

Chapter 1: History of Info-Cult

Info-Cult has been operating in Quebec for 25 years. Since its establishment in 1980, the organization's knowledge of the cult phenomenon, how groups function, the reasons why individuals join such groups and the nature of the relationship between leaders and their members has changed. The evolution of Info-Cult's understanding of these questions is reflected in the organization's history.

This chapter provides a chronological history of Info-Cult, from its founding to the present. There are three distinct periods:

- The 1980s, when Info-Cult was known under the name Cult Project;
- The 1990s, when Info-Cult developed a network of exchange and collaboration;
- From 2000 on.

Cult Project

Description

As the '70s drew to a close, the need for information on the cult phenomenon was growing in Quebec and in other parts of the world. After 913 members of the Peoples Temple tragically perished in Jonestown, students at McGill University and others started to ask questions about "cults" and their consequences for individuals and society. The questions they raised included:

- Why does someone become a member of a "cult"?
- Why do young adults radically change their lifestyle upon entering a group?
- Why do these young people accept without question the orders of a charismatic leader?

To respond to these questions and better understand the phenomenon of cults, Hillel, a Jewish student association active on college and university campuses, organized conferences at McGill University to sensitize students and the public to this issue.

Four conferences, sponsored by various associations, were organized around this theme.

The success of these conferences and the public's need for information and assistance inspired a handful of individuals to develop a proposal to set up a permanent resource centre on cults. The leadership of Hillel acknowledged the value of this proposal and presented a funding request to the Montreal Jewish community.

In 1980, Cult Project was founded. It offered a non-denominational service to the community at large. Its operating costs and some of its projects were also subsidized by grants from the provincial and federal governments.

Cult Project's objectives

The organization's objectives were to: ²

- Prepare young people in particular to anticipate the techniques and practices of cult recruitment.
- Create amongst young people, parents, parent groups, professional and community institutions, a consciousness of the ramifications of membership in cults.
- Reveal to the public the duplicity of cult propaganda, the hidden aims of various cult groups and the damaging influences they can exert upon individuals, family and society.
- Assist families who are affected by this problem.
- Aid and assist ex-cult members in their reintegration into society.
- Develop a resource centre with information in English and French on the subject, available to the general public.
- Use volunteers as a resource to educate the public. This volunteer group, composed of parents who have been affected by this problem as well as ex-cult members, also serves as a self-help group to assist others with the same problem.

On a day-to-day basis, these objectives translated into:

- Collecting information on groups and on cult phenomena;
- Supporting families and friends of cult members and ex-members;
- Offering information sessions on the cult phenomenon in Montreal community and the surrounding area.

Initial understanding of the cult phenomenon

Vocabulary

From its inception, Cult Project used the terms "cult" and "destructive cult" to describe cultic groups present in the community. They were defined as follows:

Cult:

- A group of people united around a particular ideology;
- A group of people who have split from a dominant religious group.

² These are the objectives cited in the funding application submitted by Hillel for Cult Project to the Quebec Ministère des Affaires sociales for the 1984-1985 financial year.

Destructive cult:

- A **destructive cult** is a highly manipulative group that exploits its members and can inflict psychological, physical or financial harm upon them.

When Cult Project was founded, contemporary studies and scientific papers described a member of a destructive cult³ as a victim of a leader who was depicted as a tyrant. Many parents and researchers were seeking to understand what prompted the radical behavioural change of cult members. One of the hypotheses put forth to explain their involvement was the use of mind control (brainwashing⁴) to get members to submit to the daily life of the group.

At its inception, Cult Project subscribed to the belief that destructive cults could be harmful to some of their members. It did not, however, believe that all cultic groups were problematic.

Deprogramming

During the '70s and '80s, families and friends of cult members felt a growing sense of urgency to intervene and save their loved ones from the clutches of manipulative leaders.

