

Introduction to the ICSA 2007 Annual Conference

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About the International Cultic Studies Association and Info-Cult

Founded in 1979, the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) is a network of people concerned about cultic, manipulative, and abusive groups. As the leading professional organization in the field, ICSA strives to increase understanding and awareness of such groups and to help people that they harm.

ICSA seeks to apply academic and professional research and analyses to the practical problems of families and individuals harmed by cultic experiences and to the professionals who seek to help them and/or forewarn those who might become involved in harmful group situations. ICSA is funded by individuals and foundations.

Founded in 1980, Info-Cult is a non-profit charitable organization whose objectives are to:

- Promote the study of cultic phenomena;
- Inform, raise awareness and educate the public about these phenomena;
- Help people with problems related to these phenomena.

Info-Cult is funded in part by the Quebec Provincial Ministry of Health and Social Services and operates in both English and French. It houses one of the most unique collections of materials on "cults", "new religious movements" and related groups and subjects.

Definitional Issues

A central component of ICSA's mission is to study psychological manipulation and abuse, especially as it manifests in cultic and other groups.

Different people, attach different and usually imprecise meanings to the term "cult." Those who have sought information from ICSA and Info-Cult have – properly or improperly –used "cult" to refer to a wide variety of phenomena.

- Groups – religious, political, psychological, commercial – in which the leader(s) appear(s) to exert undue influence over followers, usually to the leader's(s') benefit.
- Fanatical religious and political groups, regardless of whether or not leaders exert a high level of psychological control.
- Terrorist organizations, such as Bin Laden's group, which induce some members to commit horrific acts of violence.
- Religious groups deemed heretical or socially deviant by the person attaching the "cult" label.
- Any unorthodox religious group – benign or destructive.
- Covert hypnotic inductions.
- Communes that may be physically isolated and socially unorthodox.
- Groups (religious, New Age, psychotherapeutic, "healing,") that advocate beliefs in a transcendent order or actions that may occur through mechanisms inconsistent with the laws of physics.
- Any group embraced by a family member whose parents, spouses, or other relatives conclude – correctly or incorrectly – that the group is destructive to the involved family member.
- Organizations that employ high-pressure sales and/or recruitment tactics.
- Authoritarian social groups in which members exhibit a high level of conformity and compliance to the expectations and demands of leaders.
- Extremist organizations that advocate violence, racial separation, bigotry, or overthrow of the government.
- Familial or dyadic relationships in which one member exerts an unusually high and apparently harmful influence over the other member(s), e.g., certain forms of dysfunctional families or battered women's syndrome.

Generally speaking (though certainly not always), the phenomena to which they attach the term "cult" constitute a "conceptual family." The members of this family are distinct, and it is inappropriate to give all of them the same "name," e.g., "cult." Yet they do have a family resemblance resting on the inquirer's perception that the group exhibits one or more of these characteristics:

1. It treats people as objects to be manipulated for the benefit of the leader(s).

2. It believes that and behaves as though the group's supposedly noble ends justify means that most people deem unethical.
3. It harms some persons involved with or affected by the group.

Although some individuals may associate any one of these characteristics with the concept "cult," frequently other terms may be more appropriate descriptors.

Combined ICSA and Info-Cult have information in their files on thousands of groups and over the years have received inquiries on over 5,000 groups and subjects. However, the percentage of these groups that could be categorized as "cults" is unknown. Moreover, as explained above, the definitional ambiguity of the term "cult" limits the utility of labeling. Given the wide range of phenomena that we study and the wide range of individuals and organizations we try to assist, we emphasize that our having information on or researching a particular group does NOT imply that it is a "cult" or even that it is harmful. We do NOT maintain a list of "cults" or "bad groups," and we have no intention of compiling such a list. Also, having no information on a group does not mean that it is benign. We do, however, provide information on and conceptual tools for analyzing diverse groups that inquirers may – correctly or incorrectly – associate with cults and other groups within its conceptual family.

