

An Example for Controversy: Creating a Model for Reconciliation

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Abstract

This article provides a critical and constructive response to the “cult wars” that has become apparent in the study of cults and new religious movements. Suggestions for stimulating dialogue and mutual respect are grounded in the author’s twenty-three years of experience as executive director of Info-Cult, which in turn is used here as an example of controversy.

Scholarly research, dialogue, and education are goals that we who are involved in the study of cults and new religious movements (NRMs) pursue. However, a polarization of “them versus us” has emerged which has unfortunately created what is now known as the “cult wars.” The consequent animosity can only work to be self-defeating for our efforts to achieve those goals that will move us forward. Further, this polarization paints an inaccurate picture that does not reflect the diversity of views offered by the numerous individuals and organizations that contribute their vast array of knowledge to the discussion.

In this paper I will first offer some suggestions for enhancing dialogue and mutual respect. Then I will present some background on Info-Cult. Lastly, I will present some examples, using Info-Cult, which I serve as Executive Director, as the object of the kinds of inaccuracies and distortions that tend to magnify rather than decrease suspicion and stereotyping on both sides of the “cult wars.”

Suggestions for Enhancing Dialogue and Respect

1. Avoid simplistic terms that promote the dichotomy of good versus evil.

The use of terminology such as “Anti-Cult Movement” (ACM) and “Pro-Cult Movement” (PCM), “anti-cultist” and “pro-cultist” or “cult apologist” are examples of divisive labels that are hardly conducive to encouraging dialogue or discernment. Such labels often function, to use Dr. Robert Lifton’s terminology, as “thought-terminating clichés.” We tag the label on somebody who disagrees with us and delude ourselves into thinking that by so doing we have demonstrated an understanding of an issue. My criticism of these kinds of labels does not mean that I oppose all use of labels. Labels are categories, and categories are essential to thought. What is important is how we use the labels.

University of London Sociology Professor Eileen Barker has put forth an interesting and useful model for classifying those who are interested in cults/NRMs (Barker, 2002).

Barker identifies five ideal types into which Cult Watching Groups can be divided:

1. Cult-Awareness Groups (CAG’s)
2. Countercult Groups (CCG’s)
3. Research-Oriented Groups (ROG’s)
4. Human Rights Groups (HRG’s)
5. Cult-Defender Groups (CDG’s).

Dr. Barker’s classification invited much spirited discussion at a special AFF (American Family Foundation) meeting after the 2002 annual conference. Moreover, it was a productive

exchange because her terminology, though disputable, invites, rather than closes off, thought and discussion.

Even disregarding interesting proposals such as Dr. Barker's, we could all, at the very least, contribute to more discerning dialogue by avoiding simplistic terminology that overgeneralizes, such as "pro-cult" and "anti-cult." We could, for example, be more specific in our statements, e.g., "Info-Cult has observed that" or "INFORM's position is" or "AFF has found that."

It is also important that we clearly define the terms that we use. In this regard, AFF's definitional essays bring to light the inherent ambiguity and potential for misuse in terms such as "cult": http://www.cultinfobooks.com/infoserv_aff/aff_termdefambiguity.htm; http://www.cultinfobooks.com/infoserv_aff/aff_termcultp2.htm

2. Do your homework.

Too often, people associated with both "camps" make statements of "fact" that, upon even a cursory examination, are obviously wrong. It is especially troubling when these errors are made by scholars, from whom more is expected. Sometimes these errors result from hurried or sloppy research. Sometimes they result from a reliance on secondary sources. I have noticed, for example, that much of the sociological literature about the so-called "anti-cult movement" consists of essays citing other sociological essays that make the same unsubstantiated claims.