To help members leave a cult one method that became popular was "deprogramming." Two types of deprogramming strategies were employed:

- Coercive, whereby a member is physically removed and kept in an isolated location where a deprogrammer tries to persuade the individual to leave the group.
- Non-coercive, whereby a member voluntarily meets with a deprogrammer.⁵

Cult Project never considered coercive deprogramming as a solution and counselled families against this choice.

³R. Delgado, "Religious Totalism," *Southern California Law Review* 15 (1977), pp. 1-99;

M.T. Singer, "Therapy with Ex-Cult Members," *Journal of the National Association of Private Psychiatric Hospitals* vol. 9, no.4 (1978), pp.14-18;

P.A. Verdier, *Brainwashing and the Cults* (Hollywood, CA: Wilshire Book Company, 1977);

L. West, M. Singer, "Cults, Quacks, and Nonprofessional Psychotherapies," in I. Harold, A. Kaplan, M. Freedman and B.J. Sadock, *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, Co., 1980), vol. 3, pp. 3245-3258;

L. J. West, "Cults, Liberty, and Mind Control," in D.C. Rapoport and Y. Alexander (eds.), *The Rationalization of Terrorism* (Frederick, Md: Alethia Books, 1982), pp.101-107.

⁴ See Appendix 1: Mind Control and Groups.

⁵ Deprogramming currently implies a coercive approach and "exit counseling" is used to refer to the non-coercive approach.

Nature of the information available on the cult phenomenon

In the early '80s, former cult members were the primary source of popular information about the functioning of destructive cults (books, newspaper articles, etc.).

Given the limited research or sources of information on the functioning of cults and destructive cults, Cult Project placed a lot of importance on collecting varied information on cults. Consequently, its documentation centre gradually diversified its sources, and started to collect information on new religious movements and sociological studies of religious and political groups.

In 1986, Cult Project received two government research grants and published the following two reports:

- Les difficultés reliées aux consommateurs dans certains Nouveaux Mouvements Religieux (NMR) dans la province du Québec (April 1986);
- Non Profit and Charitable Solicitation in Canada: Review of Techniques and Ethical Considerations (April 1986).

Services offered

Prevention and awareness programs

According to Cult Project, certain destructive cults can cause their members physical or psychological harm or financial loss. This view of the cult phenomenon prompted Cult Project to set up prevention and awareness programs on the dangers of destructive cults and mind control techniques. During the 1980s, information programs on cults were offered in various places, including high schools, CEGEPs (colleges), universities, community organizations and professional associations in Montreal and the surrounding area.

Documentation centre

In 1980, Cult Project set up a documentation centre open to the public in an effort to inform the population about the cult phenomenon. The centre contained books, newspaper and magazine articles and audiovisual material.

Telephone service

From its inception, Cult Project offered a telephone service that responded to questions about cults from relatives, ex-cult members, students and the media.

Active listening and support to families and ex-members

From its very beginnings, Cult Project staff advised and supported thousands of families of cult members. The organization's goal was to support relatives and friends of cult members and ex-members in their efforts to understand the cult phenomenon and to help them with problems related to their experiences. Staff and volunteers assisted families by phone or during group meetings.

Employees and volunteers

Over its 10-year history, Cult Project employed three full-time staff members, two of whom were funded by government grants. They were responsible for various research projects on the cult phenomenon.

Cult Project's first volunteers were almost all members of Info-Cult, an association of parents of cult members. This parent organization no longer exists.

Gradually, the pool of volunteers grew, and was composed of:

- Relatives or friends of someone who was or had been directly or indirectly involved in a cult;
- Ex-members who wanted to use their experience to advise others of the potential danger of getting involved in a cult;
- Individuals who were interested and informed on the cult phenomenon.

Cult Project believed that providing assistance to the parents or friends of members helped to bring together individuals who were experiencing or had experienced similar challenges. They were able to understand the consequences of the trauma caused by a child or friend joining a cult, and could help each other. For their part, volunteers who were ex-members knew the difficulties involved in leaving a group and could share their experience and offer support to members who wished to leave or had left such a group.

