



Info-Cult at 35: Observations, Insights, and Lessons Learned

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In this article, the author, founding Executive Director of Info-Cult, a nonprofit charitable organization based in Montreal (Quebec, Canada), traces its 35-year history, sharing observations and insights about cults, new religious movements (NRMs) and related groups, and lessons learned along the way. What is a cult? How can we best

understand whether or not a group can be defined as a cult or be perceived as harmful? What questions should we ask when evaluating a group and deciding whether or not to intervene? What other considerations should we keep in mind? This article addresses these questions, thereby helping to broaden our understanding of cultic phenomena.¹

Since the 1960s, cultic groups have frequently made the news because of allegations of sexual and physical abuse involving children, fraud, and especially, fatal tragedies involving members or the public. Among the major cult-related tragedies that have made international headlines were the Manson Family, Peoples Temple, the Branch Davidians, Heaven's Gate, Aum Shinrikyo, and the Order of the Solar Temple (Lewis, 2011).

As a result of these tragedies, a number of groups, labeled as *cults*, began to be perceived as harmful, which led in part to the creation of "cult-watching" organizations (Barker, 2002) by families, former members, academics, evangelicals, or mental-health professionals. Governments began to play an active role in dealing with this issue, and some countries responded with legal and other measures.

As founding Executive Director of Info-Cult since 1980, I have observed the many ways in which individuals, organizations, and governments have responded to the cult phenomenon. I also witnessed how misinformed responses have resulted in tragic consequences. Consider, for instance, the ill-advised actions taken by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (BATF)² and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)³ in dealing with the Branch Davidians⁴ as a hostage-taking situation, or the reluctance of government officials to seriously consider the accusations against the Peoples Temple (Chidester, 2003), a decision that ultimately claimed 918 lives.

In the brief history that follows, I trace the evolution of Info-Cult as a cult-watching organization.

Info-Cult: A Brief History

The seeds of Info-Cult were sown as a result of a short-lived experience with the Unification Church (UC) in Boonville, California in 1977. I was visiting a friend who was involved with the Church at the time. The story about his kidnapping and deprogramming was featured in an award-winning series of newspaper articles by Josh Freed that were published in the *Montreal Star*.⁵ 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*, directed by R. L. Thomas.⁶

Following the publication of the newspaper articles, there were numerous requests for information about cults. The public's need to know more about cults and to seek help for 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).

For the first 10 years, the Cult Project operated under the auspices of the B'nai Brith Hillel Foundation of Montreal and received significant funding from the Jewish Community, in addition to donations and grants from the provincial and federal governments. Many parents and researchers were seeking to understand what caused the radical behavioral changes of cult members. One hypothesis put forth was that the use of mind-control (brainwashing) techniques was responsible for coercing cult members to succumb to the daily demands of the group. Cult

Project subscribed to this view and to the idea that destructive cults could be harmful to some of their members. It did not, however, consider that all cultic groups were problematic, hence, making a distinction between *cults* and *destructive cults*.

In the early '80s, Cult Project's major source of information on destructive cults came from former cult members' accounts in books and newspaper articles, to name a few. Early on, Cult Project considered it essential to diversify sources of information to include information on NRMs and sociological studies of religious and political groups. The library was accessible to the public, and an information-and-assistance phone line was installed for responding to questions from relatives, former cult members, students and teachers, and the media. The center served, above all, the needs of relatives of cult members, former cult members, students, and teachers. Cult Project had limited contact with groups identified as cults and destructive cults primarily because it was perceived as an anticult organization and was focused on helping former cult members and the families of members.

