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# Stepping out of the Ivory Tower: A Sociological Engagement in 'The Cult Wars'[1]

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## Abstract

The paper describes how the author's research into a new religious movement in the 1970s led to her finding herself a player in the 'cult wars', with a variety of different groups competing to have their constructions of images of the movements accepted by policy makers and the general public. The main players were the movements themselves, their opponents in the form of various 'cult-watching groups', and the media. Critical of the selective nature of the images, and concerned about the impact that these were having on 'the cult scene', the author founded Inform, an independent NGO that draws upon the methodology of the social sciences to provide information about minority religions that is as reliable and objective as possible. The paper describes some of the battles that ensued, focussing on methodological issues that have confronted her as she has pursued her research outside the Ivory Tower.

**Keywords:** Cult; new religious movement (NRM); Inform; triangulation; religion; anti-cult movement; communication; participant observation.

This is a personal story, but it is one that is told of a career in which 'doing sociology' has taken me outside the Ivory Tower of the university in the sense that I have always preferred interview and observation to sitting in a library or number crunching in front of a VDU, though I have certainly done my share of both. But I have always taken the Ivory Tower with me insofar as I have tried to employ the methods of the social sciences in my research. I have, furthermore, also taken the Ivory Tower with me insofar as I have spent much of the past three and a half decades as an active participant in what have come to be known as 'the cult wars', arguing that the methodology of the social sciences is demonstrably superior to that of most of the media and even to that of personal experience if one wants to acquire reliable, balanced and objective information.[2] This I did most obviously by setting up Inform, an independent charity based at the London School of Economics.[3]

## Introduction to 'the cult scene'

Back in the early 1970s I had started researching the different ways that highly qualified scientists, including not a few Nobel Laureates, were claiming that science could prove or disprove a wide range of theological

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positions (Barker 1979). I was flattered and fascinated to be invited to give a talk at a conference in London at which a number of these Nobel Laureates were to be present Then I discovered that the invitation came from the Unification Church, a new religion founded by a Korean Messiah called Sun Myung Moon who reputedly brainwashed people and whose activities were being investigated by the Director of Public Prosecutions. 'You can't go now', my husband told me. 'Nothing could stop me going now,' I responded.

The conference turned out to be disappointingly ordinary – we were allowed to say exactly what we wanted and there were some heated debates between the participants on issues related to science and values. There were, however, these young hosts and hostesses who smiled just a bit too much as they looked after our every need. 'Are these the brainwashed Moonbeams?' Ninian Smart, a fellow participant, asked me in a whisper.

I needed little encouragement to accept a further invitation to attend a small roundtable on science and religion to be held at the Unificationists' London headquarters. Here, where they were in the majority and on their home ground, the members seemed pretty well normal. I spent some time talking to Matthew, a young man who had a good history degree from Cambridge and whose father, a University of London professor, I knew slightly. My curiosity was heightened. How could an obviously intelligent person like Matthew give up his excellent career prospects to work long hours handing out tracts and selling flowers on the street? How could he believe that Moon was the Messiah, and be prepared to marry someone whom he had never met before and with whom he might not even share a common language?

A few weeks later, I learned that Matthew had been asking for me at LSE. I wondered whether he was trying to escape and had come to ask for help. When, however, he eventually found me it was to tell me he was worried because a sociologist was going to give a paper on the Unification Church at an international conference and that the only information he had about the movement had been garnered from a disaffected former member and the media. My response was that the sociologist did not have much alternative as the movement did not open itself to scholarly research. He then asked me whether, if I were to be given access, I would be interested in doing a study.

It took about two years before I was able to start studying the movement on my own terms, which included independent funding (I obtained this from what was then the Social Science Research Council) and a complete list of the British membership (so that I could select interviewees on a random sample basis)[4] I felt it necessary to use a variety of methods. These included questionnaires (for both Unificationists and control groups); in-depth interviews (on a random sample basis) which usually lasted eight or more hours; and observation, during which I lived in various Unification Centres for days or weeks at a time (Barker 1984; 1995). My original intention had been to write a general monograph about the Unification Church, but the first chapter, which was to have been on the conversion process, 'just growed'. In the end the entire book focussed on the question 'How did well-educated, middle-class young people come to be Unificationists – or, as they were by then popularly known, 'Moonies'?'

This question could be of interest to a sociologist for a number of reasons. First, it explored the relationship between the individual and the social environment. Pretty well all social action is (by definition according to Weber 1947: 88) the result of input from both the individual and his or her social environment. Here was a situation in which the popular media and general public freely used words like brainwashing and mind control to explain what otherwise seemed inexplicable, while the Unificationists themselves declared that they, as independent individuals, had freely chosen to join the movement without any outside pressure. It seemed to me unlikely that either extreme (absolute external control or completely free choice) was, by itself, correct; but it did present an interesting sociological challenge to try to work out what combination of which variables were involved in the process of joining the movement.

But the research question also presented a social and an ethical challenge. From around the mid-1970s, anxious parents were being told that their hapless (adult) children had been subjected to well-nigh irresistible and irreversible techniques, and that if the parents wanted to see them again they should employ a 'deprogrammer' (for, sometimes, tens of thousands of dollars or pounds) to kidnap their children and keep them under lock and key until they were cured of the cult's pernicious influence.

Clearly there was a human rights issue at stake here. If members of the movement were indeed victims of some Svengali-type techniques, one could argue that they needed protection, though not from the deprogrammers who were using illegal methods including, it has been alleged, physical violence and, in some cases, rape to achieve their ends. If, on the other hand, converts had actually decided of their own free will to join the movement, then, in a democratic society, one could argue that they should be left alone so long as neither they nor their movement were involved in criminal activity.

I tracked the 'Unification career' of over a thousand people who had agreed to attend a residential workshop in the London area throughout 1979, during which they were subjected to the allegedly brainwashing environment. It turned out that 90 per cent managed to resist the movement's pressure to become Unificationists. Furthermore, of those who did join, the majority left of their own volition within two years (Barker 1984: 146).[5] It was clear that, however much the Unificationists might want to influence potential members, their techniques were neither irresistible nor irreversible. This conclusion has been further reinforced by my current research which has revealed that a large majority of the first cohort of second-generation members have left the movement.

Innocently, I thought that the information I was gathering would be of interest to FAIR, a 'cult-watching group' that had been set up in England in 1976 with a particular focus on the Unification Church (Beckford 1985; Arweck 2006).[6] I was wrong. FAIR (an acronym for Family, Action, Information, Rescue) did not want to know. It had its own agenda and was not interested in the findings of a sociologist whose conclusions did not match their own. Families who turned to FAIR for help were likely to be told that their loved one had been brainwashed and that they would not be able to see him or her again unless they undertook drastic measures to rescue the victim, and a number of the core members of FAIR were themselves involved in illegal deprogramming activities. On occasion deprogramming was demonstrated publicly on national television. In 1987, a FAIR committee member was convicted of kidnapping and causing bodily harm to a 32-year-old Scientologist whom he had attempted to deprogramme. In 1994, FAIR changed its name to Family Action Information and Resource, when, possibly due in part to the work of social scientists, it was decided that the practice of involuntary deprogramming carried out by some of its members was no longer acceptable. Involuntary deprogramming continues in Japan but is rarely now practiced in the West (Barker 1989; Japanese Victims' Association 2010).

I found myself being accused by FAIR, and the media to which it fed its information, of being a Moonie – or being a 'cult apologist' who was wilfully or, at best, naively being used by the movement to further its aims. My first sin had been to counter the widespread belief that there were tens or even hundreds of thousands of Moonies swarming all over Britain. When I mentioned on the air that there were less than one hundred and fifty in the country, the radio station was besieged by indignant listeners, including the Chair of FAIR protesting that he knew of hundreds of people who had joined the movement and that one had only to go to any busy shopping street to see them handing out literature and luring young people to visit their local centre.

