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Inform

Inform (an acronym of Information Network Focus on Religious Movements) is an educational charity that exists to provide information about minority religions and spiritualities that is as accurate, up-to-date, and evidence-based as possible. Inform seeks to make academic research more widely and publicly available and responds to enquiries from a wide constituency, including government bodies, the media, former members, the relatives and friends of current members, and more. The charity fosters direct contact with representatives of minority movements as well as their critics and detractors; it also maintains a large network of academics and other specialists who can provide information and advice about particular movements.

Inform was founded by the sociologist Professor Eileen Barker (b. 1938), OBE, FBA, at the London School of Economics in 1988. Based on her research with the Unification Church, Barker felt that harm was being caused by both a lack of information and misinformation about what were, at that time, relatively new religious movements to the United Kingdom. Barker's seminal study is *The Making of a Moonie: Brainwashing or Choice?* (1984), which won the 1985 Distinguished Book Award from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. Her life's work has been to promote accurate information obtained from social scientific methodology on religion, for which she has received numerous other awards (Beckford and Richardson 2003). Inform's start-up funding was provided by the UK Home Office and it continues to be supported by a mixture of government and charitable commissions, grants and private donations.

Inform moved to the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at King's College London in 2018. In 2020, Barker stepped down from active involvement as director and Dr Suzanne Newcombe, one of the authors of this article, took on the responsibilities of director. Dr Sarah Harvey (also an author) serves as the senior research officer for Inform, which involves responding to enquiries and producing commissioned reports; she has worked with Inform for over two decades.

The early work of Inform focused on the research and provision of accurate information on groups popularly considered 'cults' or 'sects' (Barker 1989, 2006, 2011). However, moving into the twenty-first century, Inform's remit has broadened towards providing accurate, contextualized information on a wide

range of minority religious and non-religious movements. Inform does not define too precisely the terms 'minority religions' and 'spiritualities'. They are used to provide a common-sense starting point to cover what others have called 'cults', 'sects', 'new religious movements', 'non-conventional religions', 'alternative religions', 'spiritual movements', 'esoteric movements', and 'self-religions'. The majority of enquiries received at Inform are, in fact, about new movements within 'mainstream' religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhi traditions).

Inform maintains an inclusive database—any movement or group that broadly considers questions relating to meaning and purpose to life can be included. Although this database must be understood as always incomplete and provisional, it might be the largest source of information on contemporary minority religions. As of November 2020, the database had 5,112 individual group entries. The primary focus is on groups that are in some way new to Britain since World War II; however, a number of nineteenth-century sects and global movements are also included. The database has 2,372 entries categorized as minority religions and their affiliates, 1,468 as organizations, 213 as old or established traditions, 80 as nineteenth-century sects, and 244 as 'cult-watching groups' (which provide, variously, information, advice, warnings or theological criticism against minority religions, depending on their perspective). The database also categorizes movements according to religious tradition. The majority have their roots in Christian traditions (1,887), but there are also a significant number with non-religious (425), 'New Age' (412), self-improvement (300), Islamic (249), political (244), Buddhist (218) or esoteric (209) traditions.

Inform has had a long-standing interest in apocalyptic and millennial movements. The years leading up to 2000 and 2012 were particular points of activity for Inform as the charity's information, advice, and commentary were sought by a wide range of enquirers. These included various types of government body concerned about what these dates might mean for believers and the wider public, as well as media, other academics, and students. Of the movements on the database, 213 are tagged as having significant millennialist elements in their doctrine (broadly understood); the vast majority of these entries can be related to Christianity (75 percent). The remaining 25 percent are spread across a broad range of traditions, with New Age as the second biggest category at 9 percent. The database also uses a tag to denote whether these millennial movements have an element of significant female leadership—having been either founded or subsequently led by a woman; 12 percent of the millennial movements have this tag.

In addition to responding to individual enquiries, Inform actively disseminates information in a number of ways. Day-long public seminars are held every year that bring together a variety of speakers on a particular theme related to minority religions. These seminars differ from academic conferences (although Inform does also organize large, international conferences) in that at least one member of a minority religion and one detractor are invited to speak, and participants include members, former members and relatives, and anyone else with an interest in the subject. This forum hence provides a unique opportunity and a safe space for participants to exchange information of both practical and theoretical use alongside others with whom they might be in tension.

The Routledge-Inform Series on Minority Religions and Spiritual Movements is a series of fifteen books (with a further two forthcoming) that bring together the papers presented at Inform seminars, supplemented with further academic chapters. *Prophecy in the New Millennium: When Prophecies Persist* (2013), edited by Sarah Harvey and Suzanne Newcombe, included papers from two Inform seminars: 'New Religions and Prophecy' (2008) and 'Prophecy in the New Millennium' (2012). Dr Harvey and Dr Newcombe

have given numerous talks on prophecy and millennial movements over the years and, together with other Inform colleagues, have worked with the Centre for the Critical Study of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements on creating profiles of individual millennial movements.

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