Balancing pragmatism and precision – Inform's approach to cult rhetoric

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Founded in 1988, Inform (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements) is an educational charity that was formed in the crucible of the 'cult wars.' Its central purpose is to provide accurate information about new and minority religious movements. It has sought to prevent harm based on misinformation about minority religions and sects by bringing the insights and methods of academic research into the public domain. While the guiding principles of Inform over this period have remained constant, our understandings have been refined and the context in which we have been working has changed dramatically. This chapter will cover Inform's positionality in regard to the word 'cult' and how its approach has been consistently defined by a concern for both pragmatics and precision, working within the framework of the law.

This chapter is written by the current director and senior research officer at Inform, both of whom have been working at Inform for over twenty years. We will argue that Inform's approach to the word cult has largely been driven by pragmatism and a desire for precision in description. Inform attempts to maintain dialogue with all of those active around minority religions– academics, critics and former members, as well as current and prospective members, legal professionals, social workers, police officers, civil servants, journalists and students (amongst others). Drawing on the methodological principle of triangulating research evidence, we believe that the quality of information we can offer will only be improved by the more perspectives and experiences which we can draw upon.

Inform's founder, Eileen Barker (see 2013) and our former deputy director, Amanda van Eck Duymaer van Twist (see 2015), have described our research positioning as being that of a 'professional stranger' based on the pioneering sociologist George Simmel's description (1971[1908]). It is based on the principles of methodological agnosticism (Barker 1995) where questions about the ultimate veracity of super-empirical claims are bracketed in exchange for a curiosity and exploration of the recordable testimonies and observable effects of those claims on individuals and communities. However, this is not the same positionality as methodological atheism advocated by strict social constructivists (e.g. Berger and Luckman 1966; Berger 1967). Rather, as van Eck Duymaer van Twist explains:

> methodological agnosticism allows for an open mindedness that enables engagement with possibilities. It allows a level of "what if..." rather than a pre-emptive negation of the beliefs, which encourages *verstehen*. (2015, p. 33)

In its research method, Inform has always nurtured *verstehen,* an attempt to do more than simply "objectify" and observe an object of research. As Max Weber argued, empathic and participatory understanding of social phenomena – although never complete and involving inferences – was nevertheless crucial to understand meaning in social context (Turner 2019). As a matter of principle, Inform has always attempted to understand the meaning-perspectives of all the different competing interest groups within the "cultic field" in as verifiable and objective extent as possible. This describes a methodological orientation rather than any kind of perfect practice, but having ideals and standards upon which to be judged against is an important element of integrity.

To an extent, Inform has avoided using the word cult to describe the organisations it researches because it wants to be able to empathetically describe, to "translate" the beliefs, practices and worldviews of the particular minority religion to those outside the tradition. This is the *verstehen* of field research, qualitative interviews and ethnography with the religious groups themselves. No one ever decides to join a cult – and those affiliated to groups labelled as cults do not use "brainwashed cult follower" as a self-description. It is an important element of Inform method to talk to affiliates of minority religions, to read their literature, to consider other material artifacts, and to attend ritual and community events if possible. This is an important element of understanding the internal logic, the meaning appeal and the context in which any potentially objectionable, problematic and harmful behaviours might occur.

But it is also Inform's principle to attempt the same kind of *verstehen* and methodological agnosticism when approaching panicked and concerned friends and family and hurt and abused former members of minority religious groups. During interactions with those voicing these experiences, Inform training requires those responding to enquires not to correct the use of the word "cult" or try to minimize experiences or concerns voiced. Where there is evidence of illegal behaviour or prosecutable crimes, we take this information to the police while protecting the anonymity of informants unless this is expressly waved. In the last twenty years, Inform has assisted with ensuring criminal convictions against leaders of two minority religious groups (see Harvey forthcoming).

