Frontier religions are, by definition, those that are breaking new ground and they tend, almost by definition, to consist of first-generation converts who have chosen to move on from the old beliefs and practices of their parents and the rest of society. Rejection of the established and embracing of the new is unlikely to endear such people to those in the public space who prefer to stay within the safety of tested and familiar boundaries. The movements might well be seen as a threat, a disruption, or even as an undermining of the very fabric of society. This is a fear that in the past has led to Pagans feeding Christians to the lions, and Christians burning heretics at the stake.

Today, the response to followers of new religions may not be quite so drastic, but the fear and suspicion remains and, to a greater or lesser extent, societies throughout the world are currently alerting their populations to the dangers of cults, sects or new religious movements, and not infrequently, passing special laws to deal with 'the problem'. Governmental Reports have been commissioned, and while some have concluded that the public furor is an exaggeration¹, others, relying heavily on the so-called 'anti-cult movement' for information, have drawn up lists of groups which are considered criminal and/or dangerous and which need to be controlled by the state apparatus.² Apart from official reactions to the new religions, there are those who have taken the law into their own hands, resulting in injury, even death, quite apart from widespread discrimination in jobs, schools and various other areas of public life. At the level of the family, parents have been persuaded to have their children kidnapped so that they may be 'deprogrammed'³, or, more frequently nowadays, "exit counselled" in order to rescue them from the aberration that, it is believed, they have been manipulated into joining.

Not that the behaviour of those in the public space is incomprehensible. It is all too understandable. Not only is there always likely to be a healthy suspicion of those who cross social and cultural
frontiers, but there have been some well-publicised and horrifying examples of frontier religions during the past decades. Few have not heard of Aum Shinrikyo, the Solar Temple, Heaven's Gate or Jonestown. Few have not heard of families being broken up when one of their number has been 'lured into' a 'bizarre, doomsday cult' by 'irresistible techniques of mind control'. And few have not heard about the political intrigues, financial skulduggery, and criminal activities of groups led by an all-powerful charismatic leader whose followers blindly obey his (or occasionally her) every instruction.

Without question, it is true that some frontier religions have resorted to criminal and socially unacceptable practices. But that does not mean that all new religions have done so. It is also, without question, true that most, if not all, of the traditional religions have been responsible for what most of us would consider equally reprehensible behaviour more reprehensible than that of many of the new religions, in fact. But the generalised image of new religions in contemporary society, as throughout history, tends to be constructed in a monolithic manner, mainly ignoring the acceptable or praiseworthy while parading any shocking or unacceptable characteristics.

Of course, one must not exaggerate. One can find a variety of images being touted in the image marketplace. One of these is provided by the movements themselves, but some movements are secretive about their beliefs and practices; a few of them blatantly lie; most select only what they believe to be their more attractive features for public consumption.

A somewhat different picture is drawn by social scientists who have studied the movements from a variety of angles, trying to present as objective and contextualised an account of the movements as possible. In other words, the social scientist tries not only to be accurate in reporting facts, but also to put these in a comparative context so that visibility is not confused with frequency or typicality. If, for example, a cult has three suicides in a year, the media are, understandably, likely to present this as a cult-related happening: *Cult victim kills himself*. One does not, however, see a headline stating that a Catholic has killed himself. The social scientist might discover that the suicide rate among Catholics of the same age and social background is twice as high. This would not be to deny individual tragedies, but to suggest that it might be something other than just 'cult membership' which was responsible for the tragedy – and that it is even possible that membership of the cult might prevent some people from taking their own lives.

Social science is, furthermore, concerned with statements that are empirically testable, rather than with moral evaluation or theological
arguments, and it tries not to use value-laden concepts to praise or condemn. Thus, rather than saying ‘this is a bad cult’, the social scientist will say ‘Children in group X are beaten if they misbehave’; ‘Ex-members of group Y have reported that the guru uses his position to get young female members to have sexual relations with him’; or ‘The members of group Z have to hand over all their property to the community’.

