

Benefits Of Dialogue

Info-Cult has added to its website the article ***Dialogue and Cultic Studies: Why Dialogue Benefits the Cultic Studies Field****, a message from the Directors of the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA). The Board of Info-Cult agrees with the views expressed in this article and for a number of years have been pursuing a similar course in our approach to dealing with cultic phenomena.

There is one sentence in the text, however, Info-Cult wants to dissociate from -"By the late 1990s, lawyers realized there was not much money in this field, even when they won (Georgiades, 2004)." In the context of this article it seems to presume that financial gain is the only reason lawyers got involved in cult-related cases. Info-Cult does not endorse that statement nor agree with that opinion.

Info-Cult has worked closely with ICSA for many years, and since 2009 Mike Kropveld, Info-Cult's Executive Director has been a member of ICSA's board of Directors.

* This article can be found on the ICSA website at: <http://www.icsahome.com/aboutus/benefitsofdialogue> and was published in *ICSA Today*, 2013, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 2-7.

Dialogue and Cultic Studies: Why Dialogue Benefits the Cultic Studies Field

A Message From the Directors of ICSA

The International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA—formerly American Family Foundation, AFF¹), in its nearly thirty-five-year history, has always been committed to freedom of expression, freedom of mind,² openness, and dialogue. During the past 15 years, an appreciation for these values has increased throughout ICSA's broad network. This change is particularly evident at the organization's annual conference, where participants can now choose to accept, reject, or study further a much wider variety of viewpoints than would have been available to them 30 years ago. We wish to reflect on these changes so that others will better understand and appreciate both why we welcome diverse views, and why we also can honor people with opposing viewpoints.³

Historically, the cultic⁴-studies field has seen its share of black-and-white thinking and polarization of views. In the field's early days, splits resulted, at least in part, from (a) the collision of the intense emotional impact cultic-group affiliation had on some people and (b) the reactions of some academics to deprogramming and proposals for conservatorship legislation that would have enabled parents to obtain legal permission to forcibly remove adult children from groups.

As early as the 1970s, when the field was new and the term *cultic studies* was not even used, there were two clearly established camps: the so-called "anticult movement" (ACM) and an interest group of academics, the so-called "procultists." Helping professionals (mostly mental health, but also some clergy) could be found in both camps, although most leaned toward the ACM because families and former cult members who were harmed were coming to them for assistance.⁵

Some have referred to these two camps as “critics” and “sympathizers” because the differences were not as stark and caricatured as the stereotypes each camp used to describe the other camp implied (Langone, 2005).

The polarization of the 1970s continued well into the 1990s, partly because polarization is self-reinforcing: A stereotypes B; B is offended and stereotypes A; A is offended and stereotypes B with renewed vigor, and so on. The polarization was also sharpened when lawyers entered the fray. Some sued critics; some sued groups. Many attorneys called upon experts to give testimony. The ever-present threat of lawsuits made everybody wary of talking to “the enemy.”

By the late 1990s, lawyers realized there was not much money in this field, even when they won (Georgiades, 2004). This development reduced one motivation for polarization.

The glaring polarization of these decades had many deleterious consequences, among which were the following:

- There was virtually no communication between the scholars who studied groups and the helping professionals and psychological researchers who worked with the casualties that left these groups. Even though there had been dozens of publications about the ACM, until 1998 only one academician visited AFF, one of the leading organizations associated with the so-called ACM, and that visit was for about one hour. Cult critics were equally reluctant to visit the other “camp.” In other words, even when members of one camp talked *about* their opponents, they rarely could base their opinions on what they learned from talking *with* those opponents.
- Because there was little if any communication between camps, neither benefited from the knowledge and perspectives of the other. For example, mental-health professionals working with casualties of groups were not aware of the great variation among and within groups studied by sociologists of religion; while sociologists, who tended to study the “forest,” had little awareness of, or appreciation for, the profound pain of some “trees” within that forest.
- Because both camps tended to caricature their opponents, subtle—and sometimes not-so-subtle—pressures to conform and be loyal developed. Even within the camps, it was sometimes difficult to express points of view that differed from the group norm.⁶
- Because research tended to focus on either positive (member) accounts or negative (former-member) accounts, each camp tended toward one-sided conclusions about cultic phenomena.
- Opinions within camps sometimes came to be treated as established facts because virtually everybody within the camp agreed with the opinion, in part because few individuals bothered even to read what their opponents said.
- Some cultic groups, as well as some anticult activists, exacerbated the polarization by cultivating experts to advance one-sided opinions in legal disputes.

