

# GOVERNMENTS AND “CULTS”

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I started Info-Cult following my brief experience with the Unification Church (UC) in Booneville, California in 1977 that occurred as a result of a close friend's involvement with the Church. The story about his kidnapping and deprogramming from the Church was featured in an award winning series of newspaper articles written by Josh Freed in 1977. These articles formed the basis for the bestselling book *Moonwebs: Journey into the Mind of a Cult* and the Genie Award winning film *Ticket to Heaven*. Following the publication of the newspaper articles, Josh received numerous requests for information about cults. It was the need for the public to know more about cults and to seek help for cult-related events in their lives or in the lives of a loved one that led to the creation, 2 years later in 1980 of Cult Project, which is what Info-Cult was then called.

For the first 10 years, Cult Project operated under the auspices of the B'nai Brith Hillel Foundation of Montreal and received significant funding from the Montreal Jewish Community in addition to donations and grants from the provincial and federal government.

In the beginning, the Cult Project focused on the negative aspects of cults, although our contention was that not all cults were problematic; hence, a distinction was made between “cults” and “destructive cults”. During this period, some contemporary studies and scientific papers described a member of a destructive cult<sup>1</sup> as a victim of a leader who was depicted as a tyrant. Many parents and researchers were seeking to understand what prompted the radical behavioural change of cult members. One of the hypotheses put forth was the use of mind control (brainwashing) to get members to submit to the daily life of the group. Cult Project subscribed to those views and to the belief that destructive cults could be harmful to some of their members. It did not, however, believe that all cultic groups were problematic.

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<sup>1</sup>R. Delgado, “Religious Totalism,” *Southern California Law Review* 15 (1977), pp. 1-99;

M.T. Singer, “Therapy with Ex-Cult Members,” *Journal of the National Association of Private Psychiatric Hospitals* vol. 9, no.4 (1978), pp.14-18;

P.A. Verdier, *Brainwashing and the Cults* (Hollywood, CA: Wilshire Book Company, 1977);

L. West, M. Singer, “Cults, Quacks, and Nonprofessional Psychotherapies,” in I. Harold, A. Kaplan, M. Freedman and B.J. Sadock, *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, Co., 1980), vol. 3, pp. 3245-3258;

L. J. West, “Cults, Liberty, and Mind Control,” in D.C. Rapoport and Y. Alexander (eds.), *The Rationalization of Terrorism* (Frederick, Md: Alethia Books, 1982), pp.101-107.

In the early '80s, our major source of information on “destructive cults” was from former cult members’ accounts in books, newspaper articles, to name a few.

Early on, Cult Project placed a lot of importance on collecting information and over time its documentation centre diversified its sources, and started to collect information on new religious movements and sociological studies of religious and political groups.

The view that certain destructive cults can cause their members physical or psychological harm or financial loss prompted Cult Project to set up prevention and awareness programs on the dangers of destructive cults and mind control techniques. Other services that we implemented included a documentation center which was accessible to the public as well as an information and assistance phone line to respond to questions from relatives, ex-cult members, students and the media.

For the first 10 years, our centre’s clientele was mostly composed of:

- Relatives of cult members;
- Ex-cult members;
- Students and teachers.

Discussions with “cults” and their members were rare. It was only in the mid-eighties that certain cult members began to approach us in order to:

- Obtain information on their group;
- Provide us with information on their group ;
- Criticize the functioning of Cult Project;
- Obtain information on how to leave their group;
- Find out about help available once they left their group.

Cult Project had few ties with groups identified as cults and destructive cults, primarily because:

- Cult Project was perceived as an “anti-cult” organization;
- Cult Project’s interventions were focused on ex-cult members and the families of members;
- Cult Project was rarely approached by “cults”, and did not initiate discussions with these groups.

In 1990, Cult Project was dissolved and Info-Cult ("Info-Secte" in French), an independent, bilingual and non-denominational charitable centre, was born.