My response was, first, that even if there had been hundreds who had joined the movement (rather than just encountering a Unificationist in the street), the high turn-over rate that I had observed could account for the consistently small number of Unificationists; and, secondly, that visibility did not necessarily reflect actuality. This was brought home to me particularly forcibly when I was informed by students at the University of

Helsinki that there were no Moonies in Finland – and this was about half an hour after I had had coffee with five of them in the local Unification centre. Then, a month later, I found myself being told by students at Simon Fraser University that there were hundreds of Moonies in British Columbia. It took me a couple of days to track down all four of them, one of whom had escaped from a high profile deprogramming the previous week.

**Defending a sociological construction of reality**[7]

As my research into the Unification Church progressed, I found myself comparing it with several of the other new religious movements (NRMs) that appeared to be mushrooming throughout the West. At the same time, I was studying the movements' opponents and others who were playing a role in the 'cult scene', including former members, the relatives and friends of converts, members of the media, the government, the police, the medical, legal and other professions and the mainstream or traditional religions.

Each individual would build up his or her own picture of the movement in question (or 'cults-in-general'), but it soon became apparent that although each image was unique, there were systematic differences between the different categories of people as they constructed their images in a way that reflected their interests (Barker 2002). Thus, while members would stress the 'good' points of their movements and keep quiet about any skeletons in the cupboard, the so-called 'anti-cultists' would select what they considered to be the 'bad' features and ignore any positive attributes. Meanwhile, the media would tend to pounce on the sensational and shocking, ignoring the normal, every-day. It was hardly surprising that 'an objective value-free sociologist' would construct yet another image of the movement – and that this would be one with which few of the other constructors would be in agreement (Barker 1995).

Indeed, the fact that I was an academic who was trying to be as objective as possible was in itself a cause of contention. At the same time as I was being accused of being polluted by the movements with which I spent so much time, I was also being dismissed as someone who was confined to an ivory tower, incapable of understanding what was going on in the 'real world'. It was, of course, quite true that I myself had not 'lost a child to a cult', but this did not mean that the methodology of the social sciences could not result in information that could be of use to parents who found themselves in such a situation.[8] Time after time I saw what seemed to me to be unnecessary suffering resulting from ignorance or misinformation that had emanated from the movements, their opponents and/or the media. At the societal level, law-enforcement officers were reacting to religious groups without recognising the effect that strongly held beliefs could have on the members' reactions to a situation, with, on occasion, the tragic results that the world witnessed at Waco.[9] At the individual level, parents were agreeing to have their (adult) children kidnapped with the result that their offspring (who would have been statistically more likely than not to have left of their own free will) were frequently returning to their movement, more fanatical than before, and much less likely to have a relationship with the parents whom they no longer trusted (Barker 1983a).

I was becoming increasingly aware that promoting an objective stance was not as straightforward as I had once thought it might be. Weber (1949) makes a distinction between, on the one hand, *value freedom*, which refers to the actual investigation and describing the object of study as objectively as possible, rather than expressing the subjective values of the investigator,[10] and, on the other hand, *value relevance*, which refers to the reasons that social scientists investigate some topics rather than others because they attach value to having reliable information about the subject. Insofar as the brainwashing controversy was concerned, I have already explained why it had seemed to me that it was a worthwhile and valuable subject to pursue, whatever the outcome. But this never meant that my methodology should be anything but as value-free as possible, so that anyone, whatever *their* personal values, would be able to test the data and reach a similar conclusion.

**Making a difference**

A further accusation levelled against my work was that not only was I polluted by the data but that I was actually polluting it through my close involvement with those whom I was studying. In the course of my research, I had indeed recognised that I was 'making a difference' to the situation. First, it could be confusing for the members that I was living in a tightly bounded group where people's identity was primarily that of being either 'one of us' (a Unificationist) or 'one of them' (not a Unificationist). Whilst it was known that I was not a Unificationist, my presence meant that I had a foot both sides of the defining boundary between 'us' and 'them' and this had a number of consequences for all of us, not least of which was the possibility of discussions that were well-nigh impossible for members to have with either the outsiders, who were perceived as satanic, or with the members, who might feel duty-bound to report doubts and misdemeanours to the movement's leaders.

Secondly, not only was I seeking out parents to discover their perceptions of the situation, but parents were approaching me to ask for help. I found myself not only trying to explain to the parents what might have happened to their children, but also mediating between parents and children who, having reached a stage of mutual miscomprehension, were no longer able to communicate with each other. The presence of an emotionally uninvolved outsider, who nevertheless understood something of both sides' positions, could (and frequently did) facilitate the restoration of some sort of communication.

Further accusations of my 'making a difference' arose when I was called upon to be an expert witness in a number of court cases, and although I appeared both for and against the Unification Church and other groups, I was perceived as taking sides – sometimes, it would seem, both sides at the same time. On one occasion, when I had been called by the Prosecution in a case *against* a guru,[11] the Defence told the jury that I, as a *pro*-cult apologist, had been likened to a Nazi doctor at Auschwitz.[12]

**Inform**

My most obvious and active entry into what were becoming known as 'the cult wars' was, however, triggered by my attending a meeting of FAIR, at which four former members of new religious movements had been asked to give an account of their time in their movements and how they had come first to join and then to leave. The audience, which consisted predominantly of relatives of converts, was pressing the speakers to say how they had been brainwashed and manipulated by their respective movements – an approach that the speakers resisted, saying instead that they had initially been attracted by the ideology and the enthusiasms of the members, but that after a while they had become disillusioned and/or just wanted to move on. This overly mild response evoked fury in some of those present and when the Chair, attempting to pour oil on troubled waters, asked the speakers if they had anything to say that could be helpful for anxious relatives, a woman got up and started to shout loudly 'We don't want to hear this' – a sentiment that was enthusiastically endorsed by several other members of the audience. At that point, I stopped taking notes and just sat there in bemused frustration. The speakers had, it seemed to me, been honest and helpful in their talks. But their picture of the movements clearly did not fit the anti-cult construction of reality, and these anti-cultists had no intention of listening to anything that might require them to adjust their images – even if the information came from former members of the movements.

After consulting with a number of people, I decided that something should be done to enable the research that social scientists were doing on new religions to become more widely available, and, thereby, enlarge the number of perspectives that the public could draw upon when deciding how to react to the movements. In other words, if 'value-free' research were to be 'value relevant' then its results needed to be taken off dusty

bookshelves and translated from obfuscating sociologese into accessible information that the lay person could not only understand but could also use for practical purposes.

With the support of the Home Office and the traditional Churches,[13] Inform (Information Network Focus on Religious Movement) opened its doors on 1 January 1988 with the objective of providing enquirers with information that was as reliable, balanced and up to date as possible about minority religions.[14]

The reaction was immediate. FAIR and a handful of other anti-cult organisations expressed considerable displeasure at Inform's receiving the support that they themselves had unsuccessfully been seeking for some time. A stream of letters were sent to various government departments, clergy and the LSE where I was teaching,[15] hinting, and even declaring, the 'intelligence' that I was a Scientologist, a Krishna devotee, a fervent atheist, a cult-apologist – and much else besides.[16] The media were bombarded with atrocity stories about me and Inform, resulting in a number of articles and programmes, including an episode of *Face the Facts*, in which I was portrayed as the villain of the week. Some of these were pretty bruising experiences, but others were so ridiculous they actually brought in more expressions of sympathy and support than cries of condemnation. Perhaps the most helpful protest was a petition delivered to 10 Downing Street which resulted in Margaret Thatcher ordering an inquiry which, in turn, resulted in Inform receiving further funding from the Home Office to support the work it was doing.