Although these negative consequences have continued into the present to a degree, some individuals within the two camps fortunately have recognized the stifling effects of polarization. Eileen Barker, for example, described some of the problems in her 1995 presidential address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR):

If we are to be honest and self-critical, we have to admit that several of us have reacted against the selective negativity of the ACM by, sometimes quite unconsciously, making our own unbalanced selections. Having been affronted by what have appeared to be gross violations of human rights perpetrated through

practices such as deprogramming and the medicalization of belief, there have been occasions when social scientists have withheld information about the movements because they know that this will be taken, possibly out of context, to be used as a justification for such actions. The somewhat paradoxical situation is that the more we feel the NRMs are having *untrue* bad things said about them, the less inclined we are to publish *true* "bad" things about the movements. (Barker, 1995, p. 305)

The tendency to which Dr. Barker refers magnifies as participants in each camp seek collegial support when they have been attacked by members of the other camp. Again, Barker is eloquently candid on the subject, and her remarks, with minor changes, could easily have applied to the critics' camp:

The situation becomes compounded when a group of social scientists who have been similarly vilified get together and exchange their experiences at SSSR meetings or elsewhere. In some ways we are doing precisely what members of a professional body are expected to do—exchanging information and providing a critique of each other's work. But one can also recognize the process whereby we are creating a cozy little support group within which we collaborate to construct a monolithic image of the ACM, taking insufficient account of the differences and changes within the movement as we collectively confirm our prejudices about "them" (but see Bromley and Shupe 1995). Insofar as we respond to the ACM's response to us in this way, we are in danger of ignoring what it has to say that might be of relevance to our understanding of the NRMs [new religious movements], but also, and more significantly so far as the topic of this paper is concerned, of actually obstructing ourselves from acquiring a fuller understanding of how the ACM operates within the cult scene. (Barker, 1995, p. 307)

Barker was the first to try to bridge the "great divide" between the two camps. In her acceptance remarks to a Lifetime Achievement Award that ICSA bestowed upon her in 2013, Dr. Barker said,

I was scared stiff when, as a widely advertised "cult apologist," I first stepped into the lion's den of AFF's 1998 annual conference. But, within minutes, I was greeted with disarming courtesy by Herbert Rosedale; and when, each of us with three supporters, we held a day-long meeting before the Seattle conference the following year, we were both surprised at how much our interests overlapped, and how useful and illuminating it was to discuss our disagreements.

During the late 1990s, AFF's president, Herbert Rosedale, along with certain staff and volunteers of AFF, had begun to dialogue with members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). The AFF volunteers included two exit counselors who had helped several people leave ISKCON. These exit counselors had indicated that the risk of abuse in ISKCON depended in large part on geography, for the control tendencies of gurus varied considerably. Conversations with ISKCON's representatives confirmed this view and revealed other problems within the organization. AFF's discussants became convinced that the dialogue was in good faith on both sides.

At its 1999 annual conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, AFF, with some trepidation, hosted a panel discussion, "Can Cults Change? The Case of ISKCON."⁷ One of the panelists, Radha Dasi, an attorney, spoke about human rights in ISKCON, detailing her grievances with the organization to which she remained faithful. Her paper was perhaps the most well received and sought after of the conference.

