



## **'Cults': The Reality and the Response**

*Robert Towler*

**I**NFORM is a small charity, based at the London School of Economics, which collects and provides information on new religious movements, or 'cults'. A surprisingly large number of people have a friend or a relative who has become involved with a 'strange new cult', and have wanted to find out about that group's beliefs and practices. Members of Parliament and clergy have been bombarded with demands that they 'do something' about this group or that, and have found it difficult to know what they are supposed to do, even to get reliable and up-to-date information about the groups. So among those who make contact with INFORM are

friends and relations of people who have joined a group or seem to be on the brink of joining, ex-members who feel disorientated or lost after they have quit, clergy (especially university and college chaplains), welfare officers of students' unions, citizens advice bureaux, journalists and radio and television producers, academics and students. Occasionally the groups themselves will get in touch, often when they feel their group has been unfairly treated in the media and they are looking for someone well-informed and respected who will set the record straight, or when they are seeking an expert witness to testify in a child custody case, although IN-

*From time to time we print pieces about organisations which are compatible with AHP's interests. In previous issues we published articles about The Council for the Protection of Rural England and Friends of the Earth. In this article Robert Towler, Director of INFORM, explains something of the work of his organisation and sheds some light on a very emotive subject.*

FORM staff do not in fact act as expert witnesses and try to avoid controversies involving new religious movements.

### *What is a new religious movement?*

What, though, counts as a cult? The obvious cases are easy enough, and the great majority of enquiries concern the obvious. Over the last six months, for example, of 600 new enquiries, 69 were about the London Church of Christ or one of its sister churches in another city, 66 were about the School of Economic Science (mainly as the result of an article about it in the *Observer Magazine* at the end of March 1994), and 33 were about the Church of Scientology. Then there are the scores, indeed hundreds, of groups about which we receive just one or two enquiries each year, but which are unambiguously new religious movements. But there are enquiries about new religious movements which are not really new, or not really religious, or not really movements.

Whether or not a group is new is problematical when one is dealing with a new movement within an established or ancient religion, as, for instance, with groups within the Roman Catholic Church such as *Opus Dei*, or within Buddhism such as the New Kadampa Tradition. While such groups are new, they are clearly part of age-old traditions, and it can seem confusing to equate them with Scientology or the Unification Church which are only a few years old. And yet there are similarities, particularly in the degree of commitment which the groups elicit or demand, and in the frequency with which previous bonds of

family and friendship are weakened as a result of the new and strong relationships with others within the group.

Other groups are counted among the new religious movements even though they are not overtly religious, *est* (Erhard Seminars Training) being a classic case. The Forum, which replaced *est*, was subsequently organised by the Centres Network, and at the present time is run by Landmark Education. Another is re-evaluation counselling and co-counselling. The similarity to religious groups in these cases involves that which is offered, rather than the nature of the commitment required. All new religious movements are religious in the general sense that they offer a religious or philosophical worldview, or they claim to provide the means by which some higher goal such as transcendent knowledge, spiritual enlightenment, self-realisation or 'true' development may be obtained.

Then again there are elements which are part of the total new religious movements 'scene' but which could not seriously be called movements. The most obvious case in point is the new age movement in all its diversity, from aromatherapy to channelling, from I Ching to bodywork. And it is instructive to note that, despite that diversity, we refer to the new age movement, not to new age movements. By the same token it would have been clearer if, from the beginning, instead of using the expression 'new religious movements', people had talked about 'the new religious movement', for that would better have expressed what was observed and remarked upon and studied. An important change took place in the 1960s and

1970s. Something significantly new emerged. But what was new was a plurality of freshly observed groups; talk of 'new religious movements' did not in fact refer to any particular group or groups, but to the collectivity of religious and quasi-religious groups which suddenly gained popularity, especially with younger people. It was this collectivity which was new. It was this collectivity which constituted the movement.

Is it accurate and helpful, though, to regard co-counselling, for example, as a new religious movement? Does it bear any resemblance to those movements conventionally labelled cults? In certain respects the answer must be 'yes'. INFORM has received enquiries which suggest that abuse of authority has occurred from time to time, probably because the organisation is comparatively loose and because those involved constitute a shifting population. There is evidence to suggest that sometimes people assume authority on the basis of very limited experience, and that it is not unknown for emotional manipulation to occur. And involvement in co-counselling can be tremendously absorbing, with the result that people's lives and thinking can revolve around it to the damaging exclusion of much else. This is not to say that the movement should be thus characterised, but only that it is not organised in such a way as effectively to avoid the possibility of these things happening. In these ways co-counselling is not entirely dissimilar to, say, the London Church of Christ, although, overall, the differences are more numerous than the similarities. Going back twenty years, I remember a house shared by a number of young people where one was into co-

counselling, another had died her clothes orange because she was a follower of the Bhagwan, a third was trying her hardest to be a lesbian, and a fourth devoted every available moment to work with the international socialists. The point is that there seemed nothing particularly strange in these various passions existing side by side in one house.

