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The Cult as a Social Problem

Eileen Barker

Jesus was undoubtedly a problem – as were the early Christians, Mohammed and the early Muslims, and Wesley and the early Methodists. Today, L. Ron Hubbard and the Church of Scientology, Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, Li Hongzhi and Falun Gong; Osama bin Laden and Al Qaida have all been considered a threat not only to their individual followers but also to the very fabric of society. Indeed, throughout history, religious leaders and the movements to which they have given rise have been perceived to be social problems by those who are sure that they know another, truer Truth, and a different, better way of life than that proposed by the new religion.

This chapter is concerned not so much with religion *per se* being considered a problem, but with constructions of images of ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’ religions as social problems. Indeed, an integral part of these constructions usually implies the contemporaneous existence of ‘good’ and ‘true’ religion as something to be protected and clearly differentiated from bad or false religions, which, in order to avoid confusion, can be denied the label religion and, in the popular parlance of the day, branded as cults or (more commonly for French-speakers) sects.

Cults, sects and new religious movements

Most lay understandings of the terms ‘cult’ and ‘sect’ start from an assumption that the movements are social problems. Exactly what kind of problems they are thought to pose may vary, but these can include imputations of heretical beliefs, political intrigue, child abuse, criminal activity, financial irregularity, the breaking up of families, sexual perversion, medical quackery, and/or the employment of mind control or brainwashing techniques.

Social scientists have tended to start from a more neutral perspective, using ‘cult’ and ‘sect’ as technical terms to refer to religious groups in tension with the wider society. Around the early 1970s, however, a number of scholars who were studying organizations such as the Children of God, the Church of Scientology, ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness) and the Unification Church decided to abandon use of the terms cult and sect, at least in public discourse, largely because they wanted to avoid the negative connotations now widely associated with these words. Instead, they opted for the term ‘new religious movement’ (NRM) in the hope that this would provide a generic label for the phenomena they were researching without prejudging whether or not they were social problems.

There has been (and continues to be) considerable debate among sociologists, historians and religious studies specialists as to what exactly constitutes the phenomena that are covered by the term NRM. Many of the organizations to which the term is applied are not obviously religious, others are not altogether new and yet others are hardly movements. However, while not suggesting that any one meaning is more correct than another, it can

be argued that a *useful* approach is to start from a conception of an NRM as a religious or spiritual association with a predominantly first-generation membership (Barker 2004).¹

As one person's cult is likely to be another person's religion, sturdy boundaries need to be constructed in order to keep the two unambiguously differentiated, and these distinctions have had to be defended against anyone who constructs a different boundary, with a variety of methods being brought into play to clarify and justify the antagonists' distinctions between a cult and a 'genuine religion' (Barker 1991). There have, of course, been 'cult wars' throughout history. Schisms, alternative interpretations of Scripture, and new religions have long been labeled as heresies, and the heretics have frequently died at the hands of those who labeled them thus (Jenkins 2000; Versluis 2006). So far as the more recent wave of NRMs is concerned, starting in the early 1970s a number of people who, for one reason or another, were opposed to the movements began to organize themselves into what came to be known generically as the anti-cult movement (ACM).²

From an anti-cultist perspective the reason why the NRMs are considered a social problem is, quite simply, because the movements *are* a social problem: their beliefs and practices are perceived as anti-social and a danger to individuals and to society. From another perspective (especially that of the NRMs themselves), it has been argued that, left to their own devices, the movements would not pose any kind of real threat: it is the purely the way that they are portrayed by their opponents that results in their being perceived as a social problem. Using the language of constructionism, the former position sees *primary* constructions of NRMs (that is, the actions of the members) as the social problem; the latter position considers it is *secondary* constructions of the movements which result in their being perceived as a social problem.

Primary and secondary constructions of reality

All social life involves the construction of images. Social reality itself is a human construction. On the one hand, it is a reality in the sense that it exists independently of any individual person's volition – that is, one has to take it into account; one can accept it, try to reject it or change it, but, as with a brick wall, one cannot wish it away or ignore it without facing the consequences. On the other hand, unlike physical reality, social reality exists only in so far as it is recognized by individuals. This means that social reality has both an objective and a subjective character; it can, consequently, have a more or less recognizably stable structure, yet it is always an on-going, ever-changing process.