A colleague and I searched various sources and databases for studies on individual "ACM" groups, and were unable to find even one sociological study that was systematically researched.¹

3. Don't lump individuals or groups together.

The sociological literature on the "anti-cult movement" repeatedly makes the mistake of presuming that all organizations and individuals, who express concerns about cults, have uniform objectives, a common agenda, and close, interlinking relationships. In fact, there are numerous differences, and most "ACM" groups know very little about other groups and individuals. Here is a partial list of organizations that Dr. Barker might categorize as "cult awareness groups" (all are from North America unless otherwise indicated):

Info-Cult/Info-Secte

American Family Foundation

Cult Information Service

¹ The search words used were: Secte, anti-secte, Counter-cult, Cult, Anti-Cult, pro-secte, Pro-Cult, Info-Cult, Info-Secte, Projet Culte, Cult Project, AFF (American Family Foundation), CAN (Cult Awareness Network), Brainwashing, manipulation mentale, programming, deprogramming.

The following information and databases were searched.

FRANCIS, Repère sur le Web, Biblio branchée, Eureka, WebSPIRS, OVID, Web of Science, Psycinfo, Sociological Abstracts, JSTOR, Project Muse, Emerald Library, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Ingenta, Wiley InterScience, Érudit, World history, ATLAS Full Text, Kluwer, ScienceDirect, Proquest Psychology Journals.

<http://www.bib.umontreal.ca/SS/basesgen.htm>

Freedom of Mind Foundation
New England Institute of Religious Research
Maine Cult Information Network
Cult Hotline and Clinic of the New York Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services
Cult Awareness and Information Center (Australia)
Cult Awareness Center
Cult Information & Family Support (Australia)
Edmonton Society Against Mind Abuse
Ex-Cult Resource Center
FACTNet
FAPES (Argentina)
Forum Against Cults (Israel)
Free Minds
Wellspring Retreat and Resource Center
reFOCUS
Religious Movement Resource Center
REVEAL
The Ross Institute (RI)
Saskatchewan Citizens Against Mind Control
Mind Control Research Center (Japan)

I have not listed the dozens of organizations that fall under Dr. Barker's "Countercult Groups." Nor have I listed European organizations that are members of FECRIS (Fédération Européenne des Centres de Recherche et d'Information sur le Sectarisme – European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sectarianism) and other European organizations. Moreover, I could have listed hundreds of individuals who have written about cultic groups and/or who offer services to people believing such groups have harmed them. Hence, scholars who generalize about "the" "anti-cult movement," when they have had at best superficial contact with only a few organizations and individuals, make the same error as laymen and helping professionals who generalize from their limited experience to the wide world of cults/NRMs, in which there are thousands of groups.

What is clearly needed is systematic and reliable research on individual cult awareness groups. As Dr. Barker has noted, even though it may be difficult, "to have direct access to certain groups or members of the ACM does not excuse us for characterizing them by the very methods that we accuse them of using in their characterization of us and the NRMs" (Barker, 1995, p. 307). In addition, any such study should take into account the socio-cultural-linguistic milieu of each group. For example, someone who does not understand French can miss important information when undertaking an in-depth study of a group that operates in the province of Quebec, Canada.

4. Know thyself!

In making a fair and informed evaluation about an individual or group, we should first ask ourselves the following questions:

1. To what extent have we accepted the accusatory assessments made by certain individuals or groups, about the "ACM" or "PCM" without checking for ourselves and critically evaluating the accuracy of allegations made? Do we ask for documents or other empirical facts in order to make an informed evaluation?
2. Do we readily accept allegations against those with an opposing point of view because we believe they are capable of what they are accused of?
3. Do we assume that those involved in the "ACM" or "PCM" are the same today as they were in the past?

Cult critics should ask these questions when evaluating cultic groups.

It is apparent that individuals and organizations with opposing positions would be able to, and do, make the argument that their research and work has been unfairly stereotyped or has been the victim of poor or non-existent research.

5. Create more opportunities to dialogue.

We need to create more opportunities to dialogue, such as occurs at the AFF conferences, which bring people of different perspectives and disciplines together for the exchange of ideas, the examination of views, and the breaking down of stereotypes. Over the past few years there have been several productive small gatherings of individuals from the "two camps". We need more of these. We also need more cross-fertilization of ideas by having members of the two camps speak at each others' conferences. Again, some of this has occurred, but more dialogue is needed.

