interested in the wider social context. They will, therefore, study the dynamics of various processes that occur not only within the movements (conversion, disaffiliation, bureaucratisation, denominationalisation etc) but also those that occur between the movements and the rest of society (how, for example, polarisation increases or mutual adaptation takes place).

There are various techniques that the social scientist employs, including several types of questionnaire (with open or closed responses), interviews (structured, unstructured, in depth), observation (with more or less participation), content analysis of written material – and so on. Each line of enquiry opens up different kinds of information, some focussing more on the individuals concerned and others on the social interaction, examining, for example, the analysis of communication networks and authority structures. Scholars will also try to involve as many different perspectives as possible, so that when investigating an NRM they will look not only at different levels of membership (leaders and converts), but also at former members, relatives and friends who knew members before they converted, other non-members who know about or have opinions about the NRMs, and, curious though it may seem, but for sound methodological purposes, those who know nothing about the movements.

Of crucial importance to all science (natural and social) as a way of testing ‘what goes with what’, is the comparative method. If we read in the papers about, say, five cases of drug abuse that have occurred in an NRM, we are quite likely to assume that the movement is responsible for promoting drug abuse. If, however, it were to be shown that the *rate* of drug abuse among members of the movement was half that of people of the same age and social background who were not members, then we might begin to wonder whether there was something about the movement that prevented members taking drugs. It is not that the five cases may not be true accounts, but that greater visibility through media reports does not necessarily mean greater incidence. The point being made here is that while both CAGs and CDGs are likely to select examples of good or bad behaviour, the ROG methodology, although more time-consuming, is likely to result in a more accurate representation of the movement.

Another important and related concept in social science is that of the random sample. If we are to make generalisations about a group of people from a number that is less than the whole group, we cannot just select individuals because we happen to have access to them for one reason or another. They are unlikely to reflect the characteristics of the group as a whole if, say, they are the leaders or those whom the leaders have selected for us to question. Similarly, one will, again, risk forming a biased picture if one listens only to former members who are vocal in their complaints about their previous group and have spent a lot of time with ‘anti-cult activists’, while ignoring former members who have made a successful transition into the wider society and may feel that their experience was of some benefit to them.²¹ There are, however, special techniques that can be employed to ensure that all the members have an equal chance of being selected, and which allow us to calculate the probability that they are a representative sample.

But while ROGs are certainly concerned to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, they are also aware that one can never tell the *whole* truth. All individuals and organisations select only parts of the greater whole in their descriptions of reality

²¹ Research has shown that “the tendency of ex-members to hold negative, cult-stereotypical attitudes toward their former groups is highly correlated with the extent of their exposure to the socializing influences of the anti-cult movement.” (Lewis, 1986: 151.) To avoid a misunderstanding that has sometimes occurred in the past, let it be stressed that social scientists would certainly not suggest that it is not *necessary* to listen to antagonistic former members – merely that it is not *sufficient*.

V. Limitations of the social science method

Social scientists focus on information that can be empirically tested.²² *Qua* social scientists, they cannot judge the truth or falsity of theological statements, be they those of NRMs or CCGs. They can, of course, point out that the world did not come to an end on the day that a particular NRM predicted that it would. They can point out that two or more NRMs have contradictory beliefs about what God has revealed to the world, and the laws of logic would suggest that no more than one such revelation could be true – even if there is no independent way of ascertaining which, if either, is the truth. They can also try to explain why certain people in a certain situation might come to believe things that the rest of society thinks are self-evidently wrong – and perhaps why the beliefs conventionally held by the majority of society could seem equally bizarre to the proverbial man from Mars – or even to those from a different faith community.

Similarly, social scientists cannot evaluate what is morally or ethically a good or bad person, action or movement. They cannot say a lot of sexual activity is better than celibacy or vice versa. They can however, point to empirical studies that indicate some of the unintended consequences of particular types of behaviour, and they can try to explain why certain people might believe that their approach is good or better than that of others. Furthermore, while the ROG will try to present as balanced a view as possible, it can point out those characteristics that could be of particular relevance for policy makers, law-enforcement officers and other enquirers – that movement Z has been found guilty of certain criminal activities, or that a number of complaints have been received about certain actions that various people consider to be anti-social. If asked about the Manson Family or Aum Shinrikyo, for example, the ROG would be unlikely to leave out the fact that these were two of the incredibly small number of NRMs who have murdered non-members whom they did not personally know. They would be less likely to report what the members ate for breakfast.