Of course, some social science has been carried out in greater depth and with more methodological sophistication than others, but the basic aim is to be as accurate as possible without bias on either side. Social scientists are not, however, renowned for their clarity of expression and only rarely write popular books or articles. Far more readily accessible in the public space are the images constructed by the media, who have a vested interest in attracting an audience and bad, sexy, sensational, new stories are far more attractive for most of us than good, dull, every-day, old stories. Furthermore, one of the main sources upon which the media tend to draw is the ‘anti-cult movement’—coalitions of persons who, sometimes for very good reason, wish to alert the public to the dangers of the cults and persuade the authorities ‘to do something’ about them.

1. INFORM

Having been studying new religions and societal responses to them in Europe, North America and various other places around the world since the early 1970s, I had witnessed what seemed to be a considerable amount of unnecessary suffering this applied both to members of the new religions and, possibly even more, to the relatives and friends of those who joined a movement that they didn’t understand. I concluded that although there were always likely to be disagreements, much of the suffering was unnecessary in so far as people were acting on the basis either of ignorance or of misinformation supplied by the movements and/or their opponents. On the one hand, parents’ reactions to their (adult) children’s joining a movement were frequently exacerbating rather than ameliorating their relationships; on the other hand, there were avoidable tragedies such as the deaths of the Branch Davidians at Mount Carmel, Waco.

It struck me that some of this suffering might be alleviated if people had easier access to the kind of information that social scientists were producing. I approached the Archbishop of Canterbury and the British Government and, with their support and the help of a small working group of parents, academics and some other interested people, set up the Information Network Focus on Religious Movements (INFORM), which,

Needless to say, INFORM's appearance on the 'cult scene' was not welcomed by all the other participants. This is not the place to describe the attacks and 'dirty tricks' to which INFORM has been subjected and is being subjected still. Suffice it to say, that we have been continually vilified by some of the movements, some other 'cult-watching' groups and some sections of the media—though we have built up good relations with several other 'cult-watching' groups around the world (including a few that are labelled 'anti-cult'); several of the new religions now co-operate with us by providing at least some information and in trying to sort out problems that have arisen; and, increasingly, the media have come to find INFORM an invaluable resource and are now more likely to use us than to attack us.

While certainly not wishing to deny that there is a place for watch 'dogs', I do believe that objective information, which includes an understanding of the complicated processes that occur in new religions, is essential if we are to avoid some of the pitfalls into which people in the public space have fallen in their relations with frontier religions in the past. It is important that there should be an awareness of the dangers of relying on accounts that have been constructed from one-sided perspectives—be these stressing only the positive or only the negative aspects of the movements. The truth is not necessarily 'in the middle'. Social phenomena are far more complicated than that. Furthermore, negative and over-simplistic generalisations made by anti-cultists and popularised by the mass media, can well result in genuine problems being obscured.

Not only is it dangerous to generalise about the movements as a whole, but it also has to be recognised that the same movement can differ quite radically at different times and in different places—and that, even in the same place at the same time, it can have a different effect on different people. Each case is unique and to understand any particular case we need information not only about the particular movement, but also about the particular persons involved.

1.1 INFORM's general policy

INFORM is a non-political and non-sectarian charity, which aims to provide objective, balanced and up-to-date knowledge as a basis from which individuals can make their own decisions according to their own
values. It does not advocate any particular ideal or goal towards which people should be led, but it does try to minimise unnecessary suffering. It believes in respect for the individual, and that all citizens have equal rights and responsibilities, irrespective of their religious beliefs.

INFORM does not believe there should be special laws that apply only to alternative religions or 'cults'. Its position, shared with successive British governments, is that members of new religions should not be treated any differently from members of old religions or no religion just because of their beliefs. But if members of a new religion in a democracy offend against the law of the land, the law ought to be enforced and the offenders should be prosecuted and sentenced as rigorously or leniently as any other group or person would be for the same offence.

It might, however, be necessary to introduce new laws which, while applicable to all citizens, would cover certain issues that have arisen because of the existence of some of the movements. Amendments might, for example, be introduced to laws concerned with children in 'closed' communities; it could be helpful to strengthen the application of the habeas corpus law, and/or to expand 'consumer protection' legislation, allowing for a 'cooling off' period after large sums of money or property have been handed over to a movement.