However, often the abuse experienced within the context of minority religions falls below the threshold of criminal prosecution but can still be very problematic and cause harm (van Eck van Duymaer van Twist 2014). In this case Inform can help by keeping records of complaints, former member insights and other alternative testimony. When others' come for information about a particular group, Inform can alert new enquirers about these reports in a contextualised, anonymised format. For example, we could report that five people have voiced concerns about a particular religious teachers' propensity to be sexually promiscuous, or two people have complained that Y group has put pressure on young people to move into communal housing and abandon promising study or career plans in favour of promoting the group. We contextualise and balance some beliefs and practices, such as prosperity theology, or communicating with the spirit world, as being perhaps more pervasive than some enquirers have first assumed based on their own background. Sometimes we can also offer perspectives on what groups and individuals have done in the past when faced with similar situations, what the outcomes were and give some evidence-based inferences about what pitfalls there might be to a particular course of action. Inform

also seeks to ensure that people are alerted to groups who are associated with controversial beliefs and harmful behaviours, and are able to make as fully informed decisions as possible about the nature and extent of involvement they want with a particular group. Indeed, once Inform gave exactly the same information about the group then known as The Children of God to two enquirers within the same week. One enquirer concluded that the group was "all right" and would seek further contact; the second enquirer found their worst fears of a dangerous and harmful cult confirmed.

In general, when faced with an enquirer who wants to know whether or not a particular group is or is not a "cult," Inform seeks to clarify and specify what beliefs and behaviours are of particular concern to that individual or organisation. Our guiding principle is to steer the conversation back to more specific behaviours and beliefs which may or may not be present in any specific time or place. No human community, religious or otherwise, is ever immune to the potential of abusive and harmful behaviour. Therefore, no community can ever be given a clean bill of health. Conversely, a religious group considered to be a "cult" in popular culture might be experienced as beneficial and an important source of meaning and purpose in life to its members.

Inform seeks to avoid unjustified moral panics and witch-hunts against perceived heretical beliefs. In this Inform was heavily influenced by LSE Professor Stanley Cohen's work on *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972). In this role Inform most influentially contributed to the pacification of the moral panic around Satanic Ritual Abuse in the 1990s that implicated the growing pagan community of largely peaceful Wiccans as baby-sacrificing murderers (La Fontaine 1994 and 2003). Inform has acted in accord with Cohen insights' that moral panics inhibit rational debate as well as the development of solutions to the real problems represented in the apparent crisis.

As this volume explores, cult rhetoric has changed substantially since the founding of Inform. There have been more recent attempts to articulate the specific harm caused by betrayals of trust within religious and spiritual contexts with references to the concepts of "spiritual abuse" (e.g. Langone 1994, Oakley and Kimond 2013, Oakley and Humphries 2019) and coercive control. We will explore how Inform has engaged with some of these more recent understandings in the cultic field in more detail after first expanding a bit more on Inform's history in relation to the use of the word "cult."

Founding of Inform – What to do about the 'cult problem'?

In Britain in 1984, moral panics about the brainwashing of youth by new and dangerous religious and ideological movements had reached the point of being debated in the UK Houses of Parliament. In the first substantive parliamentary debate on this subject the government was challenged about what it was doing "to monitor the activities of so-called religious cults." Several members of the House of Lords were concerned specifically about the ability of "cults" to register as religious charities, as well as their reported illegal activities and harm to both individuals and families. Fear that adherents to these movements were 'brainwashed' was rife. In response to the concerns raised, the then Under Secretary of State, Lord Elton emphasised the equality of all citizens and organisations under the law and the appropriateness of media exposes in highlighting areas

of harm and bad practice of organisations. The debate on 11 July 1984 concluded with a discussion about the definitional problems of the world 'cult' in law (Hansard HL 1984). Differential treatment under law based on religious affiliation alone was considered by Government representatives to be a "witch hunt" and not a foundation of successful government policy "since The Reformation". Over the years, this continued to be the position of the UK government despite further challenges to "do more" to oppose dangerous cults. When asked by the Baroness Macleod of Borve if the government knew "how many cults are operating in the country," Lord Williams of Mostyn responded: "No, my lords. It is not a question that is capable of a rational answer because one man's religion is another man's cult and one man's orthodoxy is another man's [hedro]doxy. I really do not think that I can offer a sensible or helpful answer" (Hansard HL 1988).