Thirdly, there is the definitional issue. Not only does social science provide no way of judging a particular religion, its expertise does not extend to pronouncing whether it really is a religion, or a ‘cult’, or any other kind of phenomenon – unless the enquirer (or some other accepted authority such as the law) has already laid down the defining characteristic(s) of the term. It is worth noting, however, that the term ‘religion’ has not been defined in international law and that while most national constitutions include clauses relating to religious freedom, they too do not define the term (Gunn, 2003). In other words, if asked if movement X is really a religion, the ROG can provide the information that allows it to say that if a belief in God is taken to be a necessary component of religion, then X is not a religion; but, the ROG might add, this would mean that most of traditional Buddhism could not be considered a religion. If, however, religion is defined as a system of beliefs that addresses questions of ultimate concern, then movement X could be called a religion. This awareness of the fact that definitions are man-made *decisions*, rather than empirical *discoveries*, is very important so far as policy issues are concerned, and those who pass legislation or are charged with the administration of the law should realise that where the line is drawn for a definition can have very real consequences of a secular nature. The Church of Scientology has fought in courts around the world to be recognised as a religion in order to gain tax benefits. Transcendental Meditation has fought in a United States court to be defined as *not* being a religion in order that it might teach its

²² That is, information which, in principle, anyone with his or her faculties about them could agree was or was not the case. The criterion that Karl Popper used to distinguish a scientific statement from a non-scientific or pseudo-scientific statement is falsifiability (Popper, 1963).

techniques in public institutions such as schools and prisons, which religions cannot do according to an interpretation of the First Amendment of the US Constitution (Barker, 1994).

VI. Inform

Due largely to the stories provided by the media and CAGs in England and the United States, both the British government and the mainstream Churches were, by the mid-1980s, under pressure from a number of different sources to “do something” about the “destructive and dangerous cults in our midst.”

Around the same time, having been conducting research into NRMs since the early 1970s, I was becoming increasingly aware of what appeared to me to be unnecessary suffering resulting from, on the one hand, ignorance and, on the other hand, the misinformation that was being disseminated by some NRMs, some of their opponents, and some of the popular media. Although some excellent research was being conducted by scholars, little of this was readily available to the general public, partly because social scientists often write merely for internal consumption, but also because too many write in an obfuscating style, peppering dubious grammar with impenetrable jargon. As a consequence, at the individual or family level, parents were being persuaded by both well-meaning and unscrupulous deprogrammers to part with thousands of dollars or pounds in order to arrange a forcible and illegal ‘rescue’ – which was often unsuccessful or had unfortunate repercussions for those involved (Barker, 1989: Appendix III; Bromley and Richardson, 1983). On the other hand, decisions made at the state level could result in a tragedy such as that which was to take place in the Branch Davidian’s compound near Waco, Texas.²³

It took nearly two years to translate my concerns about this situation into action – the story has been told elsewhere (Barker, 1996; 2001). But then, with the support of the British Home Office, the mainstream Churches and a number of other interested persons, Inform opened its doors to the public on the first of January 1988.

The basic aim of Inform, to help enquirers by providing reliable, up-to-date information, requires the collection, assessment and dissemination of a considerable quantity of material. Inform’s collection of data comes from all available sources, including the movements themselves, their opponents, former members, families of members, the media and an international network of experts and specialists, which includes scholars, professionals such as lawyers, doctors, counsellors, clergy, other CWGs – and anyone else who might be able to help.

The openness with which we receive information does not, of course, mean that it is all considered reliable or given equal weight. Assessment is a crucial part of the exercise in that it is on this that Inform bases its claim that the information it disseminates is as accurate and balanced as possible and its appraisal relies ultimately on the methods and standards of the social sciences (Barker, 1995). Given, however, that Inform receives up to a thousand or so enquiries about 200 or more different NRMs each year, it is not surprising that there are instances when only limited information from non-scholarly sources is available. In such circumstances Inform will try to give the enquirer an understanding of where the originators of the material were ‘coming from’.

²³ On 19 April 1993 the FBI stormed the Branch Davidian compound, resulting in the death of 74 members, including over 20 children. Six other Branch Davidians and four members of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms were killed in the shoot out at the start of the 51-day siege. For an account of the decision-making processes involved, see Wright, 2003.