The mandate of Info-Cult is "To promote the dignity and integrity of the individual, the respect of collective and individual rights, the freedom of thought and expression, and the right of access to information," and its objectives are:

- To promote the study of cult phenomena;
- To sensitize, inform and educate the public about these phenomena;
- To assist people with problems related to these phenomena."<sup>2</sup>

In a recent newspaper article, a Quebec Provincial Minister had this to say about approaches to the issue of cults.

"In France the question is looked at from a religious perspective. There is a political movement that wants to manage the cults whereas in Quebec we favour a North American approach based on consumer protection."<sup>3</sup>

The minister's views reflect the position Info-Cult has taken for nearly 30 years in protecting consumers.

Info-Cult offers, among other services, an assistance phone line, educational programs, support to ex-members and families, research and a documentation center which is one of the largest of its kind in North America. This center houses a broad range of information from sources around the world including group-generated and critical literature.

Info-Cult's funding comes in the form of an annual grant from the Quebec Ministry of Health and Social Services, discretionary funds from different Provincial Ministers, foundations, private groups, and individual donations, as well as fees for certain services

### **Centre's clientele**

In addition to parents, ex-members, students and teachers, Info-Cult's clientele has expanded through the years to include members of different new religions and other

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<sup>2</sup> These objectives are stated in the corporation's regulation number 1990-C.

<sup>3</sup> Le Soleil, le 20 février 2008 translation by author

groups as well as academics, mental health professionals, attorneys, law enforcement, media and others.

### *Contacts with the international community*

Since its founding, Info-Cult has networked with individuals and various organizations worldwide, who are interested in “cults”, new religious movements and related groups and subjects. These contacts, including individuals and groups from various Canadian provinces as well as from countries around the world, have helped to diversify the information available at our documentation centre and to foster exchange with regard to this phenomenon. As well, increasing interest and communication with academics with varying viewpoints has helped to broaden Info-Cult’s analysis and perspective on the issue. Info-Cult has also had numerous contacts and meetings with members and representatives of “cult” groups, spiritual organizations, and new religious movements.

### **Info-Cult and use of vocabulary**

The choice of vocabulary is in itself problematic when it comes to describing, understanding and researching the cult phenomenon. Today, the term “cult” has by and large a pejorative connotation. Consequently, some argue against its use.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the term “cult” can lead some to view certain groups as being “dangerous.” While the term is not ideal, it is highly improbable its use will be eliminated, therefore, if the term is used, it should be done so judiciously and one should be conscious of its limitations.

Info-Cult’s view is that individuals can have a positive experience in a so called “bad” group or a bad experience in a so called “good” group. The reality is that groups in our society exist on a continuum and there are a variety of factors that influence the experience someone might have in a group. Some factors include:

- The general functioning and evolution of a group;
- The relationship among its members;
- The leader's influence on the members;

A recent publication by Info-Cult, entitled “The Cult Phenomenon: How Groups Function”, reflects the ways in which Info-Cult has evolved over the years with regard to

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<sup>4</sup> R. Bergeron, *Vivre au risque des nouvelles religions* (Montreal: Médiaspaul, 1997);

R. Campiche, *Quand les sectes s'affolent. Ordre du temple Solaire, Média et fin de millénaire* (Geneva-Lausanne: Labor et Fides-Institut d'éthique Sociale, 1995);

J.P. Willaime, *Sociologie des religions*, 2nd ed. (Paris: P.U.F., 1998).

how groups function, the reasons why individuals join such groups and the nature of the relationship between leaders and their members and society.

For 28 years, Info-Cult's board of directors and staff have reflected upon and asked questions about the cult phenomenon. Based on numerous written works and discussions with researchers, professionals and others, several observations can be made.

One: Cults are not a new social phenomenon. Throughout history, such groups have been viewed by their community not only as minority groups but also, from the perspective of dominant normative groups, as deviant sub-groups with a potential to cause physical or psychological harm, or financial loss to their members;

Two: Not all groups identified as cults pose a risk to their members. It is, however, important to recognize that certain groups can violate the rights of their members;

Three: Participation in the life of a group constitutes an opportunity for social participation, socialization and solace, but certain groups can also become places of psychological and/or physical exclusion.