The same year as this debate, Professor Eileen Barker, the founder of Inform, published her acclaimed study of brainwashing *The Making of a Moonie: Brainwashing or Choice?* (Basil Blackwell) based on seven years of research analysing to what extent conversion to the Unification Church could be attributed to individual choice (free will), environmental manipulation (social pressure) or inherent psychological characteristics (vulnerable psychology). Her research on this matter was described in *Sociological Analysis* as being conducted "with exceptional objectivity, rigor, and thoroughness" (Bird 1985, p. 466). Although not easily reproducible due to its scale, it was also described as having a high degree of internal validity and essentially disproving the idea that conversion to a cult was irresistible or irreversible, noting the high percentage of people approached, but not ultimately associating with the movement for more than a weekend (95%). Another reviewer highlighted how "Eileen Barker identifies, explains, and then systematically discredits the simple-minded answers offered by pop journalism [for joining a cult]" (Smith 1985, p. 998).

The analysis offered in *The Making of a Moonie* was complex and did not offer any simple answers. Barker's work acknowledged that social pressure played a role in conversion. However, this more neutral description did not go far enough for many in condemning the extreme changes in lifestyle and priorities that marked many early Unification Church members. That the Unification Church took *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* as a *carte blanche* endorsement of their approach to recruitment[1] did not encourage those committed to addressing the "cult problem" to reframe their questions. But the final paragraph of *The Making of a Moonie* offers a rather more sober conclusion:

> [those who stay Moonies for some time] …will also find that they are presented with a wide range of problems, disillusionments and disappointments, and the majority will, without the need of outside intervention, leave (or at least cease to be full-time members) within a couple of years of joining. The rest may also have problems but will remain convinced that, despite these, the Unification Church is still a better place in which to be than any of the other alternatives open to them…. (p. 259).

The vision of being inside the new religion of the Unification Church offered by Barker is not one which is particularly rosy and certainly not a theological or organisational endorsement.

[1] "The Moonies' recognition of INFORM is one of the major reasons why I feel that Government funding of the organisation should immediately cease" (Hansard 1988).

But Barker is respectful of individual choice around beliefs and practices. Her conclusions emphasise the potential for (or inevitability of) both individual and collective change as well as the unique pushes and pulls which attract an individual to and keep them within a given religious context in comparison with other apparent life choices. Revealing and elucidating these complex and contextual insights are what drove Barker to found Inform and continue to form the bedrock of its *raison d'être*, despite a greatly changed milieu and discourse around "cults" in the past thirty-five years.

The information and social environment around "cults" has changed a great deal since the 1980s. It's worth remembering the social context in which Inform was founded. This was summed up succinctly with a sympathetic article in *The Guardian:*

> If your son or daughter gets caught up in a religious cult you have never heard of - and there are hundreds of them - it is surprisingly hard to get objective information. You might finish up having your child kidnapped and forcibly deprogrammed - a costly and illegal remedy that often fails and is in many ways worse than the disease.
>
> You can ring Cultists Anonymous - a secretive group of women, all called Janet, at the end of telephones around the country, who will probably confirm the worst of your fears.
>
> Another cult-watching organisation, Family Action Information Rescue (Fair) is also doggedly 'anti-cult'; it is officially against deprogramming but disinclined to envisage the possibility that your child might have found something positive (Schwartz 1987)

In the pre-internet age in which Inform was founded, basic information on many of these minority religious groups' beliefs and practices was hard to find. In response to continuing public outcry, Barker successfully petitioned the United Kingdom's Home Office for a three-year start-up grant in 1988. With a public information line and walk-in premises, Inform offered academic access to libraries, encyclopaedias and networks of scholars as well as a growing database of groups about which it had received enquiries from which one could build an understanding of new and minority religious groups from triangulated and contextualised reporting. Inform never sought to create a list of "bad" religions, recognising from its establishment that bad and abusive behaviour occurs in both established, traditional religious contexts as well as those with charismatic leaders and first-generation membership (Barker 2004).

In contract to the position of some countries which allow for the registration and official recognition of some religious groups, and the blacklisting of others, the approach taken by the United Kingdom (and generally also taken by the governments of North America, the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries) has been that members of all religious groups should be treated without prejudice in the same way as other citizens of the country.