Inform receives enquiries from people who contact it by telephone, email, letter or a visit to the office. It produces literature, mainly in the form of leaflets, about different movements, gives lectures, arranges day-long seminars twice a year for the general public on specific issues, such as NRMs and children, the law, the media, health, the millennium, or violence,²⁴ and occasional seminars for special interest groups, such as clergy. It has also organised large conferences attended by representatives from over thirty different countries. Many enquirers are relatives and friends of converts, whom Inform can help by providing information not only about particular NRMs, but also about the possible consequences of their potential reactions to the situation.²⁵ As, however, the NRMs have changed and in many cases are concentrating more on their own second-generation membership rather than recruiting new members, there has been an increasing proportion of enquirers who are not personally involved in an NRM but in general policy issues – or just wanting reliable information for some other reason. The media have become less likely to run a ‘cult story’ without checking out some of the facts first, and more than one *exposé* has been significantly changed or even dropped altogether after the writer has made use of Inform’s resources. Government agencies from around the world have turned to Inform for information about particular movements that might want to register or about which a potential problem has arisen. Several governments have sent representatives to observe Inform in action in order to help them set up a similar information centre in their own country. Lawyers contact Inform over child custody cases and other legal actions. Academic researchers, writers and students visit Inform to make use of its data collection for days, weeks or even occasionally for months.

Inform can, however, be useful only in so far as it recognises its limitation and refuses to be drawn into passing judgements that would, in the final analysis, be little more than reflections of its staff’s own personal, subjective beliefs and/or values. It can, however, use the enquirer’s evaluation to answer questions of a theological, moral or definitional nature by using a hypothetical format (“If you believe that polygamy is bad, then the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints indulges in bad practices”). Nonetheless, although most enquirers are very grateful for the help that Inform gives them, there are those who become frustrated because they expect it to do far more. They may demand that it should arrange for their (adult) child to be removed from his or her NRM, or that it should lobby for legislation to control or ban the cults. The Chair of one British CAG has publicly complained on several occasions about the 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.”²⁶

In fact, Inform does not advise the British government or any other enquirers what they should “do about cults.” This, however, does not mean it will not provide information about whether or not a particular group indulges or is likely to indulge in socially unacceptable behaviour. Whenever it has heard of allegations of serious crimes (suspicious deaths, child abuse, or the distribution of hard drugs), Inform has immediately reported these to the appropriate authorities for further investigation – but it has also provided the police and other law-enforcement agencies with information that could prevent the unnecessary exacerbation of a volatile situation. Furthermore, Inform is proactive in its attempts to forestall potential problems: each year, for example, it sends out a poster and information sheet to all British

²⁴ For a full list, see <http://www.inform.ac/infsemtalk.html>

²⁵ The second half of a book I wrote primarily for those who know someone who has joined an NRM (and which was sponsored by the British Home Office for Her Majesty’s Stationery Office) directly addresses the question “What can be done?” (Barker, 1989).

²⁶ Tom Sackville “Why cults are bad”, *The Spectator*, 29 May 2004.

universities and colleges of further education to alert students to possible difficulties that can arise if they become involved in an NRM, and telling them how they can get further information about groups that approach them.²⁷ To give another example, it provided a warning notice for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, giving information and advice for persons travelling abroad.²⁸

Despite all this, Inform has been perceived by some other CWGs as a controversial organisation since its inception. British CAGs have strongly resented the support that it has received from the government and mainstream religions, and have attacked it bitterly in the media and elsewhere, sending letters of complaint to Members of Parliament and even submitting a petition to 10 Downing Street. Curiously enough, although it is certainly not a pleasant experience to be vilified – and can be extremely irritating when the accusations are quite untrue²⁹ – the attacks have possibly helped Inform in a number of ways. They have certainly increased its profile and have quite often been counterproductive, eliciting a positive response to its work rather than the one intended. The complaints to the Prime Minister (then Margaret Thatcher) led to an investigation into the operation of Inform that actually resulted in its receiving further funding. But, perhaps most importantly, it has kept Inform very much on its toes. Every time Inform receives an enquiry, the staff have learned from experience that it could be an ‘anti-cultist’ trying to catch them out, or it could be one of the NRMs trying to find out what Inform says about them. Knowing that it could be sued, or at least receive damaging publicity if its information were inaccurate, has underlined the need to be constantly aware of Inform’s requirement to be accountable and able to provide a justification for what it says and does. It is not that Inform will only give out information that would not upset anyone – on the contrary, it is all too clear that much of the information it produces does upset the NRMs and/or their opponents, both ‘sides’ having threatened Inform with legal action on a number of occasions if we did not withdraw statements to which they objected.³⁰

It would, however, be wrong to give the impression that Inform has bad relationships with all CWGs that come from a different perspective from its own. On the contrary, it recognises that these can complement its own work, and it not only exchanges information, but also refers enquiries to other groups. Representatives of CAGs, including the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), originally known as the American Family Foundation (AFF), the British FAIR,³¹ and the Belgian CIAOSN³² have accepted invitations to speak at Inform Seminars, contributing to a broader understanding of the general situation. I have been invited to speak at several ICSA/AFF meetings, and Inform has held day-long workshops at which British representatives of the Home Office, the Metropolitan Police and the mainstream Churches exchanged information and discussed issues related to policy with representatives from

²⁷ This can be downloaded from <http://www.inform.ac/infdocs.html>.