NRMs are part of social reality. They are constructed through the actions and interactions of their individual members. The founder of a movement and his or her followers create, maintain and change the movement through proclaiming their beliefs, giving their community a special name, identifying themselves as a more or less distinguishable unit

¹ To adopt for definitional purposes the presence of the independent variable of being in tension with the society can be useful for other purposes (Langone 1993, 5; Melton 2004), but would be to beg the question in this chapter, when the point is to enquire how new (in the sense of first-generation) religious movements may *come to be perceived* in negative terms.

² For reasons of clarity, in what follows, NRMs will be referred to as 'movements' while their opponents' organizations will be referred to as 'groups'. When the term 'cult' is used, this will be indicating that a movement is being viewed from the perspective of its opponents.

and behaving in ways that reinforce (yet may eventually destroy) the movement as a recognizable social entity.³ Such actions can be called *primary constructions* – they involve the creation, continuance and demise of the phenomenon itself.

A *secondary* construction occurs when people (be they participants or non-participants in the primary construction of the NRM) not only recognize the existence of the movement, but also construct an image of it that can be transmitted to others. There are always some features of a social reality that are agreed upon by those who perceive it (otherwise it would not be a *social* reality), but no two individuals' perceptions are ever exactly the same. The differences in their images are not, however, random. The various positions (geographical, psychological and social) from which a phenomenon is perceived can account in part for *systematic differences* between alternative depictions of the phenomenon. While people may tell the truth, and nothing but the truth, it is impossible for anyone to tell the *whole* truth. Everyone (more or less consciously) selects what is to be included or excluded from their picture of reality according to a number of criteria – one criterion being what is relevant to their interests.

Thus it is that members of an NRM (who are likely to have an interest in persuading people how good their movement is and, probably, in gaining new converts) will select for inclusion what they consider (and/or assume others will consider) to be positive features, while keeping silent about any skeletons that may be lurking in the cupboard. The movement's opponents, on the other hand, are more likely to select what they consider to be bad or harmful actions in their depiction of the movement. In this they may be aided and abetted by the media who are anxious to attract and keep the attention of an audience more interested in the novel and sensational than in the normal and everyday (Barker 2003).

Rather than arguing that the reason NRMs are perceived as a problem *either* because of their actions *or* because their opponents see them as such, I shall suggest reasons why it is possible that *both* the NRMs themselves *and* their opponents' secondary constructions that can be at least partly responsible. Furthermore, it will be suggested, the interaction between the different constructors can exacerbate the situation, resulting in the movements becoming seen as increasingly problematic.

Potentially problematic characteristics of NRMs

There are some new religions that have performed what, to most members of society, would be unequivocally problematic actions. Take, for example, the apparently senseless murders of Sharon Tate and others by members of The Manson Family in 1969. In 1978 the world was horrified by the murder of Congressman Leo Ryan and his companions and the mass suicide/murders at Jonestown, Guyana, by members of the Peoples Temple. The 1990s saw the suicides and murders of members of the Solar Temple between 1994 and 1997, the release of sarin gas in the Tokyo underground by members of Aum Shinrikyo in 1995, and the Heavens Gate suicides in 1997.

³ Drawing heavily on Berger and Luckmann (1967), I have discussed the construction of images of NRMs in greater detail elsewhere (Barker 2003).

It should, however, be stressed that such atrocities are rare occurrences considering the hundreds of law-abiding NRMs that have emerged during the past century or so.⁴ Generalizing about NRMs is fraught with dangers as nearly every generalization can be disproved by at least one of their number. Nonetheless, first-generation religions are likely to exhibit certain characteristics merely because they *are* new in this sense, and several of these characteristics can contribute towards antagonistic relationships between the movement and non-members, resulting in the former being defined as a social problem.

First, the very fact that the membership of an NRM is made up of converts can in itself lead to friction. Converts to any religion tend to be far more enthusiastic, even fanatic, than those born into a religion. It is not always easy to reason or even to communicate with converts who are enthused by their new-found faith, and who, not having totally internalized the beliefs and practices, might do little more than reiterate slogans that mean nothing to their listeners – or who may be so preoccupied that they do not even attempt to explain their new beliefs and behavior.