Barker, alongside representatives of mainstream Churches and other supporters, registered Inform (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements) as an education charity (No. 801729). The representatives of mainstream churches, i.e. The Church of England, the Catholic Church and Methodist Church amongst others, were mindful of the dangers of

legislating against religious belief and practice. However, the founders of Inform were all supportive of the principle that where illegality occurs in religious contexts members of religious organisations should be fully prosecuted without exception. Inform's foundational aim remains:

> To advance public knowledge and understanding by the promotion of study and research into religions and those movements concerned with the exploration of spiritual life or philosophies including, but without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing, cults, alternative and non-conventional religions, sects, human potential movements and new age movements, and the dissemination of the useful results of such study and research to the public (Charity Commission 1989).

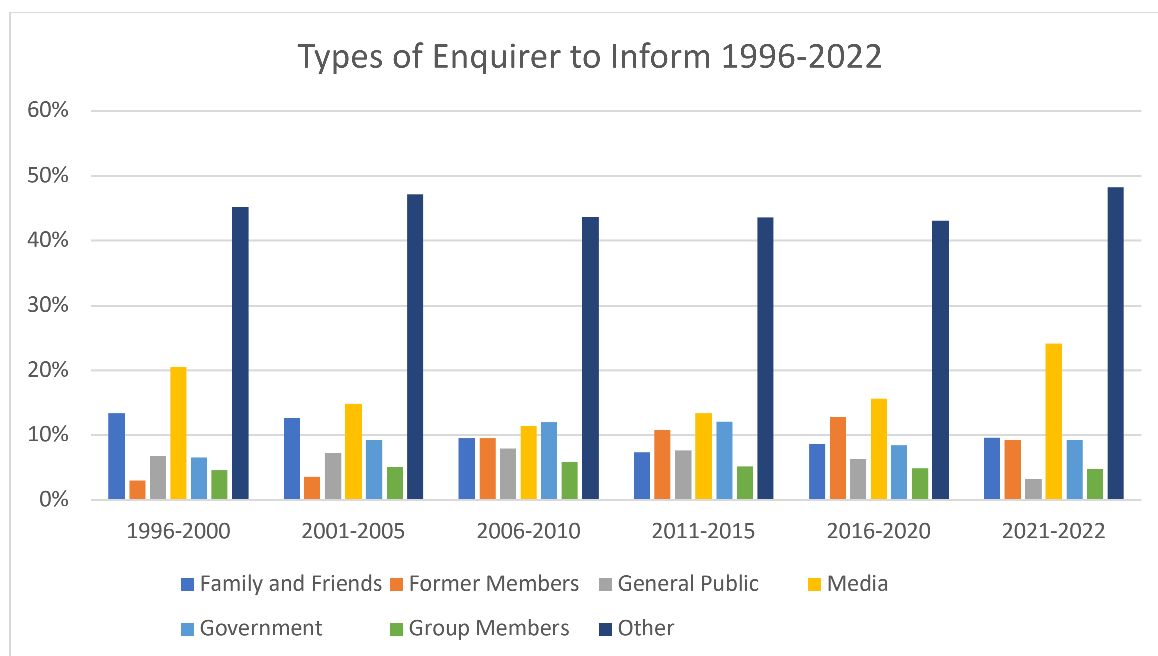
The founding brief for Inform also recognised that the boundaries between religious and secular are often porous, recognising a variety of "new age" and "human potential" contexts which might be usefully considered within this context of research. In practice, Inform has always been happy to consider enquiries and keep information on any group concerned with questions relating to meaning and purpose to life – whether or not the group self-describes as religious or spiritual in their interests. Barker's 1989 book, *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction,* was published by Her Majesty's Stationary Office (i.e. the UK government) and sought, to the objection of some concerned about the harm caused in new religious contexts, to shift the terminology more objectively to that of "new religious movement" or NRM.

Is this group a "legitimate" religion (or a cult)?