Seeing the Same Thing with Different Eyes

It is ironic that much of what I advocate in this paper has also been urged by ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness). Nobody likes to be stigmatized unfairly, whether they be academicians accused of being cult apologists, cult critics accused of being religious bigots, or cults/NRMs accused of being crass exploiters of their members. Of course, there undoubtedly are cult apologists, religious bigots, and crass exploiters among our numbers. Nevertheless, we ought not to hurl generalized accusations at those with whom we may disagree without due diligence. Hence, I find myself endorsing the following words of advice excerpted from Subhananda dasa (1979, p. 16):

- When researching or writing, please try to be sensitive to the possibility of personal bias.
- Please get our side, too. (It's only fair.)
- Please be sure to speak, also, with experts (academic scholars, psychologists, sociologists, and so forth) who may *not* have taken an "anticult" stance. They can provide an articulate, responsible counterbalance to negative views.
- Please try to let the facts speak for themselves, rather than letting them slip into what may be stereotyped patterns.
- Please avoid "lumping."

Info-Cult as a Case Study

Info-Cult, an organization of which I am the founder and Executive Director, has been subjected to many of the distorting errors about which I write. An examination of these

distortions can illuminate this discussion. First, however, I need to give some background on Info-Cult.

History of Info-Cult

Info-Cult, a resource centre on cultic thinking, was founded in 1980 in Montreal, Canada following my personal experience with the Unification Church (UC) in 1977 and specifically that involving my close friend, Benjie Carroll. After the story about Benjie's kidnapping and deprogramming from the UC was featured in a series of six newspaper articles written by Josh Freed in the *Montreal Star* (Freed, 1977 December, 1978 January), his close associates and I received numerous requests for further information. In response, several friends organized a part-time volunteer public information service.

After obtaining funding from the Montreal Jewish Community in April 1980 a full-time center called the Cult Project was started. Its objectives were:

1. To prepare young people in particular to anticipate the techniques and practices of cult recruitment.
2. To create amongst young people, parents, parent groups, professional and community institutions, a consciousness to the ramification of membership in cults.
3. To 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, the family and society.
4. To assist families who are affected by this problem.
5. To aid and assist ex-members of cults in their reintegration into society.
6. To develop a resource center of information in English and French on the subject. This information to be available to the public.
7. To continue using volunteers as a resource to pursue our goal of educating the public. This volunteer group which consists of parents who have been affected by this problem and ex-members to also serve as a self-help group to assist others with the same problem.

The center's contention was that not all cults were problematic; hence, a distinction between "cults" and "destructive cults" was made.

The center's activities included providing information programs to high schools, colleges, universities, community centers, and professional organizations principally in and around the Montreal region. These programs were geared towards sensitizing and educating the community to the issue of destructive cults and the techniques of mind control.

A documentation center was made available to the public containing books, newspaper and journal articles, and audio-visual materials. In the beginning, information focused on the experiences of families and ex-members. However, it soon became apparent that the collection must be diversified to include other perspectives.

During the first ten years, the majority of our clients were parents of cult members, ex-members, students, and teachers. Contact with groups perceived as "cults", "destructive cults", or those with opposing points of view was minimal.

During this period, funding for operating costs and specific projects was obtained from the Montreal Jewish Community, different grants from the provincial and federal governments, and individual donations.

In 1990 the Cult Project changed its name to Info-Cult ("Info-Secte" in French), moved out of the structure of the Montreal Jewish Community, and became an independent non-denominational, bilingual center run by a board of directors.

The objectives of Info-Cult are:

1. To promote the study of cultic phenomena;
2. To sensitize, inform and educate the public to these phenomena;
3. To assist those with problems related to these phenomena.

(Original in French: Règlement No. 1990-C 1) Promouvoir l'étude des phénomènes sectaires; 2) Sensibiliser, informer et éduquer la population à ces phénomènes; 3) Assister les personnes vivant des difficultés reliées à ces phénomènes.)