Inform started with a small office and one employee who responded to the more straightforward questions and put the enquirer in touch with someone with expert knowledge if the enquiry was more complicated. Two decades later, now working for Inform are myself as its Honorary Director, a full-time Deputy Director, two Research Officers, two Assistant Research Officers and an Administrative Officer, all of whom work part time. Each of the research staff has at least a Masters degree, having studied the sociology of religion and the methods of the social sciences, with the Deputy Director and one of the Research Officers holding PhDs related to the study of NRMs.[17]

The work of Inform involves collecting, organising, assessing and disseminating information about minority religions and the issues related to them.

**Collecting material**

By the time of Inform's founding, I had amassed a considerable amount of material about the movements, much of which was on an electronic data base. This was made available to the Inform office, along with a list of specialist contacts throughout the world who formed the basis of Inform's international network. At the time of writing (January 2011) Inform has on file information relating to just over 4,000 organizations, around a thousand of which are NRMs that are currently active in the UK.[18] The information is collected from every conceivable source, including scholars, the movements themselves, former members and friends and relatives of members, cult-watching groups, the media, and those who come to us with enquiries. Inform staff also conduct first-hand research, visiting and interviewing movements, as well as reading the available literature in both hard-copy and on the Internet. This is done to investigate not only facts about particular movements, but also processes involved in the interactions between the movements and other actors in the (widely defined) 'cult scene'.

**Organising the material**

One of the most exacting tasks of an organisation such as Inform is to ensure that the information it collects is readily available rather than lost in unsorted piles, where it can be of little use to anyone. Data are organised in hard and electronic files, both according to movements and other organisations and according to topics or

issues of relevance to the subject, examples being the law, violence, children, the millennium, sex, and country-specific data. Inform has also compiled a bibliography of over 14,000 publications related to minority religions which, like Inform's other electronic databases, enables rapid cross referencing with the use of key words that include details of the movements, such as names of founders, publications, as well as the various topics of interest. The bibliographic data base can also indicate the locations of the thousands of books, articles, cuttings, leaflets, cassettes, videos and DVDs that Inform has accumulated over the years.[19]

**Assessment**

The very fact that Inform's materials come from such a wide variety of (often conflicting) sources means that the ways in which these are assessed is of primary importance and, as intimated earlier, it is the use of the methods and techniques of the social sciences that distinguishes Inform from many of the other organisations offering information about NRMs in Britain and elsewhere.

Reference has already been made to some of the ways in which such an approach can be treated with suspicion by those who are not social scientists – especially those who want to promote their own particular viewpoint when this does not tally with the information presented by Inform. Such conflicts mean that Inform's task involves not only imparting factual information, but also putting that information within a wider context and, not infrequently, trying to explain some basic assumptions of the social scientific methodology.

Adhering as Inform does to the concept of 'methodological agnosticism' means not only that we cannot pass judgement on whether a particular movement is 'good' or 'bad', or whether non-empirical beliefs are true or false. It also means that we cannot refer to God or any supernatural being as an independent variable.[20] This does not mean that we cannot describe and alert people to the 'bad' things that can get done by a movement, nor that we cannot report that converts may claim that something happened because of their karma, or because it was God's will, while their parents might consider it was the result of a satanic force.

A question that Inform is frequently asked is 'Is it a genuine religion, or is it a cult?' (Barker 1994). One journalist wrote an article entitled *No Room for a View* after I had refused to say which of the movements I was studying were cults and which were religions.[21] Since the early 1970s, sociologists of religion had become well aware that, in popular parlance, terms such as 'cult' or 'sect' were not understood in the technical sense used by sociologists of religion.[22] They had become pejorative labels which, when applied to an organisation, give very little clue as to its actual beliefs and practices but made it quite clear that the labeller considered it a 'bad thing'. As a result, sociologists of religion have tended to use the term new religious movement (NRM) – a term that is not without its own difficulties, not least because not all NRMs think of themselves as new,[23] and several are not considered either by themselves or by others to be a religion.[24]

Although Inform tries to provide as balanced an account as possible of the movements, it does, like all constructors of social reality, select certain features of the phenomenon it is describing, while ignoring others. It does not usually consider it necessary to give details about what the members eat for breakfast.[25] It is more likely to draw attention to features of the movements that might be of particular relevance in helping those to whom it supplies information. It will, moreover, alert the appropriate authorities when it learns of allegations of serious criminal or anti-social behaviour, and, at the same time, it tries to reduce both unnecessary anxiety and discriminatory behaviour by pointing to the more 'normal' beliefs and actions of the movements and, indeed, the absence of any substantial evidence of criminal or anti-social behaviour.

A further methodological point that requires repeated telling concerns the importance of comparison as a critical ingredient in the scientific enterprise. Perfectly accurate accounts of undesirable actions by members

of an unpopular religion are frequently pointed to by commentators with the implication that such actions are not only typical of, but caused by, the movement in question. An example I have often used in an attempt to demonstrate this potential fallacy is that if the media report two or three instances of suicide by a member of a 'cult', it is not uncommon to start to wonder what it is about the cult that causes people to kill themselves, without recognising that the media are unlikely to report an Anglican's suicide – or at least the fact that a person committing suicide was an Anglican. The social scientist would, however, want to compare the *rate* of suicide in the movement with the rate of suicide of people of a similar age and social background in the general population, and if it were discovered that the latter was twice that of the rate in the movement the question could be reversed to ask what it might be about the movement that *prevented* its members from killing themselves.[26]

It is not always easy to convince people that, even if the results are acknowledged to be accurate, the social scientific approach is desirable. On one occasion when the then-Chair of FAIR was complaining about a statement I had made, I asked him in what way he thought it was wrong. His reply was that what I had said was perfectly correct, but that by going into the complexity of the situation and including information that could be taken to mean that the movements could have some benign characteristics, I was 'muddying the waters'. 'People cannot hear you unless you have a clear message' he explained. 'You just confuse them'.[27] To a certain degree he had a point, but Inform's objective is to try to clarify complications, not to sweep them under the carpet for the sake of clarification.

**Dissemination**

Inform disseminates information through a variety of channels. Over the years it has responded to tens of thousands of enquirers from scores of countries. Sometimes the enquiries can be dealt with by a relatively short telephone call or email; sometimes they involve days, or even weeks in the preparation of a detailed report on a particular issue or individual NRM. There are times when Inform has received innocent-sounding requests for information purporting to be from an anxious mother who says her son has joined a cult. The enquirer could, however, be (and on a number of occasions has been) someone in the movement itself, or from one of the anti-cult groups, testing us to see what we would say. Such deceptions can be irritating and if they caught us off guard could endanger our future – we have been threatened with suits for libel and defamation both by some NRMs and by some anti-cultists.

On the other hand, knowledge that, every time the telephone rings or we receive a letter or email, it could be a hoax by someone who hopes to 'expose' Inform as either a 'cult critic' or a 'cult apologist', means that we have to be always on the alert and impart only information that we could if necessary justify in a court of law. Of course, there are plenty of instances when we have to say that we do not know the answer to the questions that we are asked; if we have learned of allegations that are unproven we may report these (so long as they have some credibility), but we need to make it clear that they are unproven and to give some indication of the reliability of the source of the allegation; and when we have received conflicting reports about a movement or what has happened in a particular situation, then the enquirer is told of the alternative claims.

Quite apart from responding to those who approach Inform directly, information that Inform has collected and assessed has reached many others through more indirect means. For example, members of the international network not only provide but also receive information from Inform and then pass on the information to others. To take but one example, what was then the British Council of Churches set up a Diocesan network to work with Inform shortly after its founding, and members of this network pass on information they have obtained from Inform to people in their locality. There are also now a number of publications, including books, articles, reports and leaflets that are publicly available as a result of Inform's work,[28] and Inform is currently (January 2011) reconstructing its website (www.Inform.ac) for further dissemination of information.