INFORM recognises that some movements engage in practices which, while not criminal, are not generally considered socially desirable. As a consequence, INFORM tries to educate and, where necessary, alert people with accurate information about the movements and the possible consequences of joining one or other of their number. Plans are in progress to introduce an 'education package' that could be widely distributed to schools, institutions of Higher Education, youth clubs and other organisations, providing material that would help young people to make informed choices about the movements.

INFORM’s policy of initiating and maintaining contact with the movements has a number of beneficial consequences. First, the movements are considered an important source of information about their own beliefs, practices, organisation, history etc. They are not INFORM’s only source, and INFORM does not agree with, condone, or even believe everything that it is told. Secondly, INFORM has found that direct contact (rather than indirect confrontation or attacks in the media) can frequently result in ameliorating a number of difficult situations. The contact can involve mediation in particular cases; alternatively, dialogue with a movement can result in its altering some of its more dubious practices.

INFORM does not accept funding from any persons or groups (such as
alternative religions) that might try to influence, or be thought to influence, its policy of providing objective information. No member of a new religion can serve as a Governor or be a member of INFORM's staff.

INFORM staff are carefully selected and trained in accordance with the general principles of the social sciences. They have the opportunity to attend LSE graduate seminars at which speakers include academics and others (such as ex-members, parents of members and some current members) who have experience of alternative religions.

Since its inauguration, accountability has been one of the main concerns of INFORM's work. Confidential case notes have to be written up for each enquiry, and at least one other member of staff will look at the notes both to make suggestions of how further help may to be offered and to ensure that INFORM policy is being followed.

Staff meetings are held on a regular basis to discuss how best to help particular enquirers according to INFORM's tested principles. Staff meetings are also used to exchange general information and discuss the constantly changing trends within and between the movements.

All case notes are treated as strictly confidential and no personal details are divulged to anyone outside INFORM without the express permission of the individuals concerned.

1.2 INFORM's Structure

1.2.1 A Board of Governors is responsible for INFORM's general policy and for the appointment of staff. It consists of around a dozen persons from various walks of life, including representatives nominated by the Church of England, the Free Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group as well as some academics, counsellors and parents.

1.2.2 A Management Committee (consisting of the Chair, one of the vice-Chairs and the Treasurer and the Acting Director, with the power to co-opt other persons for particular purposes) is responsible for the more practical running of the office and ensuring the execution of policy decisions that have been made by the Governors.

1.2.3 Staff: Currently working in the office, which is housed in a couple of rooms at the London School of Economics, are a full-time Acting Director (5 days a week), an Information Officer (2 days per week) and an Assistant Information Officer (one day per week) all of whom
answer the telephone, reply to letters and help people who turn up in person, as well as collecting information which has to be filed in an easily accessible form.

There is also a part-time Administrative Officer (3 days a week) who is responsible for making sure the office functions smoothly and the finances are kept in order. He, like the other members of staff, has taken a graduate course in Religion in Contemporary Society. Students and other volunteers help with filing and some of the more routine tasks, but are not allowed access to confidential information.

1.3 The Network

INFORM is in daily touch through telephone, e-mail, fax or other means with an international network of people who can help us with information or some kind of specialist knowledge or experience. The network includes professionals such as scholars; lawyers; doctors; social workers; clergy (priests, ministers, rabbis, chaplains) and specially appointed diocesan representatives from across the nation. People with personal experience, such as relatives of members and former members are also part of the network, and an enquirer may be put in touch with some of those who are willing to spend time sharing their experiences with others in a similar situation. But this sharing of experiences should not be confused with counselling.

INFORM does not itself offer counselling. It believes it is imperative that counsellors and therapists should be professionally trained and professionally supervised. There are some organisations that use or recommend as counsellors individuals who have gone through the experience of having themselves been, or of having someone close to them, in a movement. The danger with using such people is that they may be working out their own problems and, without professional training and some measure of accountability, they may actually harm those whom they purport to help.

As intimated earlier, INFORM also makes contact with the movements themselves whenever this is possible. This is partly in order to obtain information from their point of view – which, even if not always taken at face value, is a valuable contribution to our understanding of, minimally, how they would like to see themselves presented. It is also partly in order to develop a relationship so that it is easier to negotiate mediation should the need arise. Not all the new religions agree to have contact with INFORM, but a surprisingly large number are willing to co-operate with
us to at least some degree. Even if this is only for public relations reasons, the contact can be helpful in sorting out a significant number of problems.