Info-Cult's funding comes in the form of an annual grant from the Quebec Ministry of Health and Social Services, discretionary funds from different Provincial Ministers, foundations, private groups, and individual donations, as well as fees for certain services.

Info-Cult's clientele has greatly expanded through the years. Besides parents, ex-members, students and teachers, clientele now includes members of different new religions, academics, mental health professionals, attorneys, law enforcement, media and others.

From 1990 to 2003 Info-Cult has had numerous contacts and meetings with members and representatives of "cult" groups, spiritual organizations, and new religious movements. Increasing interest and communication from academics with varying viewpoints has helped to broaden Info-Cult's analysis and perspective on the issue.

Info-Cult is the only full-time organization of its kind in Canada. It houses a documentation center that is one of the largest in the world with over 2,500 books, 9,000 files, academic reports, journals, newsletters, government and legal documents and more than 1,200 programs on audio and video cassettes. The material is collected from sources around the world and includes group-generated and critical literature.

From 1991 to 1996 the documentation center was open by appointment to all interested parties. Unfortunately, due to budget constraints, it is open on a restricted basis until such time as a process of reopening to the public is considered feasible.

Info-Cult is widely regarded as a major source of information and assistance for dealing with cults, new religions, Satanism, the Occult and other non-traditional and secretive groups.

With this reputation comes enormous responsibility to respond to individual and family concerns in a nuanced and balanced way. 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, kidnapping, and legislation have remained constant:

- Info-Cult has always operated out of a known location and is easily reachable by phone.
- Contrary to a popular belief concerning "anti-cult" groups, Info-Cult has not supported or assisted in the use of coercive measures to remove someone from a group. In situations where Info-Cult has been asked about that option, we have consistently counseled against it and have suggested non-coercive alternatives.
- Existing laws are sufficient in dealing with the multiple problems associated with "cults" and cultic groups. See: <http://www.math.mcgill.ca/triples/infocult/RESPONSE.htm>.

Examples for Controversy

Labeled as an "anti-cult group," Info-Cult has been the target of inaccuracies that hinder our mandate, which is to serve the public and promote balanced discussion of the issues.

Selected examples are presented to illustrate this point:

Order of the Solar Temple (OTS)

Members of the OTS created a world-wide sensation with the death of fifty-three members in Switzerland in October 1994, sixteen members in France in December 1995, and five people in Quebec in March 1997 (see Mayer, 1999, for a scholarly analysis of the Solar Temple deaths).

Preceding the tragedies, their apocalyptic doctrine predicted cataclysmic upheavals that threatened the planet with destruction. The earth was believed to be a living entity that could no longer endure the ecological inflictions of humankind. Solar Temple members believed themselves to be of "the pivotal elite' which 'has been removed from the collective by superhuman effort'" (Mayer, 1999: 188). Their goals included "the release of the 'inner man' from the bonds of the world and his return to his native realm of light" (Mayer, 1999: 181). Messages from other dimensions told the group that Jupiter was their "Next Home," and exhorted them to "put [their] last things in order to leave Earth free and clear" (Mayer, 1999: 183).

Internal dissent from members and former members as well as external opposition to the group fueled the paranoia of one of the leaders, Joseph Di Mambro, and strengthened the group's resolve to depart for a higher plain of existence (Mayer, 1999: 188).

After the first deaths were discovered, forensics clearly established that some were murdered, while others submitted to execution voluntarily. Most had absorbed a strong soporific before being shot. The core group had been injected with a poisonous substance (Mayer, 1999: 191).

Before the tragedies of the Order of the Solar Temple, a newspaper article by Jean-Marc Provost appeared under the sub-heading: "Info-Secte: Refuse d'Intervenir" and "À Quoi Ça Sert Info-Secte?" ("Info-Cult: Refuses to Get Involved" and "Of What Use is Info-Cult?") Provost wrote that former member, Rose-Marie Klaus, came to Info-Cult for help only to be turned away because, "On m'a répondu qu'on n'avait pas d'argent pour s'occuper de cette affaire. Que je devais m'arranger seule" ("They said they didn't have the money to handle this affair. I should handle it myself.") (Provost, 1993: 6). Later in the same article under the heading, "Puisque Info-Secte ne Fait pas Son Job" ("Because Info-Cult isn't Doing Its Job") (p. 7) readers were encouraged to contact the paper with their problems related to cults because Info-Cult, according to Provost, was not doing its job.