Inform organises events at which different perspectives can be aired in an attempt to promote dialogue that could increase understanding between people holding opposing points of view. Twice a year, there is a day-long Seminar on a particular issue, examples being: *NRMs and the Media; NRMs and the Law; Intentional Communities; Adults who grew up in NRMs; NRMs and Prophecy; NRMs and Sexuality; New Movements in the Islamic Tradition; NRMs and Health; Cults and Crime*.[29] There are usually eight or nine invited speakers and these can include an assorted combination of scholars, members, relatives of members and former members of both new and old religions, professionals such as psychiatrists or lawyers and representatives of governments, law enforcement and various cult-watching groups.

The Seminar audience, which usually consists of eighty to a hundred people is even more diverse, including anyone who wishes to attend. We have also had 'Anonymous' demonstrators outside the venue who did *not* wish to attend as they were opposed to Inform's giving Scientologists an opportunity to speak. The demonstrators did, however, talk to me for some time, and managed to eat the Inform sandwiches that were brought out to them while they were shivering in the cold. There is plenty of time for further questioning and discussion during the lunch and coffee breaks. These Seminars have been unique in the way that they bring together sometimes complementary but frequently contradictory perspectives and images of NRMs. Quite apart from the factual and experiential knowledge brought by the individual speakers, the Seminars are also a useful method of generating information about the ways in which different people might react when confronted by alternative constructions of reality. Inform has also organised three large four-day international conferences with a few hundred participants from a score or more countries. The majority of speakers are academics, but these conferences have included sessions at which members, former members and representatives of cult-watching groups have shared a platform.[30]

A third type of event has been the closed workshop, examples including a day-long dialogue between clergy (mainly chaplains) and Pagans, a special event for the Metropolitan Police held at New Scotland Yard, and a meeting entitled 'Children at Risk? Possession, Witchcraft and Exorcism' attended by specially invited social workers, clergy (including some from black-majority churches) and law enforcement officers. This was followed up by an open Inform Seminar on 'Spirit Possession and Exorcism' at which the speakers included a psychiatrist who specialises in voodoo and other religious beliefs, a police officer working for 'Project Violet',[31] a social worker working in the black community, an exorcist from a black church, a practising Wiccan, an Evangelical Christian and an anthropologist. Several of these and some of the participants at the workshop subsequently contributed to a special volume that was edited by Inform's Honorary Research Fellow (La Fontaine 2009).

**Ethical issues**

The ethical issues raised by Inform's work are not that different from those of any sociologist who conducts first-hand research, though they may at times take an unusual turn. Since Inform's inception, we have had a strict policy of not accepting funding from any individual or organisation that might affect or be thought to affect the outcome of our research. Whilst working on the original Moonie book I had, with the agreement of the government Research Council funding my research, contributed talks at some invitation-only, expenses-paid Unification conferences in order to obtain some of the information I needed for my research and could not otherwise have obtained. Although I never accepted any honoraria, and I felt I could defend my attendance (Barker 1983c), in retrospect I have come to believe that this could have been a mistake, if only because it has subsequently provided fuel for those who have accused Inform of being in the pay of NRMs. But it does raise the issue of access (discussed further below). Since the mid-1980s (that is, well before I set up Inform), I have insisted on paying my own expenses whenever I have been invited to any event that would cost the movement I was studying more than a meal; but this has given rise to some tense situations between myself and the

movement (and on a couple of occasions the withdrawal of an invitation) on the grounds that by paying for myself I was treating the movement as a 'cult'.

Another policy that Inform has always insisted upon is that it preserves the confidentiality of those who approach it with enquiries, and it does not divulge any personal information about individuals without first obtaining their explicit agreement. Material that we obtain from individuals that could be of general interest is carefully anonymised before it becomes part of Inform's more publicly available resources. However, neither Inform nor its staff enjoys legal privilege. This means that we have no legal grounds for withholding information if it is requested by a court of law – and this has happened. The case was one that arose when a number of young women told Inform that they had been raped by a guru who was purporting to heal them. Inform suggested that the women should take their stories to the police as these were serious criminal allegations. Several of the women did so when Inform put them in touch with the relevant officer, and the guru was arrested. However, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), having learned that there were more women who had told Inform about similar experiences, ordered us to disclose their names and details of their allegations.

Although we had asked these women if they would speak to the police, they had declined to do so, some because they were now married and did not want their family to learn about their past experience, and some because they feared possible repercussions from the guru's group. We decided that we would fight the demand for disclosure, and eventually the judge decided in Inform's favour, asking only for a few documents that we were allowed to redact so that our informants' identity remained protected. The judgement was due partly to the fact that Inform had shown its willingness to help the police – short of divulging confidential information. The costs in legal fees were, however, considerable (over £20,000) and although in the event Inform was reimbursed, we took a considerable risk in deciding to fight the CPS. We had, nonetheless, felt strongly that we ought to do all we could to preserve the confidentiality of our informants. Had we not fought, Inform's credibility could have taken a hard knock and we would have risked losing the trust of enquirers, particularly frightened former members and, furthermore, losing important sources of information in the process.

The case against the guru was a long and complicated one.[32] An initial trial ended in a hung jury, but a second trial resulted in the guru receiving a ten-year prison sentence (Coleman 2010; Leask 2010). Part of the Defence's position was that the allegations were the result of a conspiracy by the American father of one of the guru's followers, with Inform having helped to build up the conspiracy by putting other parents and former members in touch with each other. The fact that Inform had evidence that we had first received complaints about the guru long before the American father's daughter had ever heard of, let alone met, the guru rather weakened this approach. It was, however, true that we had put some people in touch with each other, although only with the express permission of all parties; and it is true that, as the Defence contended, this could have altered the perceptions of some of the witnesses – yet another example of 'making a difference'.

Indeed, if requested, Inform quite often puts individuals in touch with each other. This is most frequently the case with former members of NRMs or with relatives of converts, who can feel isolated and bewildered and wanting to speak with someone who has had a similar experience and who might understand their position. Enabling such contacts (and, indeed, other contacts) can certainly 'make a difference' – just as any interviews or participant observation by a researcher can make a difference to the social environment. So long as the social scientist is aware of this difference and takes it into account in his or her analysis of what is happening, this need not present an insuperable problem for the researcher. The Defence, however, referred to Inform's introductions as 'contamination'.

Although called as a witness for the Prosecution in this particular case, I have been loath to appear as an expert witness since setting up Inform. When I had given evidence at an earlier stage in my career I had assumed that I could preserve my impartiality by giving the same answers to whichever side asked me questions. While still working on my *Moonie* book (Barker 1984: 122ff), I was called by the Unification Church who were (unsuccessfully) suing the Daily Mail for accusing it of brainwashing and breaking up families. (*Orme v. Associated Newspaper Group Ltd*). After I had given my evidence, not all of which had been entirely complimentary about the movement, one of the Unificationists who was in the court remarked wryly that they had obviously not succeeded in brainwashing me.

It had soon become apparent, however, that I could only answer the questions I was asked, and precisely which questions these were depended entirely on which side had called me. For this reason, when asked to contribute to legal proceedings, Inform usually replies that lawyers can ask whatever questions they want for the preparation of their case, and, if they would like, they can go through Inform's publicly available material on the religion or issue in question, but Inform will not itself provide an expert opinion. An exception to this general policy is in child custody cases when the Family Court requests an opinion about the effect of living with a parent who is a member of a particular religion. On such occasions we are not being called by either side but by the court, which is responsible for making a decision about a child's welfare.[33]

As already intimated, Inform's policy of having direct contact with any movement that is willing to cooperate with it has given rise to accusations of partisan collaboration from members of FAIR and some other cult-watching groups. It is unlikely that this is a practice that would raise many eyebrows in the academic community, but the fact that it does cause suspicion in some quarters, including those where Inform hopes to have some impact with its own 'constructions of reality', does mean that it is a methodological approach that Inform is constantly having to justify. In doing this, Inform stresses that contact with the movements does not mean that it either endorses or necessarily accepts everything that it is told, but that it believes, first, that it is important to gain information from the movements' perspectives (more on this below); secondly, that the movements ought to be given an opportunity to respond to accusations made against them; and, thirdly, that it enables Inform (although only with the full agreement of all parties concerned) to mediate when a breakdown in communication has occurred between a movement's members and non-members. This we have done on a number of occasions so that, for example, a young person has agreed to finish his university course before he engaged in full time work for his movement; a husband has repaid to his wife money that he had obtained by taking out a mortgage on their jointly owned house to pay for a course offered by his movement; and several times we have been able to put estranged relatives in touch with each other (see below for one example).