Secondly, new religions do not attract a random sample of the population. Although the movements may differ from each other in a number of significant ways, each of them appeals disproportionately to particular sections of society. While in the past, new religions have frequently appealed to the socially, economically and/or politically oppressed, NRMs that became visible in the West in the latter part of the twentieth century appealed disproportionately, although not exclusively, to well-educated, white young adults. This meant that ‘normal’ society was presented with a very visible picture of young people abandoning the widely sought-after opportunities they had been given and, instead, embracing apparently inexplicable behavior, such as devoting their lives to some foreign guru, selling flowers or candles on the street for up to 18 hours a day, living in relative poverty, changing their outward appearance, marrying someone who has been chosen for them, and possibly severing connections with their former life, including their family and friends.

Thirdly, the founders and/or leaders of NRMs are frequently granted charismatic authority by their followers. This means that they are relatively unconstrained by either tradition or rules, and are, thereby, both unpredictable and unaccountable to anyone except, perhaps, to God. This in turn means that they can be seen as more dangerous than those in more established leadership positions whose actions can, generally speaking, be anticipated in advance. Later, there might develop a hierarchical authority structure with commands issuing from the top to the lower levels, giving the movement a strength and control over individuals who might be expected to sacrifice themselves for a greater good, which, they are told, is God’s will and, therefore, unquestionable.

Fourthly, NRMs may be considered a social problem because many of them declare the rest of the world to be the social problem. It is not uncommon for the movements to operate with a dichotomous world-view, erecting a sharp boundary between ‘us’ (the insiders) and ‘them’ (the outsiders) – a distinction that may be reinforced not only through

⁴ Inform www.Inform.ac has information on just under a thousand different movements currently active in the UK.

shared beliefs and values but also through the employment of a special language, dress, diet, music and/or other types of distinguishing behavior. As a result, non-members may be encouraged to see the NRM as ‘other’.

Fifthly, as has already been intimated, NRMs have characteristically given rise to suspicion, fear and, not infrequently, discrimination and/or persecution. New movements offer an alternative way of viewing the world and, quite often, an alternative way of living one’s life. It is not surprising that they are unlikely to be welcomed by those with a vested interest in preserving the *status quo* – or even by those who accept that statistically normal, taken-for-granted beliefs and practices are both ethically correct and desirable. Early Christians were thrown to the lions; Cathars were burned at the stake; Bahá’ís have been executed in Iran and Ahmadis in Pakistan; Jehovah’s Witnesses were gassed in Auschwitz; and there are numerous examples of NRMs being imprisoned, tortured and put to death in parts of today’s world (US Commission 2009; Pew 2009). In what follows, however, it is some of the more subtle methods of discrimination that will be considered – methods which are, nonetheless, directed towards creating a perception of the movements not only as ‘different’ but also as a social problem.

But first it should be added that a sixth and often ignored characteristic of NRMs is that they are likely to change far more rapidly and fundamentally than older, more traditional religions. Inevitable demographic changes occur with the arrival of second and subsequent generations; converts typically lose some of their initial enthusiasms as they mature; founding leaders age and eventually die, which frequently results in the authority structure becoming more traditional and bureaucratic and, thereby, more predictable and accountable. The movements’ beliefs may become less sharply defined and more open to qualification, and the strong boundary distinguishing members from non-members may become more permeable with greater interaction taking place between the members and the wider society.

The Anti-cult Movement (ACM)

Organized opposition to contemporary NRMs in the West arose early in the 1970s. It started with the concerns of parents of converts to the Children of God, a branch of the ‘Jesus Movement’ that had emerged during the 1960s. These parents, together with Ted Patrick, the originator of forcible ‘deprogramming’, founded FREECOG (Free the Children of God), which was to be the first formal cult-watching group in the United States (Patrick 1976; Shupe and Bromley 1980, 89ff). Before long there appeared a cluster of other groups similarly concerned about the practices of NRMs.⁵ The composition of the ACM has varied; in its early days it consisted predominantly of middle-class parents who were in a position to protest and to be heard, but soon the parents were joined by professionals such as lawyers, deprogrammers, therapists, mental health practitioners and, increasingly, former members.