After the tragedies, Hall and Schuyler (1997) wrote this about Klaus: "One friend suggested that Rose-Marie contact Info-Secte (or Info-Cult, as they call themselves in English)...Whatever Casgrain [author's note: Yves Casgrain was Info-Cult's Research Director at the time] made of Klaus's account, he took no public action" (p. 298).

Two years later, Jean-Francois Mayer offered this analysis of the circumstances in his article, "Our Terrestrial Journey is Coming to an End": The Last Voyage of the Solar Temple (Mayer, 1999):

Oddly enough, in the end critical coverage did not come from Europe or Canada, but from the island of Martinique: on 10 September 1991, Lucien Zécler, president of the local branch of the Association for the Defense of Families and Individuals (ADFI), the leading anti-cult movement of France, sent a letter to several associations and centers in Quebec, asking for information on the OTS. (p. 179)

Mayer, considered to be the foremost expert on the Solar Temple, continues:

While it cannot be doubted that the external opposition encountered by the Solar Temple strengthened the resolve of its leaders to depart for a higher plane of existence, the root of Di Mambro's decision to launch the process which led to the 'transit' is most closely connected to internal dissent (p. 188).

Up to this point, the reporting on Info-Cult's involvement was accurate. However, in a more recent book (Wessinger, 2000), blame is heaped on Info-Cult. Whereas in previous assessments we play a minor role in the Solar Temple deaths, Wessinger writes in a section titled, "The Persecution":

In 1991, a disgruntled defector, Rose-Marie Klaus contacted a Montreal anti cult organization, Info-Secte, which then put out a letter warning of the dangers of the Solar Temple to other Quebec organizations. (p. 224)

As mentioned above it was Lucien Zecler of ADFI Martinique, not Info-Cult, who sent out the letter. Yet according to Wessinger's inaccurate version of events, Info-Cult becomes, if not a major contributor, at least partly responsible for pushing the OTS into making their fatal decision. This is most unfortunate, for Wessinger's book is a major resource in this area. Her error, which could have been avoided if the proper sources had been consulted, contributes to the perpetuation of stereotypes about the "anti-cult movement."

Médecins du Ciel

The "médecins du ciel" refers to a number of healers/channelers who attracted attention in the province of Quebec in the early 1990's. They counseled followers who had physical ailments to believe their channeled "medical" advice. Four followers eventually died and a coroner's investigation into three of the deaths recommended that police investigate the healers for criminal negligence. However, no charges were filed. They were subsequently pursued by the College of Physicians and pleaded guilty to the illegal practice of medicine and fined (Desjardins, 1994, March).

The channelers also predicted that certain areas of the province of Quebec were to be hit by natural disasters and so they moved with a number of followers to a "safe area" in the Laurentians, a region north of the city of Montreal.

In his book, Massimo Introvigne (1996), using the "médecins du ciel" as an example, presents Info-Cult as a "classic anti-cult" group. He writes,

Ils donnent alors lieu à un modèle complet et engendrent des insinuations disant que beaucoup de nouveaux mouvements religieux pourraient être "exactement comme l'OTS." Un bon exemple de ce que nous affirmons est fourni par la réaction combinée, au Québec, du mouvement anti-sectes et de la presse à la prédiction des guérisseurs Yves Bianchi (sic) et Moniques Forgues (qui vivent avec une centaine de fidèles dans le village de Val-David au Québec), selon laquelle un gigantesque déluge devait détruire les trois quarts de la planète le 28 septembre 1995. (p. 232)

English translation:

It gives rise to a model that insinuates that a lot of new religious movements could be "exactly like the OTS." A good example of this is provided by the combined reaction of the anti-cult movement and the media, in Quebec, with a prediction made by healers Yves Bianchi (sic) and Monique Forgues (who live with about a hundred of their followers in the village of Val-David, Quebec), that a giant flood would destroy three quarters of the planet on September 28, 1995.