²⁸ This can be downloaded at <http://www.inform.ac/infmain.html> (click “Travelling Abroad” on right-hand menu).

²⁹ This has become particularly acute with the arrival of the Internet when it is practically impossible to prevent almost anything being posted, however outlandish it might be.

³⁰ While Inform would certainly correct any statements that can be shown to be factually incorrect, it has not bowed to pressure to remove statements that can be empirically corroborated but that a particular group would prefer to remain out of the public domain. Inform does, however, invite any group or individual to contribute their version of reality to the publicly available files in its office and it has added information about alternative perspectives to the information it distributes.

³¹ Family Action Information and Rescue was founded in 1976, but changed its name to Family Action Information and Resource in 1994 when it was decided that the erstwhile practice of involuntary deprogramming carried out by some of its members was no longer acceptable.

³² Centre d'information et d'avis sur les organisations sectaires nuisibles (Information and Advice Centre Concerning Harmful Sectarian Movements); www.ciaosn.be.

CIAOSN and the Belgian police and, on a separate occasion, representatives from the French Inter-Ministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against Sectarian Aberrations (MIVILUDES).³³

As should be clear, the stress Inform lays on objectivity does not mean it operates without any meta-values. On the contrary, its Board of Governors has a clear code of conduct that forms the basis for its policy in determining how Inform should be run. High on the list is an acceptance of the principles set out in international documents such as the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and the Vienna Convention. Allied to this is a belief in the importance of respect for the individual – whether he or she is a member of an NRM, a relative of a convert, one of the movements' opponents, or whomsoever. This does not mean Inform has to agree with their beliefs and practices, but that it should always recognise that they are human beings who, as such, deserve our respect. Needless to say, Inform respects the right to confidentiality, and information of a personal nature is never disclosed without the permission of the individual concerned. Next, Inform has a commitment to what might be called a negative utilitarianism – that is, it tries to reduce suffering whenever possible. The reason for stressing the reduction of harm rather than the more positive-sounding increase of happiness or goodness is because of an awareness that different people have different visions of what is good – take, for example, the correct way to bring up children – just as they have different ideas of what, theologically speaking, is true – and just as they are made happy by different circumstances.

And, of course, objectivity itself is a meta-value. By no means everyone agrees that an objective approach is a desirable approach. There are those who assume that one *ought not* to be objective, but rather press one's point home (be it pro or con) drawing on all the ammunition one can to support one's case, while ignoring, denying or deriding any evidence that would 'muddy the waters' (Barker 1995: 299). Then, even when lip-service is paid to the value of objectivity, what may appear obvious to most social scientists is not always obvious to others – intelligent, well-educated people such as lawyers, journalists or government officials are often quite oblivious of the fact that, just because one hears of something happening in a new religion, this does not necessarily mean that it is typical of the new religion and not of the rest of society. They may not always recognise that because someone in an NRM commits a crime, it is not necessarily *because* they are in an NRM – Catholics, Buddhists and Methodists commit crimes too. Furthermore, institutional responsibility varies. At one extreme, the leader of an NRM may tell members to commit a crime (for example, Asahara has been held responsible for members of Aum Shinrikyo planting sarin gas in the Tokyo underground). Less blatantly, a religion may officially disapprove of certain actions, but in practice condone, protect or ignore such incidents when they occur (several members of the Catholic hierarchy have been found guilty of protecting priests whom they knew had abused children, and of not preventing further abuses being perpetrated). Alternatively, a religion may forbid and punish through expulsion and/or reporting the offence to the police (as was the case when ISKCON devotees discovered that some of their members were abusing children in the movement's gurukulas (Rochford and Heinlein, 1998)).³⁴ Nor are non-academics always fully aware of all the baggage that is contained in the use of pejorative

³³ Mission Interministérielle de Vigilance et de Lutte Contre les Dérives Sectaires; <http://www.miviludes.gouv.fr/>

³⁴ This is still a contentious subject, with some former members expressing concern that there are still some known abusers who have not been reported to the law: <http://mitglied.lycos.de/gbc/black/childabu.htm>.

labels such as 'cult' or metaphors such as 'brainwashing', which can carry with them negative evaluations without offering any substantive content (Barker, 1994).