Inform's approach has been to try to avoid labels which provide immediate value-laded binary categories, e.g. is this group a "good/bad" or "real/fake" religion (Barker 2006)? In the early years of Inform, these value judgements obscured the actual harm or potential complex attractions to new movements, were pervasive, and continued throughout the 1990s. The tragedy at the Branch Davidian property in Waco, Texas in 1993 highlighted to scholars the dangers of uninformed, heavy-handed interventions on the part of government agents (Wessinger 2000, 2009). At the other end of the spectrum, the crimes of Aum Shinrikyo brought to light with the release of sarin gas on the Tokyo subway in 1995 underscored the potential damage minority religious groups could cause to both their own members and wider society (Reader 2000). Mindful of the dangers of action based on inadequate information, Inform has always sought to provide as specific, balanced and up-to-date information as possible in response to an enquirer's particular question.

In the days before widespread use of the Internet people contacted Inform pretty much as they would now use Google – as the first port of call - and enquiries reflected that – straightforward and quick to answer. There has also been something of a change in the typical questions Inform has received over time. At the founding of Inform and into the 1990s, there were many quick and simple questions such as contact details. In the early years many friends and relatives got in contact in hopes of deciding if a group was dangerous, or how to deal with their relative who had joined. Inform still receives these enquiries, but they no longer take up the majority of our time. Enquirers to Inform are varied – reflected in the "other" category below which includes those requesting

information on minority religions from diverse perspectives such as academics, chaplains, church networks, other 'cult watching groups', lawyers, medical practitioners, students, teachers and writers.



	Family and Friends	Former Members	General Public	Media	Government	Group Members	Other
1996-2000	13%	3%	7%	20%	7%	5%	45%
2001-2005	13%	4%	7%	15%	9%	5%	47%
2006-2010	10%	10%	8%	11%	12%	6%	44%
2011-2015	7%	11%	8%	13%	12%	5%	44%
2016-2020	9%	13%	6%	16%	8%	5%	43%
2021-2022	10%	9%	3%	24%[2]	9%	5%	48%

In twenty-first century Britain, we have seen a changing context in terms of the public recognition of religious groups, governance, and regulation. There has been a general trend towards recognizing a broader spectrum of religious beliefs (and non-beliefs). Inform's enquiries also relate to these changes – from government departments, religious groups, media, as well as the 'concerned public.' The United Kingdom has no single official way of

[2] The higher proportion of media enquiries in 2022 (38 out of 132 enquiries in the year is largely down to Inform's working relationship with the Religion Media Centre - https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/ – and the assassination of former prime minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, by a man whose mother had made significant donations to the church.

recognizing a religion – with the exception of the Church of England, being established in law and having special legal privileges in England, and the Church of Scotland in Scotland (Wales and Northern Ireland have no established church). However, there are several ways for the government to recognize – and therefore 'legitimize' a religious group. Some of the most significant of these include: registration as a registered charity, registration for certain tax-exempt statuses, registration of places of worship to conduct legally valid weddings, being recognised as partners in 'interfaith dialogue', state funding of religious schools and by the courts in a variety of contexts including asylum and custody decisions.

Many of the enquires to Inform in the period 2006-2015 reflected the need for in-depth information about a particular religious group for these complex decisions. This shift reflects the impact of changing government policy around the Equalities Act 2010 seeking to prevent religious discrimination as well as reflecting broader social changes of the diversity of British society in both its laws and in social expectations. Alongside this, Inform has had more enquiries about the diversity and new movements within the 'big faith groups,' leading to a shift in conceptual focus towards 'minority religions' as much as NRMs or 'cults'. In this public discourse, the word "cult" did not feature strongly. The debate was instead about the criteria for legitimate religions in different contexts, as well as reputable recipients of public funds and other forms of recognition. However, often the groups concerned positioned themselves as minority groups within mainstream religions.

In twenty-first-century Britain, public understanding of religion has become broader. And the way Inform has framed its area of research interest has shifted in reflection to these changes, putting a greater emphasis on 'minority religions' rather than NRMs or 'cults.' Inform has been asked to respond by various parties who have had interest in these changes – from groups themselves seeking legitimacy through registering for a particular privilege or in a court case, or by the government seeking to obtain an objective briefing in response to a challenge led by a religious organisation. Inform's remit requires a flexible pragmatism and sense of judgement (Barker 1995[1989], p. 148). However, Inform's responses to these more complex enquiries are based on the same principles of its founding – to provide comprehensive, accurate and relevant information to help the enquiring parties come to their own informed decisions based on their own criteria.