ICSA's research indicates that cultic and other high control groups vary enormously in their potential for harm. Harm may be physical, psychological, economic, social, and/or spiritual. Different people will respond in varied ways to the same intense group environment, some remaining unscathed, while others are devastated. Although scholars may dispute the level, causes, and effects of harmful practices in particular groups, a common-sense assumption underlies our work: "Some groups may harm some people sometimes, and some groups may be more likely to harm people than other groups" (Langone, 2001, p. 3). Whether or not harm results depends upon the interactions among the members of the group, including leadership. These interactions can be complex. Indeed, some persons may experience harm in what might generally be considered a benign group, while others might report a positive experience in what might generally be considered a destructive group.

We are interested in the causes, nature, prevalence, and remediation of such group-related harm.

What ICSA Offers

- **Websites** with thousands of pages visited by more than 1,000,000 persons a year:

www.icsahome.com

www.cultinfobooks.com

www.culticstudiesreview.org

- An **information service** that annually responds to more than 2,500 inquirers.
- An **E-Library** with more than 11,000 news and scholarly articles and E-books, with thousands of items to be added in the future.
- **E-Newsletter**, which enables you to keep abreast of events of note, new publications, news, popular articles, and research and educational activities of ICSA's volunteers and other experts and activists.
- A Web-based **scholarly journal** (with an abridged print edition), ***Cultic Studies Review***, which will keep you abreast of the latest advances in the field, including newspaper accounts and academic and professional reports
- An **annual conference** where you can learn about new research and other developments, meet experts and others interested in the field, and attend practical sessions for families, former group members, and professionals.
- **Workshops** and mini-conferences for former group members, families, and mental health professionals.
- **Volunteer professional committees** addressing issues of mental health, research, personal accounts, the Web, and other subjects.

What Info-Cult Offers

An **information, assistance and support service** that annually responds to more than 1,500 inquiries.

A Website in English www.infocult.org and French www.infosecte.org that provides a unique collection of information such as legal decisions, government reports and studies and an extensive bibliography.

A Documentation Centre that houses one of North America's largest collections of books, journals, video and audio cassettes and other materials from around the world.

Educational services, such as videos, our online book, conferences and workshops, and regular meetings with students at Info-Cult's offices.

Important Points to Keep in Mind

Your knowledge of the cultic studies field will expand considerably as you listen to those who will present during the next few days. We believe, however, that it will be helpful for us to draw your attention to certain propositions that some students of this field tend to overlook.

The Label "Cult" is Descriptive not Classificatory

Those who work in this field are often asked, "Is such-and-such group a cult?" The inquirers often imply that if we tell them it is a cult, they will then know a lot about the group, while if we tell them it is not a cult, they won't have to worry. The fact is, however, that, as noted above, the term "cult" is vague and does not transmit a lot of reliable information. It is not a diagnostic or classificatory category, such as "pneumonia," which functions as a short-hand description for a specific medical disorder with known characteristics (symptoms), etiology, and treatment.

In many ways, the label "cult" is similar to personality labels, rather than medical diagnoses. Suppose, for example, I said, using the personality classification system of the Middle Ages (i.e., the "four humors"): "All phlegmatic people sit in the back left corner, all choleric people sit in the front left corner, all sanguine people sit in the back right corner, and all melancholy people sit in the front right corner." You probably wouldn't know where to go. We've all experienced at some point in our lives all four of these moods, but few of us would feel comfortable being classified by any one of these labels. Nonetheless, each of these adjectives remains active in common usage. They have, however, descriptive, not classificatory, meaning.

A particular group, which some may call a "cult," may vary across time and, especially if it is a large group with centers in different geographic locations, on each of the variables used to define the term. Hence, some variables may apply to some controversial groups and not others. For example: some groups may actively recruit members, while others may not; some groups may routinely lie, while others don't; some groups may be obsessed with collecting money, while others aren't; some groups may insist that members break all family ties, while others don't.

Individual Variations Exist Even in High-Control Environments

At ICSA's 2004 conference in Edmonton Canada, Maureen Griffo talked about individual variations in the small Bible group to which she once belonged. She obtained narrative responses to an open-ended survey from 16 former members (a sample probably biased in favor of critical perspectives of the group). Based on her experience and research, one could reasonably infer that this group was indeed a high-control, cultic group. Yet even within this powerful environment, there was a surprising degree of individuality among members. Although about three-fourths described themselves as seekers prior to joining, one-fourth did not. Although about three-fourths were recruited through the group's preferred street-proselytizing, one-fourth were recruited in other ways. One ex-member still considered the experience to have been positive, while others described it as a "nightmare."