**Dichotomies, triangulation and multi-perspective approaches**

My experience at the FAIR meeting and the fact that Inform was persistently being attacked for making contact with the new religions served to reinforce my conviction that the so-called anti-cultists were uninterested in learning what the NRMs were actually like. Like some of the movements that they opposed, I decided, they saw the world from a strictly dichotomous 'them' vs. 'us' perspective.

Then, towards the end of the 1990s it dawned on me that perhaps I and some of my academic colleagues were guilty of doing exactly the same thing – though in our case it was those whom we referred to as the anti-cultists whom we were viewing as an homogenous 'them' in opposition to 'us', the social scientists. Annoyed at being misrepresented and misunderstood (even knowingly lied about by some of 'them'), I realised that I was 'lumping them all together' and finding it difficult to recognise anything that might be positive about 'them' – and that my research into them had consisted mainly of reading their negative statements about both 'the cults' and 'us', rather than having any direct interaction with them.

I had tried quite hard to make contact with FAIR and the other British cult-watchers, but to little avail – if any of their members showed an interest in Inform they were threatened with, and in some cases underwent, expulsion from the anti-cultist fraternity. It is not only members of FAIR who have been threatened; more than one European cult-watcher has been told that they would be ostracised if they accepted an invitation to visit Inform or even talk to me. A former member was invited to speak at a FAIR meeting, but after having accepted the invitation she got a letter asking her not to mention that I had helped her on her departure from her movement as this 'would upset our audience'. One of FAIR's Chairs invited me to his club on a few occasions on condition I did not tell anyone that we had met. Over some excellent claret he confessed that he would like to attend the Inform Seminars, but did not dare do so.

Eventually I decided, with a certain degree of trepidation, to write to what had become the largest cult-watching group in the United States, at that time called the American Family Foundation (AFF), and ask whether I might attend their 1997 annual meeting in Philadelphia. I got a cordial reply telling me I would be welcome, and when I arrived at the conference hotel I was invited to the President's room to have a drink with him, the Executive Director and a few other AFF officers. There were certainly several people at the conference who made it perfectly plain that they disapproved in no uncertain terms of my presence, but both the President and the Executive Director could not have been more welcoming, and they enthusiastically agreed when I suggested that we might arrange a day-long meeting just before the next AFF conference in Seattle, with four of 'them' discussing issues of mutual interest with four of 'us'.

The meeting was an eye-opener for both teams. Although we certainly did not reach agreement on everything, perhaps not even on the majority of points that came up, we undoubtedly got to know, understand and even respect each other's positions much more clearly. It also became apparent that the reason for several of our disagreements was that we were starting from different assumptions and/or asking different questions. Broadly speaking, while the social scientists were asking what new religions were like, the AFF representatives were asking what harm the cults did. Our concept of new religious movement was far wider than theirs in many ways as they, uninterested in movements that did no obvious harm, confined their scrutiny to those movements that were popularly referred to as 'destructive cults'.

The AFF has now changed its name to the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)[34] and, like Inform, has extended its activities to 'making a difference' on both sides of the Atlantic.[35] There are still those who strongly oppose the cooperation that now exists between ICSA and Inform, but there is an expanding network of cult-watchers who exchange information from a wide range of perspectives. The anti-cult oriented presidents and staff of the Centre for Information and Advice about Harmful Sectarian Organisations (CIAOSN)[36] and the Inter-ministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combating Cultic Deviances (MIVILUDES)[37] (founded respectively by the Belgian parliament and as the result of a decree by the French President) have visited the Inform office, spoken at Inform Seminars and asked Inform for information about various movements – as have representatives of various European Ministries of Justice and Religion, and law enforcement agencies.

Inform has benefitted greatly from its association with the diverse 'cult-watching groups' that start from different perspectives and employ different methods from those espoused by Inform (Barker 2002). I would, however, like to devote the rest of this paper to picking up a gauntlet thrown down by Dr Stephen Mutch, a lawyer of the Supreme Court of New South Wales, who teaches at Macquarie University and is an active Patron of the Australian CIFS (Cult Information and Family Support Inc.), which was initially formed in 1996 'by parents and family members of loved ones caught up in abusive groups' but now includes 'former members and concerned individuals working together towards a common goal, to provide support and develop awareness for those affected by high demand groups or cultic relationships'.[38]

In a key address that he gave at an ICSA conference, Mutch (2006: 185) agreed with me that it is important to understand a movement from a number of perspectives, but argued that it is 'difficult for any individual scholar to attempt successfully to gain access to a controversial new religious movement and at the same time study the accounts of leavers.' This, his argument went, is because a researcher who has engaged in either party cannot expect to have any 'street credibility' with the other. What is needed, Mutch believes, is a methodological division of labour, or what he calls a triangulated approach, with different individuals or groups having to choose to specialise in *either* 'leaver research' *or* 'invited-access research' (together with other, non-interactive methods, such as examining official records).

Mutch has a point – to be labelled (as has frequently occurred in the so-called 'cult wars') as either a cult apologist or a cult critic can make access to 'the other side' difficult. But while it can be difficult, it is certainly not impossible; and whenever it is possible, I believe it is desirable.

Perhaps the first observation to be made is that although some leavers are undoubtedly antagonistic towards their erstwhile movement by no means all leavers are; many maintain perfectly amicable relations with those who remain in the movement. To accept Mutch's dichotomous perspective of there being only two sides is to risk accepting 'their' perspective even when this is not the case. The next point is that even when there is antagonism between leavers and current members, it does not follow that researchers are necessarily denied access to one side because they have researched the other. My own work over the past few decades provides plenty of empirical refutation of such a necessity.

I now know many people whom I first met when they were members of a movement, but who have long since left yet kept in touch with me over the years. But right from the beginning of my research into the Unification Church I made it clear that I was interested in speaking to former members and others who were opposed to the movement. This seemed to be accepted without much question. Matthew, the Unificationist who had originally invited me to do a study of the movement, told me some time later that he did not know what I thought about the Unification Church, but he did know that I listened, which at that time, he felt, few people were prepared to do. The fact that the media and the movements' opponents tend to depict 'cults' in such sensationalist, one-sided and, sometimes, grossly inaccurate ways can facilitate access – or even elicit research by Inform and other social scientists as the movement wants a more accurate depiction of their movement 'out there' – even if it is not quite the one they themselves might want to present.

Of course, negative publicity can also result in movements becoming increasingly closed and suspicious of any non-members. Conversely, some of the movements that at one time were anxious for Inform to obtain information that would correct what they considered to be an unfair depiction of them in the media, and who had been willing to contribute to Inform Seminars, have, as they have become more accepted as part of the British religious scene, wanted to distance themselves from an organisation that is known to provide information about controversial new religions – although we have usually continued to have a co-operative relationship with members at the individual level.

So far as researchers are concerned, having had contact with 'the other side', they can be alerted to investigate beliefs and practices about which they might not have been previously informed by the movement itself, and, by telling their informants that they have heard that such and such is the case, the informants can be provoked into explaining and revealing more than they might otherwise have done.