It will be obvious that it takes some time and effort to build up the kinds of resources that an information centre such as Inform has acquired over the past 18 years. Most importantly, it needs specialist staff who are trained in the methods of social science and have a basic knowledge of the subject and its many related issues.³⁵ Such people cannot be picked up off the streets, and the appropriate training is not always readily available.³⁶ The staff also need to be sensitive and capable of working, often under pressure, with people who may be anxious, incoherent, emotionally upset, demanding and/or occasionally very angry. Secondly, Inform has accumulated a considerable collection of material in the form of books, videos, articles, cuttings and literature from the NRMs and various other sources. Thirdly, there is Inform's electronic database, which contains at least some information on well over 3000 different groups, which are cross referenced according to a number of themes such as children, law, violence, health and gender issues. All this information needs to be constantly updated as new movements and new issues appear on the scene. At the same time, the older NRMs are invariably changing, which they do more rapidly than established religions (Barker and Mayer, 1995). And, related to all this, there is the establishment and constant servicing of Inform's unique international network of experts and people with specialist information.

VI. Concluding remarks

One of the main reasons we have governments is so that the state can regulate certain types of behaviour, but in contemporary Western democracies it is not usually advocated that state rules and regulations should apply to different types of *beliefs*. As the policy decisions concerning the law at international, state and local levels are based on political, religious, secular, ethical and other kinds of values, the social sciences have not got the expertise to decide where the line between legal and illegal actions *ought* to be drawn. But this does not mean that objective information has nothing to contribute to an understanding of the (possibly unintended) consequences of drawing the line one way rather than another; nor does it mean that, once the line is drawn, the methods of social science cannot be of use in indicating which individuals or organisations have overstepped the boundary of permissible behaviour.

The sub-title of this volume, *Public Management of Religious Diversity*, suggests that religious diversity needs public management, and it is true that diversity of beliefs can result in diversity of behaviours. There are, however, those who would argue that there is no need to introduce special policies to 'manage' religions; that all religions should be capable of becoming legal entities in much the same way that any other organisation can become a legal entity; and that both NRMs and their members should be subject to the law in just the same way that other citizens are subject to the law (Barker, 2004a). It is certainly true that legislators have been put under pressure to pass laws relating specifically to NRMs, but often they do not know of any legally justifiable reason why they actually need a special law – the pressure has been just “to do something.”

Some of the information supplied by NRMs, CWGs and the media is little more than untestable theological, ideological or moral opinions. Occasionally the information is blatantly untrue; more frequently it is based on fact, but it may be biased in one direction or the other, and it can be grossly misleading when it is slanted in order to push for state regulation (or interference) in matters that most democracies would consider to be outside the province of

³⁵ Inform's core staff all have at least one post-graduate degree with training in the sociology of religion.

³⁶ In some countries where a reliable information centre is most needed, the study of minority religions is not considered a good career move by either supervisors or students.

the state. Immorality can be confused with criminality;³⁷ freedom of religion and belief may cease to be protected as one of the fundamental human rights laid down by the UN and European Declarations.³⁸ Of course, there are clauses in these Declarations that limit the extent to which such freedoms can be enjoyed (when, for example, there is an infringement of the rights of others, or when public order may be threatened), but it is then that objective information is required – not mere labelling, unwarranted generalisations, the application of double standards, slipping in our own subjective beliefs as unquestionable truth claims, or any other discriminatory practices that would create an uproar if they were applied to more generally accepted religions.

Organisations such as Inform have no magic wand, and other types of CWGs can certainly meet the wants of a wide range of ‘customers’ who are advocating particular kinds of actions or looking for answers to particular kinds of questions. But the experience of Inform over the past two decades suggests that the ROGs do have a critically important role to play in the so-called ‘cult-scene’ – and that policy makers are undoubtedly among those who can benefit from the ROGs’ particular brand of information when deciding “what we should do about the cults.”

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³⁷ Adultery is considered immoral but is not a crime in most societies – the fact that it is a crime, punishable by death, in some societies merely highlights the contingency of the boundary between legal and illegal acts.

³⁸ The right to *manifest* one’s religion does blur the boundary between belief and action, but the argument stands that once manifestation infringes on the law or others’ rights, accurate information is needed in assessing whether the boundary of permissible behaviour has been crossed.

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