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A multi-perspective approach for understanding and evaluating groups

My name is Mike Kropveld, and I am the founding Executive Director of Info-Cult which is a non-profit organization based in Montreal, Canada. Since 1980, Info-Cult has been responding to requests for information, and to concerns about cults, new religious movements and related high control and extreme groups.

Info-Cult is one of a handful of organizations around the world that deal with, what is most commonly referred to as, cults or new religious movements. Here is a brief history of the organization.

The seeds of Info-Cult were sown as a result of a friend's experience with the Unification Church (UC) in 1977. The story about his deprogramming was told in an award-winning series of newspaper articles.ⁱ These articles formed the basis for a bestselling book (Freed, 1980), which in turn inspired the making of the 1981 award-winning film Ticket to Heaven.ⁱⁱ

The public's need to know more about cults and to seek help regarding cult-related events in their lives, or in the lives of loved ones, led to the creation in 1980 of the Cult Project (what Info-Cult was then called). Furthermore, many parents and academics were seeking to understand what caused the radical behavioral changes of cult members. One hypothesis was that the use of mind-control (brainwashing) techniques was responsible for coercing cult members to succumb to the daily demands of the group. The Cult Project supported this view - that destructive cults could be harmful to some of their members. It did not, however, consider that all cultic groups were problematic or destructive.

Early on, it was considered essential to diversify sources of information to include reports on NRMs and sociological studies of religious and political groups. The Cult Project had limited contact with groups identified as cults and destructive cults primarily because it was perceived as an anti-cult organization and was focused on helping former cult members and the families of members.

In the mid-80s, certain groups and their members began to approach the Cult Project in order to (a) obtain information or provide us with information on their group, (b) criticize

the functioning of Cult Project, or (c) find out how to leave their group and how to get help once they left.

In 1990, Cult Project was dissolved and Info-Cult (Info-Secte in French), an independent, bilingual, and nondenominational charitable centre, was established. The centre provides services to members of new religions and other groups, as well as to academics, mental-health professionals, attorneys, law-enforcement officers, media, among others. Its library has become one of the largest of its kind in North America, housing a broad range of information from sources around the world, including group-generated and critical literature.

Over the years, Info-Cult has networked with individuals and various organizations worldwide. These contacts have helped to foster dialogue with regard to cultic phenomenon, especially during the annual International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) conferences that are organized in collaboration with Info-Cult. As well, exchanges with academics with different viewpoints have helped to broaden Info-Cult's analysis and perspective. Info-Cult also has numerous contacts and meetings with members and representatives of high-control cultic groups, spiritual organizations, and NRMs.

Info-Cult and Use of the Term Cult

I have often heard people say, "We all know what a cult is," as if there is a shared definition or there are simple criteria by which we can label a group as a cult. In fact, no one agrees on how to define a cult.ⁱⁱⁱ According to George Fenech, former president of MIVILUDES (Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires/Interministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combatting Cultic Deviances),^{iv} the French government agency that adopts a proactive approach to dealing with cults, "There is no legal definition of a cult in France, not more than elsewhere in the world. I don't know any country in the world with a definition for it."^v Many government reports that have focused on cults confirm this statement (Kropveld & Pelland, 2006).

Despite the fact that there is no agreed-upon definition of what a cult is, there is still the perception that if a group is labeled a cult, the label will somehow provide meaningful information about the group, albeit negative, and identify the group as something that must be dealt with (Bergeron, 1997; Campiche, 1995; Willaime, 1998).

Some individuals have argued that we should use the term new religious movement (NRM) rather than cult. However, the term NRM seems to imply that the group is new and respectable and therefore does not pose a problem. It also reinforces

the assumption that all cults are religious. While it is highly likely that the word cult will continue to be used, one should do so thoughtfully and be conscious of its limitations.

An important takeaway message of a book I coauthored with Marie-Andrée Pelland, entitled *The Cult Phenomenon: How Groups Function* (Kropveld & Pelland, 2006), is that groups exist on a continuum and need to be understood with regard to the groups' functioning, the reasons individuals join such groups, and the nature of the relationship between leaders, their members, and society at large.

Info-Cult avoids simplistic yes or no responses to complex questions such as "Is Group X a cult?" or "Is the group my loved one joined dangerous?"

Although Info-Cult has evolved over the years, certain positions on accessibility and legislation have remained constant. For example, Info-Cult has always operated out of a known location and is easily accessible. Furthermore, Info-Cult considers that at present existing laws are sufficient in dealing with the multiple problems associated with cults and cultic groups.^{vi}

However, not all those concerned about cult phenomena are in agreement with the view that existing laws are sufficient. There are countries that have passed laws to deal with this issue and in certain cases to deal with specific groups.

As Falun Gong is a focus of this conference, I surveyed counselors, exit counselors, cult awareness and research-oriented groups, non-profits organizations, social service and government agencies. They were selected on the basis of their familiarity with Falun Gong.

37 surveys were sent out to individuals and organizations in 17 countries: *Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States of America.*

35 surveys were sent out by email and 2 were conducted by phone. Of those surveyed 26 were English speaking and 11 French speaking.

I asked them if they received inquiries about Falun Gong in the last 5 years (2012-2016) and if so, the number and nature of these requests.

Of the 37 surveyed, 31 responded which represents an 84% rate of return.

Of the 31 responses, 19 indicated they had received no requests about Falun Gong.

Of the 12 remaining – 2 of them, an academic and a counselor didn't keep stats and responded only by memory. I did not include these responses.

Of the 10 remaining respondents, a total of 63 requests for information about Falun Gong had been received - 25 requests from the media and 32 requests from the general public.