Cult Project's clientele

Over the first 10 years, the centre's clientele was mostly composed of:

- Relatives of cult members;
- Ex-cult members;
- Students and teachers.

At that time, discussions with cults and their members were rare. It was only in the mid-eighties that certain cult members started to approach Cult Project to:

- Obtain information on their group;
- Provide information on their group ;

- Criticize the functioning of Cult Project;
- Obtain information on how to leave their group;
- Find out about help available once they left their group.

During its 10-year existence, Cult Project had few ties with groups identified as cults and destructive cults, primarily because:

- Cult Project was perceived as an anti-cult organization;
- Cult Project's interventions were focused on ex-cult members and the families of members;
- Cult Project was rarely approached by cults, and did not, for its part, initiate discussions with these groups.

Info-Cult

Transition from Cult Project to Info-Cult

Cult Project was founded to respond to the demand for information from students and the community. Under the auspices of Hillel, Cult Project responded to a growing number of calls. In fact, over the course of 10 years, the number of calls grew, on average, from 250 to 1000 per year. Gradually, the idea of founding an independent organization headed by a board of directors sensitized to the cult phenomenon took hold among Cult Project staff and volunteers.

In 1990, Cult Project was dissolved and Info-Cult was born. This independent, bilingual and non-denominational centre, headed by a board of directors, adopted the name and charter of the old parents association, and reformulated its objectives as follows:

"To promote the dignity and integrity of the individual, the respect of collective and individual rights, the freedom of thought and expression, and the right of access to information, the objectives of Info-Cult are:

- To promote the study of cult phenomena;
- To sensitize, inform and educate the public about these phenomena;
- To assist people with problems related to these phenomena."⁶

These new objectives reflected an evolution based on Info-Cult's 10 years of experience.

⁶ These objectives are stated in the corporation's regulation number 1990-C.

Understanding of the cult phenomenon in the 1990s

In the early nineties, Info-Cult modified its definition of the term cult:

A **cult** is a highly manipulative group that exploits its members and can cause psychological, financial and physical harm. It dictates in an absolute manner the behaviour, thoughts and emotions of its followers. Manipulation techniques are used to transform the new recruit into a loyal, obedient and subservient member. Cults claim a special status for themselves or their leaders that usually sets them in opposition to mainline society and/or the family. Cults conceal their real nature and goals from prospective members by adopting deceptive behaviour in order to attract new recruits.⁷

Info-Cult listed criteria to identify cults with the potential to cause physical or psychological harm to their members. The following characteristics distinguish these groups:⁸

- The group is focused on a living leader to whom members seem to display excessively zealous, unquestioning commitment;
- The leadership dictates, sometimes in great detail, how members should think, act and feel. For example, members must get permission from leaders to date, change jobs, get married; leaders may prescribe what types of clothes to wear, where to live, how to discipline children, and so forth;
- The group is preoccupied with making money. The group teaches or implies that its supposedly exalted ends justify means that members would have considered unethical before joining the group (for example, collecting money for bogus charities);
- The group's leader is not accountable to any authorities;
- Members' subservience to the group causes them to cut ties with family and friends, and to give up personal goals and activities that were of interest before joining the group;
- Members are encouraged or required to live and/or socialize only with other group members;
- Questioning, doubt and dissent are discouraged or even punished. Mind-numbing techniques (such as meditation, chanting, speaking in tongues, denunciation sessions, debilitating work routines) are used to suppress doubts about the group and its leader(s).

In the mid-'90s, Info-Cult staff considered the utility of the concept of "cultic thinking." It conducted research and held discussions to try to understand the meaning and usefulness of this concept in distinguishing groups that had the

⁷ Excerpt from the information pamphlet distributed by Info-Cult in the 1990s.