1.4 Resources

Information is collected from a variety of sources around the world: from scholars; from the movements themselves; from former members; from other 'cult-watching groups' (be they anti-cult, counter-cult or church, governmental or academic); the media and, of course, from our enquirers.

The INFORM office houses a specially designed computer programme with basic information about over 2500 different groups. The programme has an elaborate cross-referencing system which includes not only the details about particular movements, but also themes such as 'violence', 'millennial expectations', 'child abuse', 'meditation'. Visitors to the office can make use of a sizeable library of books, numerous cassettes and videos, and a score or so filing cabinets which contain articles by academics; the movements' own literature; literature from their opponents; accounts by former members; governmental and legal reports; newspaper cuttings and various other written material.

Given that much of the material would seem to be contradictory, or at least to paint inconsistent pictures both of particular movements and of 'the cult scene' in general, the information has to be assessed. In doing this, it helps the user to be aware of where it comes from—few would expect the movements to expose the skeletons in their cupboards or to tell us about some of their more esoteric beliefs and practices. We do not expect the anti-cultists to tell us about positive attributes the movements might exhibit. We do not expect the media to tell us about the more 'normal' aspects of the movements.

1.5 Enquiries

During the past twelve years INFORM has helped thousands of enquirers by giving information both directly and indirectly, through the network. Sometimes it has also helped just by being there and listening to people who felt that there was no one in the world who could possibly understand their problems.

The two largest group of enquirers (each comprising about one third of the total) are the media and relatives and friends of members of the movements. Other enquiries come from local, national and international government agencies, such as the Home Office and Departments of
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Immigration, Health and Education, the police, the security services and the social services. Members of the British and European Parliament, and the US House of Representatives and the Senate, the media, NGOs, the Mothers' Union, various religious bodies and clergy (including hospital and prison chaplains); teachers (at schools and universities); students (school, undergraduate, doctoral, post-doctoral); former members, current members and prospective members of the movements; private researchers --and various other organisations and interested members of the public from all over world.

Contact can be made by telephone, letter, fax, e-mail or by visiting the office. It would not be surprising for INFORM to be contacted in one day by a lawyer in Singapore; an anxious parent in Brazil, and another from Edinburgh; a researcher from the House of Commons Library; and half a dozen members of the media who are chasing up a story of satanic child abuse. At the same time, it is possible that a student is sitting in a corner going through some files and a couple of representatives of some foreign government are observing how INFORM operates, with the idea of setting up a similar organisation in their own country.

When someone contacts INFORM with a query about a particular movement, or new religions in general, they will be given as much information as possible by the office staff, who may then send the enquirer some basic literature--and/or agree to carry out further research and get back to him or her. The staff may also suggest further actions that enquirers can themselves pursue, such as reading relevant books or articles. They may arrange for the enquirer to have contact with one or more members of the network--with, say, someone who has researched the movement, or has had personal experience of it or a similar group. Sometimes the enquirer might want pastoral help or the professional assistance of a lawyer, a doctor or a counsellor.

Sometimes INFORM is prepared to mediate directly with the movement although, given the strict confidentiality that INFORM observes over individual enquiries, this would, of course, never happen unless the enquirers made an explicit request.

1.6 Outreach

While it does not lobby either against or on behalf of any group, this does not mean that INFORM passively waits to answer enquiries. It does not merely respond to enquiries, it believes that it can and should pro-actively use the information it accumulates both to allay unnecessary fears
and to alert over-complacent individuals and official organisations to actual or potential dangers. It has informed the relevant authorities when allegations of serious criminal activity, such as child abuse, have been brought to its attention.

Information supplied by INFORM is used in court cases and for judicial education. It has provided information to governments around the world—and talks on the work of INFORM have been given in such places as the Russian Duma, at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, the Hungarian Parliament in Budapest and to several Ministries of Religious Affairs.