⁵ Around the same time, there was also the growth of the counter-cult movement (CCM) which, while overlapping to some extent with the ACM, was more concerned with exposing what its members considered to be the theologically incorrect beliefs of NRMs (Cowan 2003).

The Cult Awareness Network (CAN) was formed from a merger of several small groups and became the foremost anti-cult coalition until 1996, when it was bankrupted as the result of an illegal kidnapping case (*Scott v. Ross*) in which it was found guilty of referring a parent to the deprogrammer (Shupe and Darnell 2006, 180-188). The subsequent purchase of the name of CAN by the Church of Scientology left the American Family Foundation (AFF) as the largest cult-watching group in North America. Founded in 1979 as a research and education organization (Langone 2002, 5), AFF membership had had considerable overlap with CAN so far as its Board and attendance at conferences were concerned (Shupe and Darnell 2006, 115), but the AFF was less strident than CAN, and, as an organization, has not promoted forcible deprogramming, preferring instead the non-violent 'exit counseling' and, later, 'thought reform counseling' (Giambalvo et al 1998).

Meanwhile, concern about the movements had also been growing in other parts of the world. Some of the most active opposition to NRMs in Western Europe has been in France, which, having established a number of anti-cult groups in the 1970s,⁶ commissioned government reports on the perceived problem, first in the early 1980s, then again in the mid 1990s. This second report was the cause of considerable controversy (Introigne and Melton 1996), not least because it contained a list of 172 sects which were presumed to be dangerous due their exhibiting at least one of ten characteristics. These included mental destabilization, exorbitant financial demands, breaking with one's original environment, indoctrination of children, anti-social speech, disturbances of law and order, and infiltrating the public authorities (Guyard 1995, 15). Needless to say, it was widely remarked that most traditional religions could find themselves included under such a definition.

Since its publication there have been numerous allegations by movements listed in the report that they have suffered from discrimination merely on the grounds that they were on the list (Lheureux et al 2000). Two years later, the Belgian government produced a report that had attached to it a list of 184 movements which included the Society of Friends (Quakers) and the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association). Although this report explicitly stated that the list was only of names brought up in evidence and did not imply that the commission considered the movement to be a sect or, *a fortiori*, dangerous, the very fact that a movement is on the list has led to occasions when it has allegedly been discriminated against and/or assumed to be a social problem.

Regardless of the status of any particular movement, it was clear that both the French and Belgian governments considered the movements as a whole to constitute a social problem, and accordingly they both established organizations that would monitor the movements' actions. The French organization is currently named MIVILUDES,⁷ and the Belgian one is known as the CIAOSN.⁸

⁶ ADFI, the most influential of these, was founded in 1974, then, uniting the growing number of branches, it became known under the umbrella term of UNADFI (National Union of the Association for the Defense of Families and the Individual) in 1982.

⁷ Inter-Ministerial Mission of Vigilance and Fight against Sectarianism; <http://www.miviludes.gouv.fr/>

⁸ Information and Advice Center on Harmful Sectarian Organizations; <http://www.ciaosn.be/>

By the end of the 1980s, small groups had surfaced throughout all Western Europe. In England, for example, the first anti-cult group, FAIR (Family Action Information and Rescue) had been founded in 1976,⁹ and further groups followed during the 1980s. There was also a growing number of groups in Australia, Japan and other Asian locations. Then, following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent flood of movements taking advantage of the new freedoms in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, worried parents and the traditional churches that had been repressed under atheistic regimes organized themselves to fight the cults, which became widely perceived as a threat to the new post-communist society. In this they were encouraged by Western anti-cultists and their literature (Shterin and Richardson 2000); some were also eager to play a role as members of FECRIS, an umbrella organization for European anti-cultists, founded largely through the endeavors of UNADFI in Paris in 1994.¹⁰

State Attitudes towards NRMs

The success of the ACM in lobbying support from those in positions of power has varied from time to time and from place to place. In some societies their existence is well-nigh irrelevant, but elsewhere the evidence of ‘cult-watching groups’ can tip the balance one way or the other. Societies governed by the principles of atheistic socialism are unlikely to consider NRMs a *particular* problem because *all* religions are considered a social problem; in Saudi Arabia, all religions apart from the state religion are considered a social problem. At the other end of the spectrum, the USA has a Constitution forbidding the government to discriminate between religions.