Discussions with cults and their members were uncommon because they rarely contacted the Cult Project, and the organization did not initiate dialogue. It was only in the mid-80s that certain groups and cult 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 center, was established with the following objectives: "promote the study of cult phenomena, sensitize, inform and educate the public about these phenomena, and assist people with problems related to these phenomena."⁷

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; and also fees for certain services. In addition to informing, educating, and providing assistance to parents, former members, students, and teachers, the center's clientele now includes members of new religions and other groups, as well as academics, mental-health professionals, attorneys, law-enforcement officers, media, and others. Info-Cult's 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 diversify the documentation materials available in its library and foster exchange with regard to cultic phenomena, especially during the annual International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) conferences that are organized in collaboration with Info-Cult. As well, increasing interest and communication with academics with varying viewpoints has helped to broaden Info-Cult's analysis and perspective on the issue. 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*

When it comes to describing, understanding, and researching the cult phenomenon, the choice of words is problematic, and some people even argue against the use of the word *cult* because it has taken on a negative connotation and led many people to view certain groups as dangerous.

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.⁸ 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),⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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, this term 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’s view is that individuals can have a positive experience in a so-called bad group, or a bad experience in a so-called good group. As Michael Langone, Executive Director of the International Cultic Studies Association, has often stated, “Some groups may harm some people sometimes, and some groups may be more likely to harm people than other groups” (Langone, 2001, p. 1).

Based on both the literature from different disciplines (i.e., psychology, sociology, criminology) and conference presentations and discussions with researchers, professionals, and others, we can make the following observations:

- *Cults are not a new social phenomenon.* Throughout history, so-called cults have been viewed by their community not only as minority groups, but also as deviant subgroups

with a potential to cause physical or psychological harm, or financial loss to their members.

- *Risks posed by a group may vary.* Risks may vary from one group to another, or from one region to another (in the case of international groups), depending on the particular period in the evolution of the group or whether there are internal or external conflicts.
- *Not all groups identified as cults pose a risk to their members.* It is important, however, to recognize that certain groups can violate the rights of their members and **do** pose a risk.
- *Participation in the life of a group constitutes an opportunity for social interaction and comfort.* Certain groups, however, can also become places of psychological or physical exclusion and oppression, or both.

In light of these observations, 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?” Info-Cult supports the need for new research to further our understanding of this phenomenon and to improve our ability to respond more effectively to calls for help. Although Info-Cult has evolved over the years, certain positions on accessibility, kidnapping, and legislation have remained constant. For example, Info-Cult has always operated out of a known location and is easily accessible, nor does Info-Cult support or assist in the use of coercive measures to remove someone from a group. In situations in which Info-Cult has been asked about that option, we have consistently counseled against it. Furthermore, Info-Cult considers that existing laws are sufficient in dealing with the multiple problems associated with cults and cultic groups.¹¹

Based on 35 years as Executive Director of Info-Cult, here are some insights I have gained and lessons I have learned from the tens of thousands of requests received:

Numerous calls about a specific group or a lot of critical written documentation about a group do not necessarily mean that it is a cult and is dangerous. For example, Info-Cult regularly receives calls concerning the Raëliens, a UFO religion that was founded in 1974 by Claude Vorilhon, now known as Raël. However, over the past few years, nearly all the calls have come from the media wanting to know more about the group’s activities, such as its Go Topless campaign, attempts to change the public image of the swastika, its plans to build their embassy in some country to welcome the extraterrestrials, or cloning.

Similarly, the fact that few or no calls are received about a certain group, and that little or no written information is available does not mean that the group is harmless. It may simply mean that little is known about the group. For example, in the case of the Order of the Solar Temple, Info-Cult received only two calls before 53 people 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 look only at statistics to evaluate a group, the results will 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 real. 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 do contact Info-Cult and have positive things to say about a group, and Info-Cult has contact with a number of groups considered to be controversial. Indeed, since 2009, Info-Cult has participated in annual meetings with controversial groups, meetings organized on a rotating basis in collaboration with three European organizations, INFORM,¹² CIAOSN,¹³ and the CIC.¹⁴ Information provided by Info-Cult, other organizations, or individuals may not be exhaustive, and therefore we may think we know more about a group or situation than we actually do. When we are evaluating an individual or group in order to decide whether or not to intervene, here are some questions that may be helpful:

- Do we accept the accusatory or positive assessments made by certain individuals or groups, without checking for ourselves and critically evaluating their accuracy?
- 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 wrong doing 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 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 it operates today?