Introvigne continues,

...des opposants locaux, dans le village, et Info-Sectes (sic), une organisation anti-sectes de Montréal, ont déclaré après le 28 septembre non seulement que les deux guérisseurs animent "une secte fermée où l'on pratique le lavage de cerveau sur les membres vulnérables," mais aussi que "groupe restreint de partisans inconditionnels du couple représente la plus grande menace pour le Québec depuis l'Ordre du Temple Solaire."

English translation:

...local opposition in the village and Info-Cult, an anti-cult organization from Montreal, declared after September 28 that not only did the healers head "a secretive cult where brainwashing was carried out on vulnerable members," but also that "the unquestioning supporters represent the worst threat to hit Quebec since the Order of the Solar Temple."

As indicated in his footnotes, Introvigne's analysis is based on one article, written in English (Baker, 1995, September 24). However, as a result of obvious errors, he presents a completely different version of the article, and consequently of Info-Cult's role. Aside from the fact that Introvigne has the date wrong (the actual date of the article was September 24, 1995, not September 30th as he cites), he has made much more serious errors that distort and misrepresent Info-Cult's role. The pertinent sections of the article actually read as follows:

But skeptics warn that the couple are really running a secretive cult where they have brainwashed vulnerable members with phony promises of cures, bilked them of their savings and had them prepare for the end of the world by stockpiling food and weapons. "We have a very serious situation here," said Pierre Rochette, a singer and former Val-David town councillor, who added that the couple's solid core of unquestioning supporters represents the worst cult threat to hit Quebec since the Order of the Solar Temple. (p. A1)

Baker continues:

Rochette, who estimates the couple's clientele at anywhere from 100 to 300 people, has teamed up with Yves Casgrain, **a former research director at Montreal's Info-Cult** [author's bold] organization, in a bid to expose the couple's practices. (p. A1)

Casgrain and Rochette's position vis-a-vis the "médecins du ciel" was reported in several newspaper articles (Baker, G., 1995, 29 September; Deslauriers, D., 1995, 9 septembre; Lamarche, C., 1995, 7 septembre). Casgrain, however, was speaking as an individual, not as a representative of Info-Cult, which is the impression that Introvigne gives. This might seem minor, but would Introvigne want the opinions of his former employees to be attributed to CESNUR, an organization that he directs?

Hexham's article on the anti-cult movement in Canada.

Another example involving Info-Cult can be found in Irving Hexham's article, "New Religions and the Anticult Movement in Canada" (2001). Hexham's article refers to anticult groups formed after 1977, saying, "...today only the Montreal group, which is supported by the local Jewish community, continues to exist" (p. 284-285). As mentioned earlier, Info-Cult became an independent organization in 1990—11 years before Hexham's article—and has not received funding from the Jewish Community since that time. Moreover, information about Info-Cult's funding sources is available on Info-Cult's website:

<http://www.math.mcgill.ca/triples/infocult/ic-e2.html> or by calling Info-Cult's office.

Hexham's article further reinforces an inaccurate view of the so-called anti-cult movement, particularly as it applies to Info-Cult. In the section entitled "The Canadian Anticult Craze 1979-1982," he writes:

From 1977 onwards various parent's groups, often encouraged by university chaplains, formed across Canada to promote deprogramming and encourage legislators to pass restrictive laws against religious conversion. (p. 284)

Info-Cult was not formed to promote the forcible removal of individuals from any group and has not encouraged legislators to pass restrictive laws.

Hexham's errors would be more excusable were Info-Cult, the leading cult educational organization in Canada, incidental to the subject of his article. Since, however, his subject was "the anti-cult movement in Canada," he should at least have these basic facts straight.