There are, however, many states that do discriminate between religions, sometimes giving special privileges, sometimes imposing restrictions on minority or unpopular religions. In France, legislation has been introduced clearly indicating that the state feels the need to protect its citizens from the social problem of dangerous sects (Altglas 2008, 56-7; Rolland 2003). Sometimes legislative discrimination is directed towards a named NRM, as is the case in China where Falun Gong, explicitly defined as a social problem, has been banned as an ‘evil cult’ and practitioners have to undergo ‘re-education’ (Ownby 2008; Palmer 2007).

Rather than elaborating further on the structural or organizational aspects of the ACM (Altglas 2008; Beckford 1985; Chryssides 1999; Shupe and Bromley 1980; 1994; Shupe and Darnell 2006), or the varied reactions by governments and in courts of law (Richardson 2004), what follows will concentrate on the construction of cult images as one (but, it must be recognized, only one) of the methods employed by the NRMs’ opponents in their attempts to persuade others (and, perhaps, themselves) that the movements are, in one way or another, a social problem.

⁹FAIR changed its name to Family Action Information and Resource in 1994, when it was decided that the illegal practice of involuntary deprogramming carried out by some of its members was no longer acceptable.

¹⁰ *Fédération Européenne des Centres de Recherche et d'Information sur le Sectarisme*. Member organizations are listed at: <http://www.fecris.org/>

Constructing images of NRMs as a social problem

It needs to be stressed that the issue being addressed here is not whether one set of images is superior to another set. I have argued elsewhere (Barker 2003) that the *methodology* of the social sciences can result in more reliable (objective) secondary constructions than other methods. It should, however, be noted that objectivity is not necessarily the main concern of all secondary constructors, just as it should be noted there are those who are associated with the anti-cultist camp who espouse a scientific approach, and that there are academics whose work falls lamentably short of the standards of science.

Just as it is impossible to generalize about NRMs, it is impossible to generalize about the ACM. One distinction that can be drawn, however, is that between those whose main concern is helping the people (such as relatives and former members) who have experienced harm because of direct or indirect contact with the movements, and those whose main concern is to expose the movements as harmful cults – a position that may be motivated by the experience of personal suffering, a firm conviction that any deviation from a socially accepted norm is problematic, or, possibly, financial interests in, say, a lucrative deprogramming practice. Generally speaking, members of the first group are more likely to want their secondary constructions to reflect the primary constructions so that they can better understand and deal with the problems, whilst members of the latter group are more likely to want to emphasize only negative features and may resort to various ruses to ensure that their images unambiguously depict cults as a social problem.

Language, brainwashing and mind control

As has already been suggested, one of the most common and effective means by which an NRM is depicted as a social problem is simply through using the term ‘cult’. There are, however, many other ways that language can convey a negative image. Nouns, adjectives and adverbs can all contain evaluative overtones, and grammar, particularly the use of the passive tense, can support imputations of brainwashing or mind control. “I converted to a new religion” becomes “he was recruited into a cult”; “I’ve chosen a life of sacrifice and dedication to God” becomes “she’s being exploited by the guru”.¹¹

The brainwashing debate is one of the more heated battles in the cult wars. Parents who saw their (adult) children apparently change overnight into completely different people embracing strange beliefs and life-styles found the suggestion that they had been subjected to brainwashing or mind-control techniques the only comprehensible explanation. The theory absolved both relatives and ‘victims’ from any responsibility; it also justified the use of forcible deprogramming as it was alleged that the victims were unable to escape by themselves but needed rescuing (Patrick 1976, 70, 276). On the other hand, NRM scholars have found that, although many of the NRMs certainly try to influence potential converts by various means, the vast majority of those subjected to such practices have resisted the pressure – and the majority of those who have joined have tended to leave of their own accord within a relatively short period (Barker 1994; Bromley and Richardson 1983). With the passage of time and further research, more sophisticated understandings of the processes involved in joining the movements have been embraced by both ‘sides’, but,

¹¹ NRM scholars have been accused of dismissing the testimonies of former members by labelling these as apostates’ atrocity tales (Bromley 1998; Langone 1993, 32).

perpetuated in large part by the popular media, the metaphor of brainwashing continues to form an enduring element in the popular image of cults.