Info-Cult recognizes that the risks posed by a group to its members may vary:

- From one person to another;
- According to the situation and circumstances;
- From one group to another;
- From one region to another, in the case of international groups;
- Depending on the particular developmental stage of the group;
- Depending on internal or external conflicts.

Info-Cult avoids simplistic “yes” or “no” responses to complex questions such as “Is Group X a cult?” or “Is the group my loved-one joined dangerous?”

Info-Cult supports the need for new research to further our understanding of this phenomenon and improve our ability to respond more effectively to calls for help.

Although Info-Cult has evolved over the years, certain positions on accessibility, kidnapping, and legislation have remained constant:

- Info-Cult has always operated out of a known location and is easily reachable by phone.

- Contrary to a popular belief concerning “anti-cult” groups, Info-Cult has not supported or assisted in the use of coercive measures to remove someone from a group. In situations where Info-Cult has been asked about that option, we have consistently counseled against it.
- Existing laws are sufficient in dealing with the multiple problems associated with “cults” and cultic groups.<sup>5</sup>

## Government and “Cults”

For the uninitiated, a cursory look at the issue of “cults” can lead one to believe that diametrically opposing positions exist in governments’ responses. On the one hand, there is France, whose government has taken what can be described as an active role in dealing with “cults”. On the other hand, there is the United States where there is a strong opposition to any government involvement, be it their own or other governments.

Upon closer examination, we see a more complex and nuanced picture of governments and “cults”. Take Canada, the country I come from, where there is no position on this issue, or consider countries such as Switzerland and the Netherlands, who have responded differently to the cult phenomenon.

Certain social, cultural and historical factors can help us understand why some governments decide to intervene when dealing with “cults” whereas some do not.

For example, a country's **historical context** can have a significant impact on the actions a government chooses to take with regard to the cult phenomenon. Consider the following:

During the course of its modern history, has the country come up against an anti-democratic or totalitarian group? For example many European countries have had first-hand experience of being occupied by a Totalitarian movement. The experience of “Nazism” during WWII has had a profound impact on the’ psyche of many European countries, and therefore it should come as no surprise that some of these countries have a lower tolerance to groups that are viewed as totalitarian. A totalitarian group, in contrast, has never occupied North America.

Another consideration is whether or not a particular country has ever witnessed violent acts such as mass suicides or murders or terrorist attacks, perpetrated by “cult” leaders and how they have reacted to these tragedies. For example, the murders, arson and

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<sup>5</sup> See also: <http://infosect.freeshell.org/infocult/RESPONSE.htm>

“assisted suicides” carried out by members of the Order of the Solar Temple (OTS) elicited different responses in the countries where the tragedies occurred.

- ◆ The French government set up a parliamentary commission.<sup>6</sup>
- ◆ In Switzerland, a Parliamentary commission dealing with general affairs submitted a report on cults<sup>7</sup>
- ◆ In Canada there was a provincial coroner’s report into the deaths that occurred in the province of Quebec.<sup>8</sup>

One factor that might account for this difference is that Canada and the United States were settled by immigrants from different countries with diverse ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds and, in the case of the United States, separation of church and state was institutionalized early on.

A second factor that **might account for actions of a government** is how it positions itself **with regard to religious groups**. In most democratic and so-called secular countries, the roles of religion and State are clearly defined. Mechanisms for recognizing religious groups are clearly set out. Groups that wish to obtain status as a religious organization must meet specific criteria. In other countries, the relationship between religion and state is ambiguous.

## Governmental Factors

Are countries that have a more centralized governing structure more prone to taking an aggressive stance towards cultic groups than countries that have a less centralized more laissez-faire approach? What role do charities play? For example, in countries such as the United States and Canada, who are seen as having a less centralized more laissez faire style of government, the charity sector plays a very vital role in filling the gaps left by the government.