⁸ Taken from the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), Mind-Manipulating Groups: Are you or a Family Member a Victim? http://www.csi.org/infoserv_articles/langone_michael_checklis.htm

potential to harm their members from others that did not. The organization defined cultic thinking as:

A way of conceptualizing reality and society by dividing them in two monolithic blocks (black/white, saved/damned, good/evil). Within this framework there is no room for grey areas. Individuals and movements with this kind of thinking automatically classify themselves in the category of the pure and the saved. Subsequently, they look for scapegoats in order to explain problems experienced by them or by society. Cultic thinking can lead to intolerance and extremism, and is particularly prevalent in times of personal, social or economic crisis.⁹

The term “cultic thinking” is used by Info-Cult to better understand the thinking process of members which can influence their behaviour and the practices of groups, but it is not used as a criterion to distinguish groups that can harm their members.

Special activities and projects organized by Info-Cult in the 1990s

During the 1990s, Info-Cult was very active in Quebec, across Canada and occasionally elsewhere. It promoted the dissemination of information on the cult phenomenon and responded to the public’s questions about cult abuses. Projects implemented by Info-Cult include:

- In **1991**, a Quebec-wide media campaign was organized to raise public awareness about the cult phenomenon. In addition, a bilingual information pamphlet was published by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in collaboration with Info-Cult. The pamphlet, *Are You Vulnerable?* was distributed throughout Canada.
- In **1992**, Info-Cult made public its findings on the Médecins du Ciel (a group of healers/channelers). This led to complaints being lodged with the Quebec College of Physicians by individuals who had been harmed. Subsequently, three of the healers were convicted and fined for the illegal practice of medicine.
- In **1993**, Info-Cult released an educational documentary video in French, entitled *Au-delà des Mirages*.
- In **1994**, *Beyond the Mirage*, the English version of the video was launched. The goal of the documentaries was to raise awareness among youth about the cult phenomenon. During this same period Info-Cult submitted a report to a Quebec parliamentary commission on “alternative therapies” in which concerns about the harm associated with the practices of certain alternative therapies were raised.
- In **1999**, Info-Cult entered the cyber age with the launching of www.infocult.org. Among other contents, the site offers links to articles,

⁹ Excerpt from an information pamphlet distributed by Info-Cult in the 1990s.

books and reports on the cult phenomenon as well as a list of the latest publications.

Info-Cult services

Info-Cult offers a telephone service, educational programs, an active listening service and support to ex-members as well as to the family and friends of members.

Centre's clientele

In the 1990s, Info-Cult staff noted a diversification of its clientele. Members of religious, spiritual, esoteric and personal growth groups, for example, were increasingly contacting the centre. They were seeking to:

- Find out about the nature of the information available on their group;
- Talk about their group and its practices;
- Obtain information on available resources (psychological and educational assistance).

Info-Cult and its contacts

Contact with government and non-profit organizations

Over the years, Info-Cult has established contact with many public and private organizations and has built a network with which it exchanges information, assistance, resources, referrals etc., either on a regular basis or according to the need. These organizations include the Office de la protection du consommateur (consumer protection bureau), CLSCs (local community service centres), Communication-Québec, various police forces, youth protection services and health professionals (psychologists, physicians and social workers). In the last few years, Info-Cult staff has noted an increase in requests from these organizations.

Contacts with the international community

Since its founding, Info-Cult has been in contact with various organizations and individuals that share its concerns. These contacts with individuals and groups from various Canadian provinces as well as other countries, including Australia, England, France, Spain, and the United States have helped to diversify the information available at the documentation centre and to foster a better exchange of knowledge, perspectives and innovations with regard to the cult phenomenon.

Sharing knowledge and views of the cult phenomenon with professionals, researchers and organizations has been beneficial for both the public and the

organization. The more information circulates, the greater is the opportunity to deepen our knowledge of this vast phenomenon.

In the years to come, Info-Cult hopes to maintain and expand its connections with organizations and academics in an effort to continue these discussions and share knowledge.