Generalizing

Indeed, the role of the media cannot be over-estimated. Analyses of ‘cult stories’ have repeatedly uncovered ways in which NRMs are portrayed as social problems by, for example, including frequent references to unrelated ‘suicide cults’, with vivid pictures of the tragedies accompanying the article (Beckford 1999; van Driel and Richardson 1988). Thus a programme about Soka Gakkai in the UK, which had not succeeded in unearthing any particularly problematic details, started and ended with footage of firemen removing bodies from the Tokyo underground after the release of sarin gas by members of Aum Shinrikyo – an NRM which, apart from its Japanese origins, bears no similarity to Soka Gakkai.

This is a variant of the inductive logic that, if one member of a class of phenomena is known to have committed a criminal act, it can be assumed that all members of that class have done likewise. It is not always necessary for anyone explicitly to suggest that all cults are guilty of crimes; the very fact that the media report a crime when it has been committed by a cultist can result in the reader/listener/watcher concluding there is a strong connection between cults and crime. They are less likely to notice that the media do not report the religious affiliation of Anglicans when they commit crimes, yet the Anglican crime rate might be twice that of NRMs. A slightly different assumption is that an action that is true of NRMs is peculiar to NRMs but not the rest of the population. Thus it may be ‘discovered’ that members of NRMs sometimes cried as children, which, while undoubtedly true, is hardly peculiar to those who join NRMs.

Imputing negative motives and double standards

Both sides in the cult wars have a tendency to define their own actions as being carried out for the best of motives, while imputing the worst of motives to their opponents. Even (perhaps especially) when NRMs perform what would normally be regarded as ‘good works’, these may be dismissed by the ACM as nothing but devious PR enterprises designed to gain (illegitimate) legitimacy. A related practice is to condemn actions performed by the ‘other side’ while the very same action performed by one’s own side is described as justifiable or even praiseworthy. The accounts by Ted Patrick (1976) of deprogrammings he conducted provide copious examples of this strategy, ranging from the use of deception to the use of physical violence.

Labeling and deviance amplification

Criminologists have long recognized that labeling people in a negative way can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy, encouraging them to behave as they have been labeled (Becker 1963). They have also observed what has come to be known as a spiral of ‘deviance amplification’ when a society’s negative reaction towards a movement that is perceived as deviant may result in the movement becoming *more* deviant, thereby provoking further condemnation – and so on ... (Young 1973, 350). Escalating hostility between the FBI and the Branch Davidians, and between the Chinese People’s Republic and Falun Gong, provide examples of this kind of negative polarization within the ‘cult scene’ (Bromley and

Melton 2002). It should, however, be noted that the spiral can work in the opposite direction, decreasing tensions through mutual accommodation.

Protecting images

ACM activists need not only to construct but also to *defend* their constructions in a market place of competing images (Barker 2003). Part of their defensive strategy can involve challenging conflicting depictions, especially those of NRM scholars whom they may try to dismiss by labeling them as ‘cult-apologists’. The final section of this chapter offers examples of some of the ways those who are concerned to defend their images of cults as a social problem do so by attacking what they consider to be ‘the other side’. Several illustrations are of a personal nature, if only because my work has invoked a formidable array of examples!

Whilst publications by NRM scholars are frequently ignored, there are two ways in which they do get ‘used’ by their antagonists in the cult wars: data deemed to be positive (or even neutral) are taken to ‘prove’ the scholar is a cult-apologist; data deemed to be negative are taken to show that *even* cult-apologists have to admit that the cults are a social problem.