One of the more dramatic situations in which I quite openly had access to both sides occurred when I was engaged in interviewing and participant observation at the Unification Theological Seminary in Barrytown, New York. I discovered that this was located near the offices of a notorious deprogrammer and managed to arrange to spend a day with him. In the evening the deprogrammer, who had a gun on his dashboard, drove me

back to the Seminary. He dropped me off at the gates, keeping me in the glare of his headlights as I walked the few yards to where the armed Unification guards were waiting to receive me. I didn't really believe that either side would hit me in the cross fire, but I admit that it did feel a bit like crossing Checkpoint Charlie during the Cold War.

It might be added that the Unificationists did not merely accept that I had contact with their opponents; they also accepted my writing critically about their movement and its messiah. At first when I was invited to speak at a Unification conference, I spoke about neutral, non-Unification matters, and when asked to talk about the movement, I kept to fairly straightforward descriptions and statistical analyses. Then, when they were holding a conference about the family, I was invited to write a paper on the Unification concept of the Ideal Family. This I did, describing ways in which Moon's instructions to members to leave their families in their endeavour to restore the Kingdom of Heaven on earth actually prevented their establishing the God-centred ideal nuclear family required for the restoration. I also drew on former members' reports and the movement's internal literature to demonstrate that Moon himself had violated his own ideals in performing his role of father, husband and son. On submitting the paper I expected my invitation to be withdrawn; it was not. During the conference, the Unificationist responsible for the movement's 'blessed couples' discussed the situation with me, not only agreeing with most of what I had written, but also mentioning some further problems they were having with homosexuality. The paper (Barker 1983b) was published by the Unification Theological Seminary without a single word being altered by the non-Unificationist editor.

But it has not only been Unificationists who accept that my research involves interactions with opposing sides. The Exclusive Brethren, whose reading of the Bible supports their Doctrine of Separation,[39] which involves their cutting themselves off from the rest of society as far as is possible, have invited me to their schools and into their homes (although I always have to eat in a separate room).[40] Not only are they well aware that I have interviewed several former Brethren who have been 'put out' or 'withdrawn from' since their departure from the movement, the Brethren have arranged for me to talk to the relatives of some of these former members (with whom they themselves will have no dealings). When I ask them why they will offer me hospitality yet refuse all contact with their sister, son or uncle, they explain that they can talk to me because I was not brought up knowing the Truth and then rejected it, which is what the 'apostates' have done. Interestingly, although I have been urged to convert by members of several of the religions I have studied, the Brethren have never subjected me to any such pressure.

The Family International, formerly known as the Children of God, which I have studied in considerable depth (interviewing members at length and staying in several of their Homes around the world), is another movement that has always been well aware of my many contacts with former members (including those that are active in 'anti-cult' groups). Among the occasions when my contact with 'both sides' was abundantly clear, was one when I arranged for a mother who had left the movement in its early days to spend a day in my kitchen with her daughter who was still in the movement and whom she had neither seen nor spoken to for fourteen years. Both the mother and the daughter arrived at my house with their 'supporters', but for several hours I refused to allow any of them to enter (apart from letting my husband conduct them to 'the facilities' at regular intervals).

Both mother and daughter were clearly nervous and insisted that I remained with them for their initial meeting and during a slightly strained lunch. Eventually I managed to leave them alone together for a short time and then decided it was 'safe' to let the (non-member and former-member) relatives meet with the daughter for tea in the garden. The daughter then rejoined the movement's members who were waiting for her. Her mother had to wait several more years for her daughter to leave the movement, but an initial contact had been made and communication restored (Jones et al 2007). So far as I was concerned, as a researcher I had been able to gain a

unique insight into a situation that would have been quite impossible had I adhered to Mutch's 'triangulated approach'.

To take just one further illustration out of the numerous examples from which I could draw, I have been a participant observer at Falun Gong gatherings and interviewed several of its practitioners at length, including those who have been granted asylum in the West after having been held for 're-education' in the People's Republic of China; and I have stayed on the campus of the police university in Beijing (more officially named the Chinese People's Public Security University), where, on two separate occasions, I have given short courses on social science methodology. I have also interviewed former practitioners who are now responsible for 're-educating' practitioners in China, as well as a number of government officials and representatives of the Chinese Anti-Cult Association. Again, both the practitioners and their opponents knew I had contact with the 'other side' yet seemed eager to respond to questions that explicitly drew on allegations I had heard from their opponents.

When invited by the Centre for the Study of Destructive Cults at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to give a lecture on 'positivist analysis and research on the harms of people's freedom of mind, personal rights, social order and public security etc. by destructive cults in the world and in China', with the suggestion that Falun Gong could provide a typical case, I wrote a long paper that drew on accusations made both by officials of the People's Republic of China and by Falun Gong. This was published in full in English (Barker 2009), although the accompanying Chinese version was somewhat shorter – the reason for this being, I was told, that the translator did not have sufficient time to provide a full translation because I had handed it in at the last moment.

There are, of course, people on 'both sides' who refuse to have anything to do with me or Inform – but many of these refuse to have any contact with any outsider. For this reason it is sometimes assumed that covert research is more productive than overt research, and there are some cases in which this can be persuasively argued (Humphreys 1975; Lauder 2003). But, quite apart from ethical and psychological issues, my experience has led me to believe that in most cases it would be not only unnecessary but also methodologically counter-productive to go undercover and pretend to join. Once accepted in the researcher role, one is granted permission to question in ways that would be unthinkable for a covert researcher – female members are frequently separated or discouraged from interacting with male members, and rank and file members have little opportunity to question or even observe those in leadership positions.

Returning to Mutch: he continued his argument by saying '… it is difficult to sit on the barbed wire fence … in an effort to strive for academic even-handedness. This approach is likely to lead to public-policy impotence' (Mutch 2006: 185). But even-handedness is not the same as either objectivity or methodological agnosticism. The researcher does not have to decide which side of the fence to come down on, but that does not mean that s/he cannot pass through a gate to discover what people believe and do on both sides of the fence (and other people in other places adjacent to those on either side of the fence) – and where there are conflicts. It is not the researcher's task to resolve conflict, but Inform does consider it is its task to give people an idea of what is happening on the other side of the fence so that they themselves might have a greater opportunity to resolve conflict. And by so doing, Inform not only can, but does, stimulate 'public-policy potency'.

Whilst Inform does not advise the British government or any other enquirers what they should 'do about cults' this does not mean it will not provide information about whether or not a particular group indulges or is likely to indulge in socially unacceptable behaviour. Whenever it has heard of allegations of serious crimes (suspicious deaths, child abuse, or the distribution of hard drugs), Inform has reported these to the appropriate authorities for further investigation – but it has also provided the police and other law-enforcement agencies

with information that could prevent the unnecessary exacerbation of a volatile situation. Furthermore, Inform is proactive in its attempts to forestall potential problems. Each year, for example, it sends out a poster and information sheet to all British universities and colleges of further education to alert students to possible difficulties that can arise if they become involved in an NRM, and telling them how they can get further information about groups that approach them[41]. To give another example, it provided a warning notice for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, giving information and advice for persons travelling abroad.[42]

However, Mutch highlights the fundamentally different methodological approach between Inform and the Australian CIFS when he declares that 'the only way we are going to find cancer is by searching for the cancer – not in trying to determine how healthy the body might otherwise be' (Mutch 2006: 185). Sticking with his metaphor, doctors need to know how a healthy body functions if they are both to recognise and to cure a cancer. Since (possibly before) Durkheim (1938; 1952), sociologists have been aware of the normality and the relativity of deviance (as well as of its social functions).