### *What does INFORM do?*

How, then, does one respond to the new religious movements? Different individuals and different organisations respond in a variety of ways, but INFORM helps enquirers by giving them information, either directly or by putting them in touch with someone from its extensive network of experts and others with first-hand knowledge. Our research operation includes the collection, analysis and publication of information about the diverse beliefs, practices, membership, organisations and whereabouts of new religious movements, and the consequences they appear to have for individuals and for society at large. Information is gathered by doing fieldwork with the groups, by collecting their own literature and talking to individual leaders and members, by talking to ex-members and to friends and relatives of members and ex-members, by keeping press cuttings and relevant publications of anti-cult groups (of which more below), and by maintaining a library of scholarly and academic work on the movements. We endeavour to hold information on a group from every possible perspective, and to provide information which presents a rounded picture in the established tradition of social science. We aim to be objective, while recognising that at the end of

the day there is no such thing as pure objectivity, the best approximation being a balanced picture.

INFORM'S national and international network of contacts includes scholars and organisations engaged in research, as well as friends and relations of members and ex-members, and current and former members themselves, together with others who have specialist knowledge in a wide variety of areas connected either directly or indirectly with the subject. When a relative or friend of a member approaches INFORM we generally find that the first need is for information — as much information as possible — and the second need is for someone to talk to, which is where our network of contacts proves invaluable. Often the person an enquirer most wants to talk to is someone who has been through a similar experience, and INFORM has regular, though not frequent, meetings for relatives of members and ex-members of a variety of movements.

Although INFORM does not itself offer a counselling service, it can put enquirers in touch with a network of those who can offer help, which could be anything from sympathetic support to the services of a professional counsellor. Through one member of its board of governors, INFORM is providing training for a small group of professional counsellors, alerting them to problems arising out of involvement with some of the new religious movements.

INFORM organises a twice-yearly all-day seminar for a wide cross-section of people who want an opportunity to gain and to exchange information which could be of practical use. A seminar at the be-

ginning of May 1994 was on 'New Religious Movements and the Law', and one in December 1994 was on 'New Religious Movements and Mental Health'. In addition, we provide speakers for schools, universities, colleges and churches, and participants for radio and television programmes about new religious movements.

### *Controversies*

Although we obviously believe it to be the best, INFORM'S approach to the new religious movements is not the only one, and it may be useful to distinguish two alternative responses, each embodied in a number of organisations. I have already identified INFORM'S stance as being neutral and objective. In our experience this approach has the advantage of yielding a clearer understanding of cults than is possible with a partisan approach, but it has the further advantage of providing the most effective help for those whose lives have been shattered, to one degree or another, by the effects of a loved one's membership of a new religious movement. One alternative to INFORM'S perspective can be called the fundamentalist Christian approach. Organisations which embody this approach provide a theological critique of cults, on the assumption that their own theological position represents the truth, while the beliefs of new religious movements are false, seductive and dangerous, and therefore the movements need to be opposed with all necessary vigour. Characteristically, this is the approach adopted by some Catholic organisations and, perhaps to a lesser degree, by Lutheran and Calvinist organisations.

The other alternative is represented by

the anti-cult movement, the principal characteristic of which is the belief that people do not choose to join a cult, but are deceived and then psychologically coerced into membership through the use of mind control techniques or brainwashing. The tactics which groups are said to employ include social and sensory deprivation, emotional blackmail, spiritual and physical threats, unbalanced diets, repetitive chanting, childish games, straightforward concealment of the movement's real teachings or practices, flattery, impoverishment of linguistic capacity, relations of dependency on existing members, and deliberate attempts to alienate recruits from all outside influences. Because the anti-cultists believe that individuals have been forced into groups they believe also that it is legitimate to force them out, through the efforts of 'exit counsellors' and the use of forcible deprogramming. In the view of INFORM, the anti-cult movement does rather more harm than good. It creates greater fear and alarm, especially among parents, than is either justified or helpful, and itself becomes positively cult-like, being as determined as any of the movements it attacks to close its eyes and ears to any

evidence which might confuse a simple division between goodies and baddies.

Scholarly opinion and, increasingly, pastoral opinion, strongly favours the line adopted by INFORM. Of those young people who choose to join a new religious movement, the vast majority leave again of their own free will, either very quickly or within two years at the most. The few who choose to stay within a movement are only harmed and further alienated from their families and friends by attempts at deprogramming, few of which 'succeed' in any case. INFORM's advice to families and friends is far from easy to take, but it is simple: become as fully informed as you can about the group, its origins, its history, its beliefs and its practices, and maintain as much contact as possible with your son or sister or friend, affirming the person without either affirming or deriding the group they have joined, only asking and gently questioning. The chances are that they will leave the group and come back, in which case you want them to know they are welcome and that your relationship remains intact. If they turn out to belong to the tiny minority who opt to stay, at least you will not have lost them completely.

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### *Further Reading*

Eileen, Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?*, Basil Blackwell, 1984

Eileen Barker, *New Religious Movements, A Practical Introduction*, HMSO, 1989

James A. Beckford, *Cult Controversies: The Societal Response to the New Religious Movements*, Tavistock, 1985

INFORM, which is a registered charity (No. 801729), can be reached at Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, or by telephone on 0171 955 7654.