This kind of ‘tails-you-lose, heads-I-win’ approach was adopted by an ACM reviewer when she reported, “the author focuses almost exclusively on her positive reframing and apologetic reframing [of the movements]” then concluded:

Ultimately, I suppose we can thank Palmer for giving us more ammunition in the academic (and sociocultural) battle between those of us who believe that such groups are potentially harmful ... and those who line up with the cult apologists. (Lalich 1997, 159-61)

Sometimes what has been written is taken completely out of context. In an article designed to demonstrate that ‘apologist NRM scholars’ have collaborated with the movements by presenting only positive images, one critic wrote:

Barker (1991, p. 11) noted the ‘considerable economic advantages to be gained from being defined as a religion’, but has not suggested that this may motivate any specific NRMs or their leaders. (Beit-Hallahmi 2001, 57)

In fact, the entire paragraph from which the citation was lifted was devoted to suggesting that very thing.

A posting on a cult-watching website offers an interesting example of selective perception. It consists of an account of a lecture I had given, but bears little relation to my actual position or to what I had said, including a complaint that I had presented “a graphic image of the bombing of an ISKCON temple [but] no images of atrocities committed by cultic groups”¹² In fact, my PowerPoint presentation had contained two graphic images of dead bodies in Jonestown; one of the Branch Davidians compound in flames; a collage of bodies in the Tokyo underground and Aum Shinrikyo’s leader, Asahara; and a photo of the blazing Twin Towers. It was only after showing these that I had shown the picture of the bombed ISKCON temple – which was followed by a further picture of bunk beds containing the bodies of Heaven’s Gate members who had committed suicide.

¹² <http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/2009/11/06/question-and-answers-from-maynooth-conference-mick-farrell-2-eileen-barker/>

I have no reason to believe that the complainant was deliberately lying. I suspect he just had not remembered my showing the other pictures, which would have merely confirmed his taken-for-granted dichotomous worldview of ‘*cults=bad vs. rest-of-society=good*’. A proponent of cognitive dissonance theory might conclude that the inclusion of the unfamiliar ISKCON picture threatened his picture of reality and, to protect this, he had to reject the apparent inconsistency by proclaiming I was a cult apologist who presented only information defending the cults (Festinger 1956).

Perhaps less forgivable are occasions when complainants presumably know that they are fabricating the evidence. On an internet discussion group an avowed anti-cultist has attacked one of my books (Barker 1994), stating that I used methodological techniques I had explicitly not used, and giving a ridiculously inaccurate account of my findings. When another list member challenged the woman’s statements, she defended herself by saying that she had not read the book as, she claimed, she had tried to get it from Amazon ‘but even a used copy is more than \$100.’ On checking Amazon that same day, I saw several copies on offer for under \$5.

Then there are those who apparently consider any direct familiarity with my work would involve contamination. One of my students, attending a FAIR meeting, found herself being told about the terrible things I had written. The student, somewhat surprised, asked her informant where she had read these things, whereupon the woman replied in a shocked voice that she wouldn’t dream of reading any of my work.

One of the criticisms sometimes leveled against NRM scholars is that they are too academic; they cannot understand the situation because they have never lost a child to a cult.¹³ Several years ago I was asked to write a pamphlet for the Catholic Truth Society about the new religions. This I did, but it was rejected because, I was told, it was too objective. Another Catholic publication, *The Clergy Review*, did publish an article I wrote for them, whereupon the then-Chair of FAIR telephoned the editor demanding the right “to redress the balance as Barker’s article was so balanced!” When I asked another of FAIR’s Chairmen to give me examples of errors in my publications, he responded that he didn’t think I was wrong, just that by presenting two or more points of view I was “muddying the waters”. It was, he said, much easier for the FAIR membership if they had an uncomplicated picture of the situation.

Concluding remarks

‘Cult wars’ are likely to continue so long as there are new religions. What has been suggested in this chapter is that if we want to understand why there is a widespread perception of cults as a social problem it is necessary to study not only the NRMs, but also the various interests, methods and techniques involved in secondary constructions of the movements. This chapter has briefly introduced the complexity of the constructions of social life – but there is much, much more to be written on the subject

¹³ I have been greeted with this criticism on numerous occasions, particularly since founding Inform (www.inform.ac), with the express aim of helping those who were seeking reliable information about the movements (<http://www.inform.ac/aboutInform.pdf/>).

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