The dialogues with ISKCON and Dr. Barker and her colleagues were liberating. They compellingly demonstrated that the sterile polarization of the past did not have to be permanent. There was still much about which we disagreed. But, given the many years

during which the two sides had hurled simplistic stereotypes at each other, the amount of agreement was startling. We were not humans and Klingons grudgingly approaching a peace table in a *Star Trek* episode. We were humans and humans discovering how much we had in common.

The dialogue begun in the late '90s has continued and expanded. The communication has enriched the views of people on both sides of what once was, but is no longer, a great divide.

Friedrich Griess, Past President and current board member of FECRIS, and one of the 2013 ICSA award recipients, has tried for many years to bring activists, helping professionals, and researchers together. He has translated the Group Psychological Abuse Scale (Almendros, Gámez-Guadix, Carrobes, & Rodríguez-Carballeira, 2011; Chambers, Langone, Dole, & Grice, 1994; Langone, 2006) into German and has been helpful in bringing professionals associated with ICSA to FECRIS conferences. He has also engaged in respectful dialogue with people of diverse views at many ICSA conferences. Mr. Griess, who emphasizes the harmfulness and totalitarian nature of certain groups, advocates balance in his acceptance remarks to receipt of the Lifetime Achievement Award:

I am convinced that totalitarianism cannot be combated by totalitarianism. There may be different ways to fight totalitarianism, depending on culture, personal experience, historical and scientific background, and so on. It is important that people and associations dedicated to various ways of helping victims and preventing the spread of totalitarianism respect and even assist each other. As European institutions have often maintained, it is important to understand that religious freedom is a high value that should be balanced against, and that should not be abused to suppress, other human rights and freedoms.

There have been many papers and panels that have crossed this now "unsecured border." As a result, sociologists and religious-studies scholars have become more aware of the profound pain that some individuals experience as a result of a cultic-group experience. Helping professionals, psychological researchers, families, and former group members have become more aware of the great variety of individual responses among and within cultic groups. There is a growing recognition that much apparent disagreement is a function of different disciplines having different roles. Helping professionals and some psychological researchers focus on casualties and concentrate on those who have been hurt. This does not mean that these professionals and researchers are uninterested in those who are not casualties; nor does it mean that religious freedom does not concern them. Sociologists and religious-studies scholars are academicians who observe, analyze, and report on groups; they rarely focus on individual harm. This does not mean, however, that they do not care about people being hurt.

There seems to be a growing recognition of a bottom line on which most can agree:

Although cultic groups vary a great deal, a huge body of clinical evidence and a growing body of empirical research indicate that **some groups harm some people sometimes, and that some groups may be more likely to harm people than other groups.**⁸

People can and do argue respectfully about the nature of harm, how much harm, the relative level of harm in various groups, the causes of harm, the most effective ways of ameliorating harm, and the like. But it now seems beyond dispute that harm is real. Strange though it may seem to those who are new to this field, this proposition represents progress; for when the great divide really was *great*, some implied that all reports of harm lacked credibility.⁹

The bolded proposition above reflects two principles that are basic to the social and behavioral sciences, but that even scientists often forget: variation and interaction. The phenomena that social-behavioral scientists study are called *variables* for a reason: Their values vary! Moreover, different people interact in different ways with a particular variable. The dynamics can become dizzyingly complex. Thus, Guru A may generate more complaints of harm than Guru B; however, that statement does not mean that there cannot be happy persons who follow A, nor does it mean that there cannot be unhappy persons following B.

Relationships among variables in the social-behavioral sciences are complex and express themselves in statistical distributions. These relationships are not like gravity and other laws of physics, the equations of which are more commonly associated with precise and reliable predictions.

When helpers recognize the variety and complex interactions of people in cults, they can benefit from the findings of psychological and sociological researchers. For example, sociological and psychological researchers have found that as much as 70 percent of people born and raised in cultic groups (second-generation adults—SGAs) are likely to leave when they become adults (Barker, 2013; Kendall, 2006). Other research indicates that at least in some groups the SGA departure rate declines over time because the group begins to accommodate in response to the loss of members (Barker, 2013). Mental-health professionals have described the serious psychological and social problems that SGAs often face (Furnari & Henry, 2011; Goldberg, 2006). These helpers see the casualties who come to them; they know little about the SGAs who don't come to them. Some of these SGAs have left groups; others have remained. Some in both of these categories may need and benefit from counseling. Because dialogue among a wide variety of professionals and researchers is now possible, the resulting increase in understanding of the SGA experience may lead to better treatments.