1.7 Seminars

Twice a year, a day-long Seminar is organised around a particular aspect of the new religions. These are attended by about a hundred persons and have covered topics such as NRMs and Violence; NRMs and Sex; NRMs and the Media; NRMs and the Law; NRMs and Money; NRMs and Authority and Dependence; Leaving an NRM; NRMs and the Family; NRMs and Education; NRMs and Health; Changes in NRMs; NRMs and Children; The New Age; New Movements within Christianity; NRMs and the Millennium; NRMs and the Internet.

One of the most notable features of the Seminars is that the speakers and audience cover a wide range of persons with very different experiences and perspectives. These include academics, students, social workers, clergy, students, police, government officials, doctors, lawyers, prison officers, members of the ‘anti-cult movement’, members of the media, relatives and friends of members of the movements, ex-members, a few members of the movements themselves, and interested members of the public. At such Seminars, it is possible to see people who would normally be at each other’s throats not exactly agreeing with each other, but engaged in exploratory dialogue, learning about each other’s perspectives, and sometimes entering into a relationship that continues long after the Seminar is over.

In 1993, a four-day Conference was attended by over 200 participants from 23 different countries. A selection of the papers was subsequently published in a book New Religions in the New Europe. A second international conference is to be held in April 2001 in conjunction with a number of other ‘cult-watching groups’.

Special workshops have been given for professionally trained counsellors and therapists, giving them information about the new
religions and discussing some of the problems which arise as a result of their existence. INFORM has also contributed factual information at seminars arranged by the mainstream religions for their clergy.

1.8 Literature

INFORM has produced a number of leaflets about a variety of new religions, giving basic facts about their history, beliefs, practices and organisation, with a brief discussion about any points that may have given rise for concern, and how to find further information about the movement.

Just after setting up INFORM, I wrote a book, New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction, which, while drawing on the research conducted by social scientists, addresses the kind of questions that relatives or others (such as teachers or clergy) who know someone who has joined a new religion may ask. The first part presents some basic information about the movements and the second part discusses potential problems with suggestions as to how these might be dealt with. There is also an Appendix with information on thirty or so movements about which INFORM receives regular enquiries.9

At the beginning of each academic year, a poster is sent to universities and colleges throughout Britain, alerting students to problems possibly associated with becoming involved in a friendly group which might be offering simple solutions to their problems, and telling them where they can turn for further information and, if necessary, help. Students and other travellers have also received a warning note that we wrote to be included in a leaflet handed out with passports.

1.9 Speakers

Speakers are provided for schools, colleges, universities, churches and various other public and private organisations in order to give basic information and to stimulate discussion about what the movements offer converts, focussing in particular on practices involved in methods of proselytising, and some of the potentially negative consequences of joining some of the movements. Members of INFORM’s staff and Governors also make a significant number of contributions to the popular media in print, and by appearing on radio and television.

1.10 Some examples
In order to try to bring to life a bit more the kind of work that INFORM does, it might be helpful to give a few examples. Although some details have been changed to preserve anonymity, the stories that follow are based on actual cases:

Mrs A had a 19-year-old daughter working full time for a new religion. She had been in touch with another organisation that had recommended a well-known 'deprogrammer' who had attempted, unsuccessfully, to persuade the daughter to leave. The consequence was that Mrs A was now having difficulty in communicating with her daughter at all. At Mrs A’s request, INFORM arranged a meeting on neutral ground with Mrs A, her daughter, and a representative from the movement. As a result, the daughter agreed to stop working for the movement for two years on the understanding that if she wanted to go back after the two years ‘in society’, then Mrs A would not try to stop her.

Mrs B learned that her husband had mortgaged their jointly owned house not, as he had told her, to pay for roof repairs, but to pay for some self-development courses. After many months’ negotiation with the group, INFORM succeeded in getting a cheque for a five figure sum for Mrs B as her half of the money that her husband had paid for the courses.

The Reverend C was worried about a group of people who wanted to hire his church hall for meetings. INFORM gave him information about the group and he decided to let them go ahead and hire the hall.

The Reverend D decided not to let the same group hire his hall after INFORM had given him identical information.