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<sup>6</sup> A. Gest, & J. Guyard. Commission sur les sectes en France. Assemblée Nationale (1995). : <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/rap-eng/r2468.asp>«

<sup>7</sup> Email communication with Jean-François Mayer May 3, 2008. Initially this commission was started to look at attacks made in a Swiss newspaper (Tages-Anzeiger, Feb. 4, 1997) against Jean-François Mayer, an expert on cults, who was at the time a Federal civil servant and had been requested to contribute to a report then being prepared by a consultative commission of the Ministry of Justice about Scientology. The Parliamentary commission decided to hear from Mr. Mayer and others and finally decided to take the opportunity to find out about cults, which led to the idea of a report on cults.

<sup>8</sup> P. Morin, Ordre du Temple Solaire: Rapport d’investigation du Coroner. Bureau du Coroner, Gouvernement du Québec. (1996)

As some researchers<sup>9</sup> have noted, religious groups have to fight for access to privileges. The more difficult it is to acquire status and privileges associated with being recognized by the government, the more conflictual is the relationship between a particular group and the government.

The Western European Governmental response to “cultic” groups can be described as global, that is, instead of looking at one tragedy or a unique situation, they attempt to understand cult phenomena and assess the risk that cults represent for their respective countries.

With the exception of the 1980 Hill report on the *Study of Mind Development Groups, Sects and Cults* in the Canadian province of Ontario, one can describe Canada and the United States response to “cultic” groups as situational. This means that a specific issue related to a cult or religious group is addressed instead of the cult phenomenon in general.

In many of the parliamentary reports on this issue that I have examined, the solution most widely recommended is to provide the public with information about cults, new religious movements, spiritual or other groups. Government reports emphasize the need to educate the public about how these groups function, their recruitment methods and their philosophies. The goal is to provide the public with as much information as possible so that individuals can make informed choices about whether or not to join a group.

Governments cover the gamut from taking a strong position in opposing "cults" to doing nothing. With such a range of responses, is there a suggested approach for governments to take and would it be possible to achieve a consensus given that actions are rooted in assumptions about ourselves and others that, in turn, are inseparable from the historical, political, legal, cultural, social, personal context/worlds in which we live? As the author and diarist, Anais Nin (1903 - 1977) wrote, “***We don't see things as they are; we see things as we are.***”

With that in mind I propose that an acceptable and viable approach for governments is to look at the most critical areas, such as **Information and Education, Victim**

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<sup>9</sup> B. Wilson and J. Cresswell. (eds.). *New religious movements challenge and response*. New York: Routledge, (1999), pp. 5-21

R. Stark and W.S. Bainbridge. *The future of religion: Secularization, revival and cult formation*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (1985)

R. Stark, W. S. Bainbridge. *A Theory of Religion*. New York: David Lang. (1987)

R. Stark, W. S. Bainbridge, and D.P. Doyle. *Cults of America: A Reconnaissance in Space and Time*. *Sociological Analysis* 40 (1979), pp. 347-459.

**Assistance and Research**, where the potential exists for getting governments to devote time, energy and resources.

Support for informing and educating the public has been recommended in different governmental reports. As well, government officials and private and professional organizations in many countries have voiced their support for this option when asked to respond about problems related to "cults".

To conclude, it is important to realize that tragedies have occurred and chances are they will occur again. Whereas they represent a very small percentage of the range of groups that exist in our society, these gruesome and tragic acts reinforce the public's perception of cults as being dangerous. As a result, people look to the government to deal with this issue.

The majority of new groups, even those that may be considered cults, are not tragedies waiting to happen; neither will every person involved in such a group be harmed. Every year there are new groups that emerge - religious, spiritual, educational, therapeutic, human potential, occult etc. A number of them may, at first glance, appear peculiar because their beliefs or lifestyles are different from the norm. This does not necessarily mean that the group is a "cult" and represents a threat to its members or others. A fundamental issue is a group's actions and conduct. Does the group harm individuals, physically or psychologically? Does it pose a threat to society? If the response to these questions is in the affirmative, governments can and should intervene. However, in doing so, they must respond in a democratic fashion, respecting everyone's rights and needs, and they must avoid adopting draconian measures.