Thus, the benefits of dialogue are the converse of the negative effects of polarization:

- Communication increases knowledge, broadens perspectives, and enhances one's capacity to understand and appreciate the complex interpersonal dynamics of people who have left or are still in cultic groups, and it may help us better relate to those who have endured abuse.
- When groups of helpers and researchers with different perspectives and foci have open boundaries, people belonging to those disciplines will feel less pressure to conform and, consequently, will feel freer to pursue new ideas or innovative approaches to treatment.
- When one has regular contact with those holding differing views, one is more likely to recognize one's opinions as opinions and not mistakenly treat them as facts.
- When boundaries between helpers and researchers are open and characterized by much "cross-border traffic," dubious groups or dubious individuals within groups cannot so easily exploit the situation.

Dialogue is a process. The content of the dialogue is secondary to the good faith of participants honestly trying to understand the perspectives of people with whom they may disagree, but without giving up a commitment to truth.

Dialogue is also premised on humility. If I deem myself to be imperfect, value truth, and have a set of beliefs, then I ought to be open to discussion with those who do not share those beliefs. I cannot correct myself if I do not allow myself to be challenged.

Let us close with a cautionary note. This paper extols dialogue. Nevertheless, even with the much increased level of dialogue compared to 30 years ago, the cultic-studies field still has problems.

First of all, from a scientific standpoint, we have many more questions than answers. In part, our understanding is impeded by the lack of multidisciplinary studies. It could, for example, be very helpful if sociologists and psychologists collaborated on studies of current and former cult members.

Second, the tendency to pin labels onto opponents rather than respond to their arguments is a natural human temptation to which we may all succumb and that we should all try to resist. Stereotyping can provide a short-term comfort, for it requires less thought than analyses that recognize the complex dynamics of cultic phenomena. But stereotyping inevitably leads to polarization, which reinforces stereotyping. Thus, statements such as “She’s an anticultist” or “He’s a procultist” tell us very little and can mislead us a great deal. More useful than labels are questions followed by good-faith discussion. “What does he say?” is a more fruitful question than “In what category does she belong?”

Third, good faith is a prerequisite to fruitful dialogue. Believing in the good faith of a potential dialogue partner presupposes a minimum level of trust in that person. Some individuals and groups may deserve the minimum level of trust required to initiate dialogue; others may not. However, we cannot determine who is worthy and who is not if we do not give them an opportunity to dialogue. Giving others that opportunity entails risk, the kind of risk that Dr. Barker took when she approached AFF/ICSA in 1998. Nevertheless, we should not be naïve. There may be some with whom dialogue will not be fruitful. As one person humorously put it, “It is good to be open-minded, but not so open-minded that our brains fall out.”

In the late 1990s, when people in this field began to listen more dispassionately to those with different views, opinions changed. If the benefits of dialogue are to continue, we need to avoid wasting time and effort arguing about what we or others might have said or done in the past and focus instead on what we think now. Let us shun futile confrontation and affirm the value of dialogue by talking respectfully with those who hold opinions that differ from our own. We may find that our differences diminish and our understanding increases.

Carmen Almendros

Rosanne Henry

Steve K. D. Eichel

Michael Kropveld

Carol Giambalvo

Michael Langone

Lorna Goldberg

Alan Schefflin

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About the Authors

Carmen Almendros, PhD, is Associate Professor in the Biological and Health Psychology Department at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain.

Steve K. D. Eichel, PhD, ABPP, ICSA President, is Past-President of the American Academy of Counseling Psychology and the Greater Philadelphia Society of Clinical Hypnosis.