In the same year that Inform was founded (1987), the Inter Faith Network was also founded as a registered charity (No. 1068934) with a government grant to "advance public knowledge and mutual understanding of the teachings, traditions and practices of the different faith communities in Britain… and to promote good relations between people of different faiths" (Pearce 2012 in van Eck Duymaer van Twist 2020, p. 208-9). The Inter Faith Network originally accepted institutional membership representing nine major faith communities (Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain Jewish, Muslim, Sikh as well as Baha'i and Zoroastrian). The Inter Faith Network's remit and membership structure has always been contested – who can be represented? Which organisations are accepted to represent 'Hindus' or 'Muslims'? – are not easy questions to settle. Some groups were unhappy to be excluded and the membership criteria was reviewed and adjusted in 2014 in response to a legal challenge under the Equalities Act 2010's prohibition of religious discrimination (van Eck Duymaer van Twist 2020, p. 214-15). At this point the Druid Network, the National Spiritualists Union and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints were admitted as

provisional members, while some other groups who sought membership continued to be excluded. But the existence of the government funded Inter Faith Network reinforces the idea that some religious groups receive greater legitimacy in the form of government recognition, access and status than other groups. That is to say, some religious groups are ‘acceptable’ and ‘legitimate’, while others do not enjoy this kind of status.

In contrast, Inform was set up as a network based on social scientific scholarship and not a membership-based organisation within which new and minority religious could receive ‘official’ recognition (however much some minority groups and individuals might have wished Inform to act as such an organisation). Inform keeps a record of every enquiry and every group enquired about or that comes across our network which, in our professional judgement, addresses questions of meaning and purpose to life or behaves in a way that could be illuminated using the conceptual categories and comparative context of new and minority religious movements. This has meant that although the number of enquiries has decreased in recent years, those we do take on tend to be more complex and require this analytical, comparative insight, drawing upon our database of over 5,000 different groups and movements and history of over 13,500 enquiries since 1996 (when Inform began keeping computer records).

Inform is sometimes asked if a particular group “is a cult” – we tend to respond by deflecting this to questions about particular concerns in relation to the group and/or situation in question. Inform has been criticised by some cult-critics and former members for ‘blacklisting’ the terms ‘cult’ and ‘brainwashing’ with straw man arguments considering these as simplistic value judgements (e.g. Zablocki 1997). It is accurate to say that Inform’s approach consistently eschews the use of the terms ‘cult’ and ‘brainwashing’ as having limited utility in recognising or preventing harm within or against minority religious groups. In the words of Eileen Barker (2009b):

> No one is likely to say that they themselves belong to a cult – what makes it a cult is that other people call it a cult. We know it's bad and wrong, but we don't know exactly what it is that is bad or wrong, which can vary quite dramatically between individuals, from place to place, and from time to time…
>
> …Perhaps most significantly, throughout history new religions have been treated with fear and suspicion – they are, after all, challenging the status quo with their new beliefs and practices… unpopular religions can be discriminated against with relative ease throughout the world when they are labelled, and thus made into, "cults."

Inform is making an ideological and value-laden decision with its policy of redirecting conversation away from a focus on these two value-laden and emotionally driven terms. However, it also does try to address harm and illegal activity within minority religious groups, and we do recognise that the term ‘cult’ in particular has a broader use in popular discourse. Many of those associated with Inform have used the term as a teaching tool - Eileen Barker, Amanda van Eck Duymaer van Twist and Marat Shterin have taught undergraduate courses entitled “Cults, Sects and New Religions” in which each of these terms is opened to discussion around a variety of definitions and their social contexts (as

well as involving field visits to religious groups and explorations of case studies of violence relating to new religions). We also recognise that as a term of self-description for someone who has left a group in which they experienced harm and abuse, it can be a useful tool for beginning to unpick the processes of socialisation by which they adhered to beliefs and behaviours which they now find abhorrent (Barker 2009).