In the article Hexham writes:

...Josh Freed, who subsequently wrote the best selling book, *Moonwebs*, and made the film, *Ticket to Heaven* based on the book. Before the book was published, Freed wrote several sensational syndicated articles for *The Montreal Star* that "exposed" the Unification Church. (p. 283)

... it is tempting to speculate that this intense anticult activity was the result of a skillful publicity drive by Freed. As a journalist he was in a position to promote stories that helped both his book and the subsequent film. (p. 285)

The following comments by Freed challenge the "scholarship" of this article:

This series of "sensational" articles won the 1978 National Newspaper Award for Feature Writing, the most prestigious award given out in Canadian journalism...The mainstream "sensational" media regularly fact checks, and I am often called by fact-checkers when my name is mentioned. You would think an academic journal would do the same. It's bad enough the author didn't call; at least the journal should have...This was the worst financial period of my life and it took me a long time to recover, and I didn't do it for the money, but because I cared about it...If it [his book] did well, it was because it was well written and well researched. (Personal Communication June 11, 2002)

I find Hexham's choice of words, "it is tempting to speculate," surprising for an article that is published in a scholarly journal (i.e., *Nova Religio*). A simple call to the people about whom he writes might have eliminated his need to "speculate."

Richard Bergeron

The last example is by Richard Bergeron, founder of the Centre d'Information sur les Nouvelles Religions (CINR) in Montreal, now known as the Centre Spiritualités et Religions de Montréal (Montreal Centre on Spirituality and Religions). In his book, *Le Cortège des Fous de Dieu* (1982), Bergeron describes deprogramming as "une méthode psychiquement violente qui utilise des moyens coercitifs, comme le kidnappage" (p. 458). (English translation: "a psychically violent method that uses coercive means, like kidnapping.") He also says: "Il ne devrait pas favoriser l'utilisation des techniques de 'deprogramming,' comme Info-culte incline à le faire" (p. 456). (English translation: "One should not favor the use of 'deprogramming' techniques, as *Info-cult* is inclined to do.")

Once again, such statements are not based on a verification of the primary sources, in this case, Info-Cult.

Fifteen years later Richard Bergeron (1997) pursues his analysis of Info-Cult:

En 1990, Projet-Culte fermait ses portes comme service de B'nai B'rith pour se constituer en organisme autonome sous le nom d'Info Cult/Info-Secte. Ce changement de nom n'implique aucun changement de perspective ni de méthode d'intervention. (p. 33) (English translation: In 1990, the Cult Project closed their doors as a service of B'nai B'rith to form an independent organization called Info Cult /Info-Secte. This change of name didn't involve any change in their perspective nor their method of intervention.)

The last time Info-Cult had contact with Richard Bergeron was in the mid 1980s, more than 10 years before the above-cited comment.

More recently, during a visit to the offices of Info-Cult, Jacques Cherblanc, a doctoral student from France had this to say about Bergeron's "analysis" of Info-Cult:

... que l'organisme a beaucoup évolué depuis cette époque, et son directeur général, Mike Kropveld, est le premier à la dire, et sa biographie est très différente de celle présentée par M. Bergeron (p.4). (English translation: "...the organization has evolved a lot since that period [referring to the 1980s] and its Executive Director, Mike Kropveld, is the first to admit that and his story is very different from that presented by Mr. Bergeron.)

Conclusion

The above examples have been selected to expose certain problems regarding the nature of discussion and research about cults/new religious movements. My premise is that the labeling of Info-Cult, when it first started as a so-called "anti-cult" group is one that is still used unthinkingly. Moreover, this labeling has led to the portrayal of the organization in a simplistic, static, and one dimensional manner.

The kinds of inaccuracies I've described above have occurred time and time again. I use these as examples of how the stereotypes that have fueled the "cult wars" endure because of a lack of scholarly rigor.

I am not the first to raise the issue of the harmful aspects of the "cult wars". Others have done so very eloquently (Barker, 2002; Langone, 2000; Robbins, 2000; Zablocki & Robbins, 2001). I hope that the examples and suggestions offered here reaffirm the need to dialogue and to bring together individuals and organizations on all sides of this complex and controversial issue.

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