Carol Giambalvo is a cofounder of reFOCUS, a national support network for former cult members, and Director of ICSA's Recovery Programs.

Lorna Goldberg, LCSW, PsyA, past president of ICSA, is a psychoanalyst in private practice and Dean of Faculty at the Institute of Psychoanalytic Studies.

Rosanne Henry, MA, LPC, is the chair of ICSA's mental-health committee and a psychotherapist practicing in Littleton, Colorado.

Michael Kropveld is chair of ICSA's conference committee and Executive Director of Info-Cult/Info-Secte, based in Montreal, Canada.

Michael Langone, PhD, is Executive Director of ICSA and Editor-in-Chief of *ICSA Today*.

Alan W. Scheflin, JD, LLM, is Professor of Law at Santa Clara University School of Law in California.

¹ In 2004, the American Family Foundation (AFF) changed its name to the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA). The former name had taken on inappropriate political connotations that did not exist when the organization was founded in 1979. At least two dozen people participated in several months of email and phone discussions about the name change. Some discussants did not want to have a "cult" word in the title. But the majority felt that doing so would maintain continuity with the ways in which family members and former group members in the organization's network regarded the issue. These were, after all, the people AFF was trying to help. The selection of the adjective *cultic*, instead of the noun *cult*, was deliberate. The adjective—"of, like, resembling, related to 'cult'" —demonstrated that the discussants acknowledged ambiguity in the term, while they accepted its practical utility.

² See the article by ICSA director and former President, Alan Scheflin (1983): <https://docs.google.com/a/icsa.name/file/d/0B7gQLq25IOjMLTNuaVUyWUhMSVU/edit>

³ Some had difficulty understanding why at our 2013 annual conference we could give Lifetime Achievement awards to Eileen Barker and Friedrich Griess. The Lifetime Achievement Award honors individuals who have, to an exceptional degree, embodied in their work ICSA's values of openness, courtesy, and dialogue, and who have made academic and/or other exceptional contributions to the field of cultic studies. Mr. Griess, who has been affiliated with FECRIS and has supported attempts to pass legislation aimed at cultic groups, has focused on harm in cults; whereas Dr. Barker, a sociologist who founded INFORM and has generally opposed attempts at new legislation, has addressed harm in some of her publications, but that has not been her focus. In our view, dialogue is concerned more with process than content. Each of these individuals has tried to build bridges between members of ICSA's network and people outside that network, and each has been respectful and open to talking with people of widely varying opinions. We honored them because of their promotion of dialogue, not for the content of their sometimes diametrically opposed opinions.

⁴ There are many definitions of *cult*. This paper defines a cult as "an ideological organization held together by charismatic relationships and demanding total commitment" (Zablocki, 1997). This definition is compatible with some definitions of new religious movements (NRMs), but *cult* can also refer to nonreligious organizations. As defined here, cults are at risk of abusing members, but do not necessarily do so.

⁵ By the early 1990s, mental-health professionals within the ICSA network had worked with an estimated 9,000 cultists and their families (Langone, 1993).

⁶ In part, these pressures resulted from concerns that "giving credibility" to the other side might enable lawyers to attack oneself or one's colleagues during depositions or trials.

⁷ A transcript of this session, as well as Radha Devi Dasi's paper, along with many others can be found in a special online group report that ICSA compiled in 2001: <https://docs.google.com/a/icsa.name/document/d/1Z-gWYIPv4FRb-uWp4akrZ4CuDsNXnQ0IjKWyLijCu6A/edit>

⁸ This quote comes from Langone (2001, p. 3). Recognition of the basic point can also be found in a book review by Massimo Introvigne (Introvigne, nd) and on the Web site of INFORM, the organization founded by Eileen Barker (INFORM, nd).

⁹ A number of publications, for example, referred to former-cult-member testimonies as "atrocious tales" (e.g., Bromley, Shupe & Ventimiglia, 1979), but none ever called current-member testimonies "benevolence tales."