Contemporary Concerns – Harm in Religious Contexts

Inform has always positioned itself primarily as an information resource closely connected with active, academic social scientific research. It never has been primarily an organisation offering support for those injured by religious groups. However, over time, a significant minority of our enquirers have come from former members of religious groups who have experienced harm. This has been particularly true since 2006, when there were several clusters of former members of specific groups with grievances. Inform was successfully able to share information with the police and Crown Prosecution Service which assisted in the eventual conviction of a religious leader and alternative healer, Singh, on charges of rape and sexual assault in 2010. As part of this case, Inform was forced to successfully defend the confidentiality of its enquirers (we had received 131 enquires between 1997-2010) who did not want to be involved in a criminal case nor their details released to the defence attorney (Katz 2018). The rape trial was a gruelling process for the women who chose to give their testimony and many more reported harm within this group than those willing to be cross-examined in court.

In a second case from around the same period, a tightly knit community discovered their religious leader had been manipulating them sexually and financially; the group began talking to each other and left *en mass*, giving their testimony and much theological and historical material to Inform for safekeeping. In the aftermath of this event, the leader incited one of the few followers to remain to cause grievous bodily harm against another former member; Inform was able to provide briefings to the trial judge in the sentencing process which caused the leader to be imprisoned alongside his deputy. Yet there are difficulties in naming this leader as he is now out of prison and has resumed teaching; the former members who left have no obvious criminal path to further prosecution and are reluctant to have their own reputations damaged. They simply want to get on with their lives and recover. While Inform does not have a remit to proclaim the name of this group and its leader, when it is specifically asked about this individual, it can share the background, carefully anonymising the former members and providing public domain information about the leader's past convictions and historical publicity material. While this situation is less than satisfactory for many, it highlights the legal complexities involved with protecting individuals from harm in religious contexts – the interests of both former members who wish to move on with their lives as well as any future followers should be safeguarded (see Harvey forthcoming).

Meanwhile, cultural awareness of harm in religious contexts has become much more pervasive since when Inform was first founded. Accusations of sexual abuse of minors against respected members of the clergy only began to be discussed by the media in the 1980s. Inform used to have to explicitly point out that abuse happens in traditional religious

contexts as well as in ‘new religions’ or ‘cults.’ In 1995, Anson Shupe needed to explicitly justify how any situations of power inequity – especially those of religious traditions - can easily create environments in which abuse, exploitation and manipulation occur (Shupe 1995: 30). The aftermath of recent Royal Commissions into the sexual abuse of children in Australia (2017) and the UK (Jay *et al.* 2022) have put into place more stringent “safeguarding practices” to help protect children in all institutional settings, including those within a religious context, against future abuse. While these changes are very important, they do little to prevent the abuse and manipulation of adults within religious and other high-demand communities.

There has been growing recognition of the unique psychological harm caused by those who feel betrayed and abused within a religious context. The psychologist Michael Langone, previous executive director of the International Cultic Studies Association in the USA, included “spiritual abuse” in the title of his edited book, *Recovery from cults: help for victims of psychological and spiritual abuse* (1994). However, most of the abuse described in the chapters is delineated as physical, sexual or psychological and “spiritual abuse” as a concept was not well defined. In the UK, Lisa Oakley has developed the use of this concept, primarily within mainstream Christian contexts, pointing towards the unique sense of betrayal when abuse is perpetrated by trusted authority figures and necessitates a subsequent potential reframing of an entire worldview (Oakley and Kimond 2013, Oakley and Humphries 2019). The inclusive framework of harm, covering all religious contexts and particularly more mainstream ‘Christian’ ones, helps move the debate onwards from the ‘cult-wars’ in which Inform was founded and helps ‘survivors’ pinpoint exactly the reasons for their feelings of profound betrayal when abuse happens in religious contexts.

Inform has been participating in several constructive conversations which aim to recognise and prevent harm in religious contexts. Inform has been part of regular discussions with Lisa Oakley in the context of her chairmanship of the national working group for abuse linked to accusations of witchcraft and spirit possession (formally the national working group for child abuse linked to faith or belief) which was set up in response to the death of a child of African origin in London (Department of Education 2012). Inform has also worked closely with the National FGM Centre in its expanded remit around Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief (CALFB), sharing information, and giving workshops at conferences (National FGM Centre 2022).