The subtleties of interaction between leader and member are illustrated in the case of a woman who was effective in the leader's business and brought in a substantial amount of money. She was also more assertive than other members. As a result, she was able, for example, to get away with an action that other members deemed unimaginably rebellious: She told the leader's wife to tell her husband to stop listening in on her [the member's] phone conversations! Had her work not been so profitable, she might very well have been kicked out of the group for insubordination. Hence, Ms. Griffo says it is vital to look upon and treat cultic group members as individuals, not as "clones" based on somebody's written or spoken stereotype.

Groups vary significantly on each of a multitude of dimensions, and individuals respond differently over time to each dimension within each group.

The table below illustrates, in an admittedly simplified way, how different people can honestly describe a group or group leader in contradictory ways. The table, for purposes of explanation, looks at two hypothetical people, one generally high in self-esteem and assertive, one generally low in self-esteem and unassertive. The table

speculates about how these two people might react to two different shepherds (immediate superior in some Bible groups), one who is respectful and one who is exploitatively manipulative. As the table shows, depending upon the interaction, one may get false and true positive reports as well as false and true negative reports.

Why Conflicting Reports Concerning Cults May Sometimes Be True: One Example

	Member is high in self-esteem and assertive	Member is low in self-esteem and unassertive
Shepherd is exploitatively manipulative	<p>Member may successfully resist some of the shepherd's manipulations and resent others</p> <p><u>Mixed Reports</u> (e.g., "I've learned a lot from Pastor Bob, but he is too pushy.")</p>	<p>Member may stifle resentment about manipulations</p> <p><u>Positive Reports when in the group</u></p> <p><u>Negative and/or positive when out</u></p>
Shepherd is respectful	<p>Member is likely to have positive experiences.</p> <p><u>Positive Reports</u></p>	<p>Member may stifle resentment about having a "boss."</p> <p><u>Positive Reports while in the group</u></p> <p><u>Negative and/or Positive Reports when out</u></p>

Concluding Comment

As we have tried to show, this field is not as simple as some accounts portray it to be. That is why research and dialogue are important—as means to increase understanding and as means to increase one's effectiveness in helping or educating others. The sessions and

informal as well as formal discussions in this conference provide a broad range of subjects and perspectives that should contribute significantly towards a deeper understanding of this field.

Recent Developments: Highlights

Cultic Studies Review—Articles (Vol. 5, 2006)

Burke, John. Antisocial Personality Disorder in Cult Leaders and Induction of Dependent Personality Disorder in Cult Members (5.3)

Dole, Arthur A. Are Terrorists Cultists? (5.2)

Goldberg, Lorna. Raised in Cultic Groups: The Impact on the Development of Certain Aspects of Character (5.1)

Gomez, Jaime. Terrorist Motivations, Extreme Violence, and the Pursuit of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) (5.2)

Langone, Michael D. Responding to Jihadism: A Cultic Studies Perspective (5.2)

Micewski, Edwin R. Terror and Terrorism: A History of Ideas and Philosophical-Ethical Reflections (5.2)

Mutch, Stephen. Cultism, Terrorism, and Homeland Security (5.2)

Raine, Susan. The Children of God/The Family: A Discussion of Recent Research (1998–2005) (5.1)

Shaffer, John, & Navarro, Joe. The Seven-Stage Hate Model: The Psychopathology of Hate Groups (5.1)

Thiessen, Elmer J. The Problems and Possibilities of Defining Precise Criteria to Distinguish Between Ethical and Unethical Proselytizing/Evangelism (5.3)

Tourish, Dennis, & Vatcha, Naheed. Charismatic Leadership and Corporate Cultism at Enron: the Elimination of Dissent, the Promotion of Conformity, and Organizational Collapse (5.1)

Whitsett, Doni. The Psychobiology of Trauma and Child Maltreatment (5.3)

Cultic Studies Review—Book Reviews (Vol. 5, 2006)

Eichel, Steve K. D. Help At Any Cost (by Maia Szalavitz) (No. 1)

Robbins, Thomas. All the Fishes Come Home to Roost: An American Misfit in India (by Rachel Manija Brown) (No. 1)