Researchers who limit themselves to obtaining knowledge from the critical former members whom Mutch recommends as one of the options for his division-of-labour-approach have sometimes used questionnaire and interview. However, by definition, they deny themselves the possibility of interviewing current members, let alone first-hand observation of the movement as a social entity. They can, as a consequence, miss much that is of importance in understanding the people who stay 'inside' and the social processes that take place within the movement. Certainly, there are former members who have written books, and they assuredly have some knowledge of what went on in their movement. However, they (like some current members who write books about their movement) frequently have a strong agenda to promote and are unlikely to have conducted questionnaires or interviews on a systematic basis (Lewis 1986).

Of course, there are always likely to be actions that are hidden from any outside observer (and possibly just as many, if not more, that are kept from the members themselves).[43] But more is likely to remain hidden from those who never visit a movement – indeed, it is even relatively easy for a short-term visitor to be kept unaware of important aspects of a movement.[44] Quite apart from the opportunity to observe the social interactions that are taking place in the day-to-day life of the community, one of the advantages of participant observation is that researchers can be corrected when they make a mistake, not least by *doing* things that they had not noticed were *not* done – and which they would not have recognised as incorrect or inappropriate had they just been passively reading, listening or watching a film of the movement (Barker 1987).

There are methodological risks inherent in living with a religious community (or a tribe or any group that one wishes to study). One of these is 'going native'. Neither I nor any of the Inform staff have ever felt the slightest inclination to join any of the scores of movements we have studied. It is, however, easy enough not to notice what one is learning – what initially seemed strange and exotic can become familiar and accepted as 'normal'. For this reason, keeping a diary or field notes about not only what one is observing but also what one is experiencing is essential for ensuring one remembers what had initially seemed unusual. It is through recognising one's changing perception of what is unusual and what is normal that one can hope to communicate the different perceptions to others.

The ease with which one can 'go native' in this soft sense was brought home to me on an occasion when my husband happened to be present while I was chatting with some Unificationists whom I had got to know well. Once we were alone, my husband confessed that he had been amazed not so much by their behaviour and language as by mine. This surprised me as I had been unaware that I was doing anything unusual. However, once I thought about it I realised that, just as one behaves slightly differently in the presence of a maiden aunt from the way one behaves at a student party, I had unconsciously slipped into 'Unification mode'. It should, however, be stressed that this did not mean that I 'had become a Moonie' as a FAIR commentator claimed

after I had told this story on television. It was obvious I had not as my husband had been taken aback by my behaviour.

## Communication

Communicating the results of one's research is rarely discussed in any detail in methodology books or courses.[45] The work of Inform has highlighted this as a genuine challenge. Indeed, one of the reasons Inform was founded was because so few people were aware of the work being conducted in Britain and around the world by social scientists. And, as has already been explained, Inform's depictions of NRMs have had to compete in a market place populated by other depictions that can be considerably more alluring. The socio-logic of our methodology is by no means obvious to everyone.

Even those who are anxious to hear what Inform has to say can become suspicious if our description too obviously overlaps with that of the movement we are describing. Early on in my research, an anxious mother seemed to be calming down as I tried to explain to her what her daughter might have found attractive about a particular NRM. About twenty minutes into the conversation, however, she suddenly interrupted me with the accusation 'You're sounding just like them!' It was, I realised, necessary to 'translate' so that what was being described was understandable to the listener, who would have his or her own assumptions and expectations rather than those of the people one was describing. In other words, as any good advertising agency is no doubt aware, it is necessary to have knowledge not only of the product, but also of the potential customer.

Paradoxically, to have maximum impact one may have to present one's construction of a social reality so that it does *not* directly represent that which it is depicting. This is not to say that one should mislead by giving inaccurate information but, rather, impart the information in a manner that differs from the way that it would be presented by the participants (in this case, the members of an NRM). An illustration that might help to explain this point could be the theatrical performance of a brilliant actor playing the role of a bore. The audience can be riveted by his portrayal and understand the character far better than if the actor were boring.

## Concluding remarks

This paper has been an account of how researching new religious movements resulted in my engaging in a situation in which conflicting images of the movements were competing with each other, and where it was frequently those images constructed by the popular media and the so-called anti-cult movement that were having the greatest impact – with, on occasion, what were likely to be unnecessarily distressing consequences. In the belief that the results of research conducted according to the methods of the social sciences should have a stronger voice, Inform was founded with the aim of helping people by providing reliable, up-to-date information, based on such methods.

It is not possible to estimate the extent of the impact that Inform has had over the years, but it would be hard to argue that it has had none. Thousands of enquirers have expressed gratitude to it for the information it has given them, telling us that they have been helped either by being alerted to potential dangers or by being reassured when there was no need for undue anxiety. Governmental and non-governmental organisations in Britain and throughout the world have continued to make use of Inform's services, telling us that they have found our information more reliable and helpful than the information they can get from other sources. Of course, not everyone is happy with the impact Inform may have had. The current chairman of FAIR has publicly complained on several occasions about the government's using Inform as 'its principal source of advice', which, he says, is responsible for 'the total lack of official action to restrict or discourage the activity of cults, or to warn students and others of the dangers of becoming involved' (Sackville 2004).

Sociologists have long accepted that multiple methods (interviews, questionnaires, observation and literature reviews) can, in their own ways *and* when taken together, enrich the overall picture that we construct of a phenomenon. This paper has argued that not only should the methodological techniques be as varied as possible, but that as wide a range as possible of the different actors affecting the situation should be studied in their own right *and* taken together.

While it may be useful, even necessary, to have specialist researchers concentrating on one set of persons (such as current members) and another set of researchers concentrating on another set (such as former members), if we want to understand the interaction between them and, therefore to further understand each phenomenon itself, we cannot just add the two isolated phenomena together. The ever-changing whole is in some ways more and in other ways less than the sum of its parts. Not only do we need to visit both sides of the fence to get an overall understanding of the whole scene, we need to understand the whole scene in order to understand its component parts. As Kipling (1891) wrote, 'And what should they know of England who only England know?'

Furthermore, if we are hoping that the results of our research are to have an impact on a public that extends beyond the academic community, increasing our understanding of a phenomenon such as the cult scene from as many perspectives as possible can enable us to communicate more effectively to those who, as individuals or public or private organisations, could already be drawing on alternative socially constructed images – we need to understand where they are 'coming from' if we want them to be able to 'hear' us.

Such exercises necessitate stepping out of the Ivory Tower of the University. This is not always a comfortable place for scholars; however, at least in the field of minority religions, it is unlikely that their work will have much impact on the wider society if they do not venture beyond the security of academia. But this does not entail abandoning the rigours of the sociological method. And it can be fun.

**Notes**

[1] Throughout the years in which I have been engaged on the work described in this article, I have received funding from a number of sources: the ESRC, the SSRC, the Nuffield Foundation, the Leverhulme Trust and, most recently, the British Academy. I would like to express my thanks to all these organisations for their support.

[2] This is not to deny for one instant that personal experience constitutes an important, indeed necessary, part of the social scientific investigation. It is just that by itself it can result in a distorted picture of a wider whole.

[3] Information Network Focus on Religious Movements: www.Inform.ac

[4] There was initially some resistance to giving me a full list as the Unificationists said this could put their members in danger from the media or deprogrammers if it fell into the wrong hands. We eventually reached a compromise whereby I would have a complete list, with dates of birth and joining, but the names themselves would not be complete (Barker 1984: 15; 262 note 4).

[5] These results were remarkably similar to those found by an American psychologist who conducted a similar study of 104 potential converts in the United States around the same time (Galanter 1980).

[6] The generic term 'cult-watching group' is used to describe any group that exists primarily because it has an interest in new religions – widely defined. The category can be further subdivided into groups with different kinds of interests in the movements, some positive, others negative, with yet others being more theologically and ethically neutral (Barker 2002).

[7] It will be clear that this and other sections of the paper owe much to Berger and Luckmann's (1967) approach to social processes.

[8] See Bryan Wilson's (1970) introduction to his book *Rationality* for a discussion about the distinction between subjective knowledge and knowledge obtained through systematic objective study.