Financing

Info-Cult obtains its funding from:

- The provincial government through the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (Ministry of Health and Social Services);
- Discretionary funds from various government ministers;
- Foundations, private organizations, businesses and individual donations;
- Service fees.

Info-Cult and the choice of vocabulary

The choice of vocabulary used to describe the cult phenomenon is in itself problematic when it comes to researching and understanding it. Historically, the term “cult” has been used to describe groups that have severed ties with an established religious group.

Today, the term “cult” has taken on a whole new meaning in the public mind, and tends to have a pejorative connotation. Consequently, some argue against its use.¹⁰ Indeed, the term “cult” can lead some to mistakenly view certain groups as “dangerous.” While this term is not ideal, it is highly improbable at this point to eliminate it as it has become entrenched in the popular language.

Info-Cult argues that groups should be distinguished on the basis of their internal and external functioning, their world vision and their behaviour, and not solely on the basis of a cursory evaluation.

Info-Cult focuses on the internal and external dynamics of groups to better understand:

- The general functioning and evolution of a group;
- The relationship among its members;
- The leader's influence on the members;

¹⁰ R. Bergeron, *Vivre au risque des nouvelles religions* (Montreal: Médiaspaul, 1997);

R. Campiche, *Quand les sectes s'affolent. Ordre du temple Solaire, Média et fin de millénaire* (Geneva-Lausanne: Labor et Fides-Institut d'éthique Sociale, 1995);

J.P. Willaime, *Sociologie des religions*, 2nd ed. (Paris: P.U.F., 1998).

- The characteristics that help to identify groups that, at certain periods in their history, may harm some of their members or pose a risk to public security.

Assessment of the 1990s

While in its early years Info-Cult had very few calls or meetings with “cult” members, during the 1990s the number and diversity of calls from members of these groups increased.

There has also been more and more contact with professionals in Quebec’s social services’ network. Various collaborative efforts have enabled the organization to offer assistance and information services that are adapted to the reality of members, ex-members and friends and family of members.

Info-Cult in the 21st century: Current views

For 25 years, Info-Cult’s board of directors and staff have reflected upon and asked questions about the cult phenomenon. On the basis of numerous written works and discussions with researchers, professionals and others a number of observations can be made. They include:

- Cults are not a new social phenomenon. Throughout history, such groups have been viewed on and off by their community not only as minority groups but also, from the perspective of dominant normative groups, as deviant sub-groups that have the potential to cause physical or psychological harm or financial loss to their members;
- Info-Cult acknowledges that not all groups identified as cults pose a risk to their members. It is, however, important to recognize that certain groups can violate the rights of their members;
- Info-Cult recognizes that participation in the life of a group constitutes an opportunity for social participation, socialization and solace, but also recognizes that certain groups can also become places of psychological and/or physical exclusion.

Info-Cult recognizes that the risks posed by a group to its members vary:

- From one person to another;
- According to the situation and circumstances ;
- From one group to another;
- From one region to another, in the case of international groups;
- Depending on the particular developmental stage of the group;
- Depending on internal or external conflicts.

Info-Cult considers that existing laws adequately respond to the various problems associated with cults and cultic groups.

Info-Cult believes that new research is required to further our understanding of this phenomenon and to intervene more effectively when responding to calls for help.

Consequently, Info-Cult supports research that contributes to a better understanding of this phenomenon.

Conclusion

Like a human being, Info-Cult has evolved over its 25 years of existence. Like the groups that it observes, visits and studies, Info-Cult has developed and modified its perception and understanding of the cult phenomenon. Furthermore, connections with the international scientific community and with various spiritual and esoteric groups have helped to improve the organization's understanding of groups and how they function.

Info-Cult has collected a broad range of information on the cult phenomenon, making it the largest centre of its kind in North America. With the advent of the 21st century, Info-Cult is pursuing its reflection and search for information on the phenomenon, while continuing to provide assistance and referrals to all those looking for information on this phenomenon.