Of the 6 remaining inquiries:

- 1 person called 3 times to complain about Falun Gong but never followed up;
- 1 was specifically interested about their government's resolution on organ transplants;
- 3 wanted help with a family related problem; and
- 1 professional who wanted to consult about the group.

The results of my survey show that there has been a limited number of requests about Falun Gong and the overwhelming majority of them were of a general nature.

What conclusions, can be drawn from this survey and, how can we understand the differences between China's views and concerns about Falun Gong and the respondents in the present survey?

The following questions can be helpful in bringing to light several factors that could possibly account for these differences in perspectives about Falun Gong, and can be used as starting points for further discussion and debate.

My sample is predominantly from western democratic countries. Would the results be the same for non-western countries, for example, Far Eastern, Eastern or Middle Eastern countries?

Even taking into account the many media outlets run by Falun Gong and its potential influence in the west, how does this explain that there were so few calls to centers that deal with cultic concerns? It would be interesting whether a similar survey would reflect my findings. To my knowledge, no such study has been done before.

Does Falun Gong operate differently in China than in western countries? If so, how does it differ and why? Can language and culture be a factor as to why there are so few complaints outside of China?

If Falun Gong operates similarly in all countries, then what are the factors that might account for the differences as to how countries respond to the group?

Is there a difference in the ways in which Falun Gong has evolved over the years in China versus in Western countries? If so, what external and/or internal factors might account for these differences?

Are there more members being harmed in China compared to other countries? According to one account, there are more Falun Gong practitioners in China than elsewhere in the world. If this is the case, it would be understandable that the more members there are in a particular country, the greater the possibility of them being harmed. Therefore, it is not surprising that there might be more reports of harm in China.

It is important to keep in mind that those members who are harmed or involved in illegal or questionable activities may not be representative of the whole organization. As Michael Langone of the International Cultic Studies Association stated, "Some groups may harm some people sometimes, and some groups may be more likely to harm people than other groups." Other factors to consider are the group's geographical location, its leadership and the specific period in its history.

Is Falun Gong considered primarily a political movement in China as compared to a spiritual / religious movement in the west? If so, can we ask ourselves whether Falun Gong is being framed as a Human Rights issue in the west, as some have stated, which in turn might explain why there is little concern focused on the group and its leader's behaviours?

How many Falun Gong practitioners residing outside of China are of Chinese origin? Is it possible they may not approach traditional social and healthcare services if they have a problem, even services run by Chinese associations?

Can the results from my survey be interpreted to imply that there are no problems or reasons to be concerned about Falun Gong?

In the next section of my presentation, I will discuss the results of this survey from a larger perspective based on my 40 years of experience as executive director of Info-Cult.

To begin with, numerous calls or written documentation about a specific group do not necessarily mean that it is a cult and is dangerous. For example, Info-Cult used to regularly receive calls concerning the Raëliens, a UFO religion, founded in 1974 by Claude Vorilhon, who is now known as Raël. However, nearly all the calls came from the media wanting to know more about the group's activities, such as their Go Topless campaign, their attempts to change the public image of the swastika as well as their plans to build their embassy in some country to welcome the extraterrestrials, and of course, cloning.

Similarly, if few or no calls are received about a specific group, or little or no written information is available, it does not mean that the group is harmless. It may simply mean that not much is known about the group. For example, Info-Cult received only two

calls about the Order of the Solar Temple, before 53 members of this secretive group lost their lives. There was no indication whatsoever that anyone had an idea of the actions the group's leaders would take.

If we at Info-Cult only look at statistics to evaluate a group, the results would weigh heavily in favor of the negative. People generally call with problems or to complain about a group. However, we do not interpret negative comments about a group to be necessarily reflective of the group itself, or to represent a group's policy. This does not imply that concerns expressed by callers are not genuine. It might mean that the harm one experienced is the result of being in a group, among other factors. It is important to note that people sometimes contact Info-Cult to say positive things about a group, and that Info-Cult has contact with a number of groups considered to be controversial.

Here are some questions that may be helpful to ask when evaluating a group:

- Do we accept the accusatory or positive assessments made by certain individuals or groups, without checking for ourselves and critically evaluating the accuracy of the information provided?
- Do we readily accept allegations against certain groups because we believe they are capable of doing what they are accused of? Or do we readily support a group against accusations of wrongdoing because we believe they are not capable of doing what they are accused of?
- Have we informed ourselves about what is happening in the group: its origins, its doctrine, its leader(s), the leader's(s') role, and the motivations and experiences of the members?
- What evidence is there for determining whether or not the information obtained is accurate? Do we ask for documents or other empirical facts in order to make an informed evaluation?
- If there are negative reports associated with a group, how prevalent are the problems?
- Has anyone attempted to establish a contact with the individual or group?
- Where and how was information about the group obtained, and, depending on the source (i.e., current members, former members, families with a loved one involved, professionals or other experts), what other factors should we be considering?
- Do we assume that the history of a group reflects how they operate today?

In conclusion, my 40 years of running Info-Cult, and more specifically the results of the survey I conducted on Falun Gong, underlines the need to understand and evaluate groups from different perspectives.

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Notes

ⁱ Freed, 1977 December, 1978 January.

ⁱⁱ To view the film, go to youtube.com/watch?v=UoavV7D74BU

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information about the definitional issue, see Issue 63 of *ICSA Today*.

^{iv} Online at derives-sectes.gouv.fr/

^v France 3, Sun, July 3, 2011, with guest George Fenech, English translation (online at sott.net/articles/show/235545-Georges-Fenech-of-MIVILUDES-Nemesis-of-the-ScientificMethod)

^{vi} See also online at <http://infosecte.org/RESPONSE.htm>