Inform’s founder Eileen Barker has been attending conferences and actively seeking dialogue with those involved in raising awareness of the harms caused by ‘cults’ since 1998.[3] Although there are still differences of opinion in this vast and varied milieu, there is much more dialogue and agreement between those operating in this area than there was in the early 1980s. In recent years, Inform has continued this tradition in having online bi-annual meetings with organisations active in the ‘cult-watching’ field in the USA, Canada, Switzerland and Belgium. Inform’s Senior Research Officer Sarah Harvey is a Research Associate on the AHRC-funded project, Abuse in Religious Contexts, led by Professor Gordon

[3] When she first attended the annual conference of the International Cultic Studies Association (then called the American Family Foundation). ICSA’s current philosophy of dialogue has been influenced by Barker’s approach of engagement – see https://www.icsahome.com/aboutus/benefitsofdialogue

Lynch at the University of Kent and which runs from 2022-mid-2024. She is analysing Inform materials in relation to abuse in new and minority religious movements.

Inform gave official feedback on new legal recognition for coercive control which became a criminal offence in family and intimate contexts in 2015 (Home Office). Although the UK Government declined to broaden this offence to institutional and religious contexts, it is now widely recognised and discussed as an aspect of domestic violence and control. As such, the specific mechanisms of coercive behaviour are being more widely discussed as both recognisable and socially inappropriate. This can only help those who have been subject to similar pressures in the context of religious and ideological groups. The public discourse around gaslighting as a method of manipulation in both religious and secular contexts has the potential for moving on old discussions of 'brainwashing' and highlighting the continuing and unique problems of gender inequality and problems of 'survivorship' after leaving highly controlling relationships (Sweet 2021 and 2022).

Popular books like Amanda Montell's *Cultish* (2021) have usefully played on both positive and negative associations of the word "cult" while pointing out how linguistic moves like the "thought terminating cliché" (originally coined by Jay Lifton in 1961) are commonly found in "cultic" contexts. Montell shifts this specific aspect of Lifton's work (which focuses on the treatment of American POWs in North Korean prisons) subtly away from the more pervasive metaphor of 'brainwashing' and the criteria for 'thought control' which are rarely if ever fully met in contexts other than those involving physical imprisonment. That Montell plays on her own 'cult appeal' within social media contexts only adds to the shifting of the public discourse around 'cults', at least in Anglophone contexts. Yet, elsewhere in the world, the idea of 'cult' still serves the interests of authoritarian states which seek to repress ideological dissent, including those associated with groups which are not considered particularly problematic in other contexts (Barker 2010 and Introvigne 2018).

The current public discussion around 'cult' in the Anglophone world is less focused on minority religious groups and more generally concerned with harmful patterns of behaviour; this can only be welcome as a way to help individuals in our society be less susceptible to social pressure wherever it is found.

Conclusions

Inform has always sought to contribute to the "cult debate" in ways that could reduce harm and promote more informed decision making based on accurate information. While the use and social context of the world "cult" has shifted significantly since Inform's founding in the 1980s, the need for providing accurate and up-to-date information from a variety of perspectives on specific religious and ideological groups remains. The type of information required in the twenty-first century for good decision making is much more complex. Inform continues to be uniquely placed as being able to contribute research-based comparative and contextualised information from which a variety of individuals and organisations can make more informed decisions about minority religions.

The 1987 article in *The Guardian* announcing the founding of Inform also contained a tongue-in-cheek invitation for applications for a Director of Inform who "can handle research academically, distraught parents sympathetically, rabid anti-cultists diplomatically and cult officials with polite scepticism" (Schwartz 1987). This rather difficult job description continues to be the one that Inform attempts to live up to – and its approach to the word cult reflects this position. It is hardly surprising though, that considering the audiences involved it is impossible to please all these audiences, all of the time. In seeking to keep dialogues and discourse as constructive as possible, Inform has traditionally sought to sidestep the definitional debate of "cult" but instead to more pragmatically concentrate on moving the debate forward and mitigating incidences of harm within specific contexts.

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