Shaw, Daniel. Madness and Evil—A Review of The Sullivanian Institute/Fourth Wall Community: The Relationship of Radical Individualism and Authoritarianism (by Amy B. Siskind) (No. 2)

Stahelski, Anthony. Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill (by Jessica Sterns) (No. 1)

Szimhart, Joseph. Imaginary Friends (by Alison Lurie) (No. 1)

Szimhart, Joseph. ocCULT: They Didn't Think It Could Happen in Their Church (June Summers) (No. 2)

Szimhart, Joseph. Opus Dei: An Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church (by John L. Allen, Jr.) (No. 1)

Szimhart, Joseph. Theosophy and Culture: Nicholas Roerich (by Anita Stasulane) (No. 1)

Whitsett, Doni. Take Back Your Life: Recovering from Cults and Abusive Relationships (by Janja Lalich & Madeleine Tobias) (No. 1)

ICSA e-Newsletter—Articles (2006)

de Cordes, Henri. Preventing Cultic/Sectarian Deviations in Europe: Policies That Differ (No. 1)

de Cordes, Henri. Preventing Cultic Deviations in Europe: Reply to Singelenberg's Comment (No. 1)

Kropveld, Michael, & Langone, Michael. "Lost Love" in the Controversy Surrounding "Big Love" (No. 2)

Langone, Michael D. Editor's Comment on "Opus Dei Over Time" (No. 2)

Langone, Michael D. Psychological Abuse: Theoretical and Measurement Issues (No. 1)

Langone, Michael D. Reflections on the Legion of Christ: 2003-2006 (No. 2)

Lennon, J. Paul. Aspects of Concern Regarding Legion of Christ Mind Control Reflected in Its Rules, Norms, and Ex-Member Testimonies (No. 2)

Moncada, Alberto. Opus Dei Over Time (No. 2)

Muster, Nori J. Myth and Themes of Ex-Membership (No. 1)

Petukhov, Vladimir. The Cult Movement and Religious Situation in Ukraine (No. 1)

Singelenberg, Richard. Divergent European Cult Policies: A Reply to Henri de Cordes (No. 1)

2006 Annual Conference

The 2006 ICSA Annual Conference took place in Denver, Colorado from June 22 to June 24. The *Conference Handbook* containing abstracts and speaker bios is here: http://www.icsahome.com/infoserv_conferences/2006Denver/2006_conference_handbook.htm

A highlight of the 2006 conference was the "Phoenix Project: Ex-Member Art and Literary Works," organized by Diana Pletts. The Phoenix Project provides a place for ex-cult members to present their cult and recovery related artwork in a variety of artistic media and genres. The 2006 Arts Exhibit shed light on the experience of life in a high-demand organization, and its effects on individuals. It also provided an empowering experience for participating artists, giving them an opportunity to tell their own stories in their own ways. This year's presentation will include both a new collection of artwork by former members, and a separate slideshow of the 2006 works, along with biographical information and artistic statements by the original presenters.

Ex-Member Workshops

Once again ICSA conducted its July "After the Cult" workshop for former group members high in the Rocky Mountains at the St. Malo Conference Center in Estes Park, Colorado.

In April of 2006 (and again in April of 2007) ICSA conducted a workshop for SGAs (Second-Generation Adults – people born or raised in cultic groups) at the Trinity Conference Center in the Berkshire Hills of Connecticut.

Info-Cult Book

The Cult Phenomenon: How Groups Function, an updated English translation of the French book, *Le phénomène des sectes*.

Expansion of Info-Cult Documentation Center

Info-Cult has continued to expand its documentation center, which houses more than 3,000 books, 1200 programs on video cassettes, newsletters, journals, legal decisions, and government reports from around the world.

Info-Cult has also expanded the legal and governmental document sections of its website.

References

Langone, Michael D. (2001). Cults, psychological manipulation, and society: International perspectives – an overview. *Cultic Studies Journal*, 18, 1-12.

Langone, Michael D. The Definitional Ambiguity of "Cult" and ICSA's Mission. http://www.icsahome.com/infoserv_articles/langone_michael_term_cult_definitional_ambiguity.htm

Rosedale, Herbert L. & Langone, Michael D. On Using the Term "Cult." http://www.csj.org/infoserv_articles/langone_michael_term_cult.htm.