Having made an informed evaluation, we may have insufficient information to justify an intervention, although the situation may warrant monitoring and adopting a wait-and-see approach. If an intervention by a government agency is deemed necessary, the following questions can be helpful in planning a suitable course of action:

- (a) Are the motives for intervening clear and precise?
- (b) What does one hope to achieve?
- (c) What are the possible strategies to achieve the goal?
- (d) What are the pros and cons of adopting a particular strategy or approach (with a focus on the cons)?
- (e) What are the criteria for evaluating whether or not an intervention is successful? For example, is the approach making things worse? And if so, how could it be modified?

There are other considerations to keep in mind:

- Laws in different countries require that certain professionals are legally and ethically bound to report to protective services when there is even a suspicion of harm to a child, a senior, or a dependent adult.
- What appears to function in one country may not in other countries because of factors that include the country's history, culture, laws, relationship with religion, and past experience with cultic or totalistic movements.
- Governments have an enormous amount of power at their disposition, and they should be extremely cautious in wielding that power when dealing with any group. Unless there is a serious and legal reason, the state should show restraint.
- Different situations may call for different criteria to determine whether or not an intervention is appropriate and feasible. For example, should a family intervene when they have a loved one in a group they perceive to be harmful? Should state authorities intervene to control certain cultic groups?

Some people have remarked that Info-Cult's views are moderate on the subject of cults and new religions, and they have suggested we should take a more forceful position. However, Info-Cult is not a cult-fighting organization. Our goal is to assist those harmed by cultic and other high-control groups, and to educate the public.

In conclusion, before reacting to cult-related situations, and deciding on what actions to take, we must acknowledge that how we understand the issues involved will have a direct influence on how we respond to them. And so seeing things in as broad and understanding a way as possible is imperative.

The following Talmudic quote attributed to Anais Nin, a well-known author, and others in recent times expresses this approach very well: *We don't see things as they are; we see things as we are.* ■

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Notes

- [1] The author wishes to thank Debbie Carroll for her editorial assistance in the preparation of this article.
- [2] A federal law-enforcement organization within the US Department of Justice.
- [3] The FBI is the domestic intelligence and security service of the United States, which simultaneously serves as the nation's principal federal law-enforcement organization. It operates under the jurisdiction of the US Department of Justice.
- [4] *Report to the Deputy Attorney General on the Events at Waco, Texas February 28 to April 19, 1993, October 8, 1993. Redacted Version*, United States Department of Justice, Washington, DC.
- [5] Freed, 1977 December, 1978 January.
- [6] To view the film, go to youtube.com/watch?v=UoavV7D74BU
- [7] These objectives are stated in the corporation's regulation number 1990-C.
- [8] For more information about the definitional issue, see Issue 6.3 of *ICSA Today*.
- [9] Online at derives-sectes.gouv.fr/

- [10] 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).
- [11] See also online at infosect.freeshell.org/infocult/RESPONSE.htm
- [12] Information Network on Religious Movements London, United Kingdom (online at www.inform.ac).
- [13] Centre d'information et d'avis sur les organisations sectaires nuisibles, Brussels, Belgium (online at ciaosn.be/).
- [14] Centre Intercantonal d'Information sur les Croyances, Geneva, Switzerland (online at cic-info.ch).

About the Author



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new religious movements, and other groups, and members' families. He has served as an expert witness on cult-related criminal and civil cases, and is consulted regularly by mental-health professionals and law-enforcement agencies. Since the mid-1990s he has been a collaborator in organizing the ICSA annual international conferences. He has been an invited speaker worldwide, and has appeared on many radio and television programs locally, nationally, and internationally. He has coauthored various publications, including *The Cult Phenomenon: How Groups Function* (2006)/*Le phénomène des sectes: L'étude du fonctionnement des groupes* (2003). Both versions are downloadable for free at infocult.org He was awarded the 125 Commemorative Medal in 1992 by the Government of Canada in recognition of significant contribution to compatriots, community, and Canada; and in 2007 he received the Herbert L. Rosedale Award from ICSA in recognition of leadership in the effort to preserve and protect individual freedom. infosecte@qc.aibn.com ■