Mr E’s sister, who had suffered a severe mental breakdown, had been hospitalised. The psychiatrist asked Mr E to find out more about the meditation centre his sister had been attending for several months as he thought it might be responsible for her illness. Mr E did not know the name of the group but did know the address from which it operated. INFORM’s computerised database immediately identified the group as one about which INFORM holds extensive information. It had received varied enquiries about the movement over the past eleven years, but no information it held suggested their meditation practice led directly to mental illness. It was thus able to tell Mr E that it was unlikely that the practice *per se* was the cause of the mental illness, although it was possible that the meditation had brought to the surface an underlying mental health problem. The psychiatrist consequently concentrated on other possible causes for the breakdown and was subsequently able to exclude the meditation as a cause of the illness.
Mrs F had been told that she would not see her son again as he had joined a destructive cult in the USA, and that her only hope was to get him kidnapped from the group. She rang to ask if INFORM could suggest someone suitable. INFORM warned her that, apart from being illegal, such action frequently resulted in the convert returning to the movement as a more fanatic believer than before and with a deep distrust of his parents. Instead, it was suggested that she should go to the USA, meet her son and listen to what he had to say. She should then reassure him that she loved and trusted him, and was glad he was happy and felt he was doing something. She should, however, also say that she was concerned because she had heard some things said about the movement that were worrying and wanted to ask him whether he had found these to be true. He would be likely to say they were not. She might then ask, 'What would you do if you were to find out that they were true after all?' This she did and, as expected, the son replied that he would not wish to be a member of such a group.

Mrs F, again at INFORM's suggestion, told her son that, 'just in case', she had arranged with British Airways that an airline ticket would be available at the airport for him should he want to return to London. Several weeks later the son rang his mother and asked whether she could pick him up at Heathrow as he was flying home that evening, having learned that there was some foundation for one of the allegations his mother had told him about. He thus returned of his own volition, having been alerted to a potential danger by his mother, with whom he still had a close and trusting relationship.

Mrs G told INFORM that she had not seen her daughter since she herself had left a new religion and was unable to make contact with her. It so happened that I had met the daughter and her father while studying the movement in Japan, and was able to arrange for the daughter to return to England where she and her mother met for the first time for 14 years in my kitchen. They spent the day talking to each other, and although their relationship is still somewhat strained, they continue to keep in touch with each other on a relatively friendly basis.

Mr H complained that he kept receiving unsolicited mail and telephone calls from a group in which he had once shown a passing interest. INFORM contacted group which agreed to remove his name from their mailing list and the calls ceased.

Mrs I was worried because her son, who had just joined a new religion, was about to inherit a large sum of money. INFORM put her in touch with a lawyer who helped her to ensure that the money was put in a Trust and
could not be handed over to the movement until he was older. Although the son was not very pleased at the time, when he left the movement some months later, he was very grateful.

By definition, frontier religions will always present us with new challenges. They will introduce new ideas and practices and old ideas and practices dressed in new clothing. Their innovations will bring joy, happiness and liberation to some and tears, anger and frustration to others.

There will always be some problems that cannot be solved, but INFORM has a proven track record of having helped to improve numerous difficult and sensitive situations involving thousands of individuals—both directly and indirectly since its inception. INFORM does not have a magic wand, but it is, we believe, worth bringing the sociology of religion into the public space.

NOTES


2. See, for example, Duquesne and Willems, L. 1997 'Enquête Parlementaire visant à élaborer une politique en vue de lutter contre les pratiques illégales des sectes et le danger qu'elles représentent pour la société et pour les personnes, particulièrement les mineurs d'âge', Brussels: Belgian House of Representatives; and Garay, A. 1999 L'activisme anti-sectes: De l'assistance à l'amalgame, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press.

3. Japan is the only First World country where a significant number of deprogrammings involving physical constraint are carried out—most of the subjects being members of the Unification Church.


6. One of the last tasks performed by the erstwhile British Council of Churches was to set up an ecumenical network of Diocesan advisers with whom INFORM is in contact for receiving and giving information.

7. Not all of these are new religious movements—there is also information about other groups including some older religions, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, about which INFORM receives enquiries.


9. First published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office under the auspices of the Home Office in 1989, this is now in its fifth impression, and is shortly to appear as a fully updated second edition. It is currently available in seven languages, with more translations on the way and is used for reference and teaching around the world.