[9] In 1993 the FBI stormed the Branch Davidians' compound in Waco, Texas, resulting in the death of most of the followers of David Koresh, including 25 children whom the authorities had intended to rescue from the group (Bromley and Melton 2002).

[10] Of course, in the social sciences (unlike the physical sciences) investigators use their own subjective awareness and understanding of social life as part of their research methods (Weber's concept of *Verstehen* is relevant here), but this

does not mean that what they describe should not correspond as far as possible to the phenomenon being researched, rather than the researcher. Too much detachment or too much involvement can become counter-productive. We need to be careful that a quest for immersion in the subjective does not exclude the quest for objectivity; but must also be aware that a fascination with the rigours of objectivity does not exclude a curiosity about subjective understanding (Barker 1987).

[11] This case, *Regina v Michael George Lyons (aka Mohan Singh)*, and some of the problems of appearing as an expert witness, are discussed in further detail below.

[12] This turned out to be taken from a Wikipedia article on me that claimed to be citing a book by two anti-cultists who were actually referring not to me but to medical professionals who were members of 'cults' (Singer 1995: 217), although they had moved on to launch an attack on me later on the same page.

[13] The then Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Robert Runcie, was particularly supportive and became Inform's first Patron; but invaluable help was also received from the Methodist Church and what was then the British Council of Churches.

[14] No attempt has ever been made to define too precisely the groups with which Inform is concerned as the terms that are used have different meanings for different people, often implying some sort of positive or negative evaluation merely through the application of the label itself. The term minority religion is now used to provide a common-sense starting point to cover groups about which Inform might receive an enquiry and that others might refer to as 'cults', 'sects', new religious movements (NRMs), non-conventional or alternative religions, faith, spiritual or esoteric movements, groups or communities – as well as new movements within established religions, 'high demand groups' and some political or ideologically based groups that exhibit what have been termed sectarian or cultic characteristics. The religions about which Inform receives enquiries tend to be those that are not included as one of the nine members of the Inter Faith Network UK (that is, representatives of the mainstream Baha'i; Buddhist; Christian; Hindu; Jain; Jewish; Muslim; Sikh; and Zoroastrian communities) – partly because they are considered (and in some cases are) controversial. The religions about which Inform receives enquiries include groups as diverse as Al-Muhajiroun, Ananda Marga, the Children of God/Family International, the Church of Scientology, the Druid Order of the Red Dragon, Falun Gong, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Jesus Army, the Mormons, Soka Gakkai, 'UFO-cults', and various 'invented' and virtual religions found only on the Internet.

[15] Ralf Dahrendorf, LSE's Director and later one of Inform's Patrons, used to forward these to me with a note remarking that here were some more data for my research!

[16] Obtaining charitable status for Inform was held up because the Commissioners received the intelligence that I was a Moonie and that Inform was really a Unification front.

[17] The other Research Officer is currently undertaking part-time study for a PhD.

[18] For classificatory purposes, NRM are those that were founded after 1945. The other organisations include older, particularly nineteenth-century movements; associations concerned with the NRMs, such as various 'cult-watching groups' and inter-faith groups; and organisations associated with a particular movement, but going under a different name – thus CARP (Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles) is one of the many organisations associated with the Unification Church, but is not classified as an NRM so that the Unification Church is not counted twice.

[19] Staff members also have access to the British Library of Political and Economic Science, which, like Inform, is based at the LSE and is one of the largest libraries in the world devoted to the social sciences.

[20] It should be stressed that methodological agnosticism is not the same as methodological atheism. The social sciences cannot deny the influence of supernatural forces any more than it can endorse their efficacy; it just has no empirical means of testing the existence of such phenomena.

[21] I had, as always, tried to explain the reason for this reluctance to be misunderstood and/or misleading, drawing on the work of the anthropologist, Mary Douglas (1966) and the philosopher John Hospers (1956).

[22] See McGuire (1992), Stark and Bainbridge (1979), Wallis (1984) and Yinger (1957) for technical definitions of and distinctions between such concepts as church, denomination, cult and sect.

[23] For example, ISKCON, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, traces its origins back to, at least, the Vaishnava monk Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533/4).

[24] The Brahma Kumaris prefer to be seen as a spiritual or educational movement; the Raelians call themselves an atheistic religion. Moreover, the designation of being a religion (or not being a religion) can have considerable financial consequences for a movement. Transcendental Meditation has fought (unsuccessfully) in the courts to be defined as a technique rather than a religion so that it would not be prevented by the First Amendment of the US Constitution (on separation of Church and State) from teaching in public schools or prisons. On the other hand, the Church of Scientology has fought in courts around the world to be recognized as a religion in order to obtain secular benefits such as tax exemption.

[25] There are some occasions on which this could be significant information – if, for example, fasting, the use of hallucinogenic drugs or some exotic dietary practices are expected of the membership.

[26] Obviously, there could be a number of other independent variables to consider, but at least the question would have been raised.
[27] See Barker 1995 for further examples.
[28] Books written directly as a result of Inform include Barker 1989; Harvey 2009; La Fontaine 2009; Towler 1995. Inform has also signed a contract with Ashgate to publish a series of edited volumes based largely (though not exclusively) on its Seminars. See Inform's website www.Inform.ac for details of further publications.
[29] A full list of the topics can be found on the website.
[30] The 2008 International Conference, *Twenty Years and More: Research into Minority Religions, New Religious Movements and 'the New Spirituality'* was organised by Inform and Cesnur (the Italian-based Centre for the Study of New Religions) in association with ISORECEA (the International Study of Religion in Central and Eastern Europe Association).
[31] The Metropolitan Police's Safeguarding Children and Development Unit, known as Project Violet, was initiated in 2005 as a response to public and community concern about the abuse linked to belief in spiritual possession.
[32] *Regina v Michael George Lyons (aka Mohan Singh).*
[33] In such cases the procedure is likely to rely more on an inquisitorial than an adversarial system.
[34] http://www.icsahome.com
[35] ICSA membership now has four main constituencies: relatives of members; former members; helping professionals (such as counsellors); and researchers.
[36] *Le Centre d'information et d'avis sur les organisations sectaires nuisibles* http://www.ciaosn.be/
[37] *Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires* http://www.miviludes.gouv.fr/
[38] http://www.cifs.org.au/index.php/
[39] II Timothy 2:19; II Corinthians 6:14; II Corinthians 6:17-18.
[40] 'But now I have written to you, if any one called brother be fornicator, or avaricious, or idolater, or abusive, or a drunkard, or rapacious, not to mix with [him]; with such a one not even to eat.' (I Corinthians 5:11, translation by J.N. Darby).
[41] This can be downloaded from http://www.inform.ac/infdocs.html/.
[42] This can be downloaded at http://www.inform.ac/infmain.html (click "Travelling Abroad" on right-hand menu). See also, for example, http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/travel-advice-by-country/asia-oceania/india?ta=general&pg=7/; or http://ukinrok.fco.gov.uk/en/help-for-british-nationals/living-in-korea/general-advice/links-uk-government/
[43] Members have frequently approached me asking for information about their movement.
[44] Whilst in Italy in the early 1990s, I spent a day with two colleagues visiting Damanhur, which describes itself as an eco-society. We were shown around the community and talked to members, including the children at the school; we watched the members at work and, we believed, we learned quite a lot about their beliefs and practices. It was not until a few months later that it was revealed that the community had, for fourteen years, been secretly digging into the mountain and constructing a vast complex of underground temples. We had had no idea whatsoever of what had been going on literally under our noses (Introvigne 1999; Merrifield 1998. For pictures of these quite remarkable temples, see the community's home page: www.damanhur.org ).
[45] There is a sizable literature on how to write a PhD thesis, but this is more likely to be telling the candidate how to impress the examiners than to have any impact on the general public.

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