

HOW TO BE INFORMED ABOUT MINORITY RELIGIONS CELEBRATING INFORM ON ITS TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

An interview with Dr. Eileen Barker



INFORM (The Information Network on Religious Movements) was established by Dr. Eileen Barker at the London School of Economics in 1988. A leading scholar in the study of contemporary religious groups, Dr. Barker was aware of the controversy and unreliable information concerning newly formed religious groups. INFORM was established with the goal of providing current, accurate, balanced information about contemporary religious groups to scholars, media representatives, political and religious leaders, families of group members and former members, and the general public.

INFORM has received support from the British government as well as foundations and mainline churches. The organisation has grown into a global resource that conducts research, maintains a large data archive with information on a broad range of religious groups, and sponsors seminars on issues confronting new religious groups and their host societies. INFORM also offers referrals to specialists and experts for those who are interested in or concerned about new religious groups. With INFORM now celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary, WRSP is taking advantage of the occasion to reflect on the organisation's history and many accomplishments.

Dr. Barker, welcome to the World Religions and Spirituality Forum!

WRSP: What was it that first led you to consider founding the organisation that became INFORM?

Dr. Barker: I had been studying new religious movements since the early 1970s, and was becoming increasingly concerned about the social reactions to them insofar as these were based upon ignorance or misinformation – the misinformation coming from the movements themselves, their opponents, and the mass media. By the mid-1980s deprogramming was rife. Parents were paying tens of thousands of dollars to a deprogrammer who would kidnap their (adult) children and hold them against their will until they managed to escape or say that they had renounced their faith. The main justification for such illegal practices was that the movements had acquired “brainwashing” techniques of a well-nigh irresistible and irreversible nature, which, it was claimed, meant they would never leave the movement of their own free will. At the same time, some of the movements were undoubtedly involved in illegal or antisocial behavior that was obscured by the gross and obfuscating generalizations that were being made.

The crunch came when I was attending an “anticult” meeting in London to which some former members had been invited to talk about their experiences. I thought they gave plausible accounts of their joining and their time in their respective movements, but the majority of the audience were highly dissatisfied and pressing them to say that they had been brainwashed and/or deceived and treated badly. Trying to pour oil on troubled waters, the organiser asked the former members whether they would like to say something that they thought would be helpful for the relatives in the audience. At this point, a woman stood up and started shouting, “We don't want to hear this! We don't want to hear this!”

I realized at that moment that the majority of members of anticult groups like the one I was attending really did not want to hear anything that threatened their own version of the movements. I also decided that something needed to be done to make an alternative version of what the movements were like available to the media and relatives – and, indeed, to policymakers, law-enforcement officers and others who were making decisions concerning the movements. It seemed that the most obvious thing was to create an organisation that would offer enquirers information that was as objective and reliable and up-to-date as possible, drawing on the methodology of the social sciences and the not inconsiderable network of scholars who had been conducting research in the area.

WRSP: What are the most common sources of requests INFORM receives for information or assistance (media, governments, law enforcement, families)?

Dr. Barker: These have changed over the years. At the beginning, the largest number of enquirers were relatives of new converts to new religions. More recently, the proportion of these enquiries has fallen and we receive more requests from governmental organisations in both the United Kingdom and overseas. However, there has been a constant stream of enquiries from the media, various professional bodies such as academia, students, the law, medicine, counselling, and the traditional religions. We have also worked closely with the police, sometimes alerting them to potential dangers but frequently reassuring them that a particular group, although unconventional, is unlikely to be dangerous for either its members or the general public. Then there have always been enquiries from members of the movements and, more frequently, former members and the general public.

WRSP: INFORM has grown into a global resource through your website and seminars. Have requests for information come from different areas of the world at different times?

Dr. Barker: Yes, we have always had enquiries from overseas. This has been particularly from other parts of Europe and North America, but they also come from Asia, Africa and South America. In the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we had a considerable number of enquiries from Central and Eastern Europe, where many of the new religions were seeking registration and the governments had little information about the beliefs and practices of the movements.

WRSP: What has been the reaction to INFORM by the religious groups on which you collect information and the cult watching groups that also collect information?

Dr. Barker: At the beginning, there was suspicion all round. However, at that time the media and anticult groups were depicting the movements in such negative, and frequently inaccurate terms that the movements were quite relieved that someone was prepared to listen to them, even if we didn't always accept everything that they said. Many of them learned to trust us and began to cooperate with us when we presented them with problems. We were, for example, able to facilitate meetings between members and relatives who had not communicated for years. This was by no means always the case, however, and there have been occasions when one or other of the movements has threatened to sue. So far, I'm glad to say, this has not actually happened.

As time went on and some of the movements came to be more accepted in society, they became slightly chary of being associated with INFORM and thus, they feared, with "cults". Even more recently, as these movements became even more "established" they have felt secure enough to cooperate with us once again.

On the other hand, the existing cult watching groups seemed to consider that we were even more dangerous than the movements. They informed the media and anyone who would listen

that we were “cult lovers”, “cult apologists” or even that we were really cultists in disguise. A petition to this effect was presented to 10 Downing Street, demanding that the start-up funding INFORM had been granted by the Home Office should be withdrawn immediately. An enquiry was set up, which evidently reported back to the Prime Minister (it was Mrs Thatcher at that time) that INFORM was doing useful work and that its funding should be increased!

There were several extremely unpleasant radio and television programs made about INFORM in general and me in particular, but this only rarely happens now as we have become more accepted by mainstream society as a reliable source of information. However, this does not mean that the British anticultists have accepted our presence. Although individual members of these groups have developed good relations with us, the current leadership of the largest British group continues to attack us and frequently announces that the reason the British government refuses to do anything about the cult problem is because of the bad influence of Eileen Barker and INFORM – a complaint I find somewhat flattering, even if it is patently untrue!

But that is the British scene. While originally the anticultist lobby ensured that not only the media and government but also other cult watching groups throughout the world would know that INFORM was a dangerous cult apologist group, there have been some changes in other countries. Most notably, 12 years ago I asked the president of what was then the American Family Foundation (and is now the International Cultic Studies Association) whether I could attend their annual conference in Philadelphia. He assured me that the meeting was open to all, and when I arrived at the hotel I was invited to meet him and members of the executive committee, who welcomed me and were prepared to discuss questions of mutual interest. Of course, by no means all the AFF/ICSA members were delighted to see me, and several were determined to make my presence as uncomfortable as possible. However, over the years, we have developed an excellent working relationship with several of the AFF/ICSA leading members, cooperating on some cases, speaking at each other's conferences and seminars and even going on joint visits to a number of the movements. We also have very good relationships with some other “cult-watching groups”, such as Info-Secte in Canada and CIC in Geneva.

WRSP: Many social scientists who study new religions have dismissed what you have called “cult watching groups” as important to the study of new religions. INFORM seems to have made a point of including cult watching groups, families of converts, and former members in the conversation about new religions. Has this been a productive approach for INFORM and why do you think this is important?

Dr. Barker: Yes, I think it has been an extremely productive approach and I also think it is very important.

There are always many constructions of social reality, each person selecting what s/he considers relevant, often ignoring what is considered irrelevant. There is no single “Truth” out

there when we are talking about social phenomena. There are, however, certain things that we can know are factually incorrect. The methods of social science are, I believe, in many respects more reliable than the methods used by others, but if we are to understand “the cult scene” we need to understand the different perspectives of the different actors in that scene. To my mind it would be ridiculous to ignore *any* understanding of the movements. Quite apart from anything else, there is always a very real possibility that other cult watching groups have access to information that would be otherwise unobtainable. Of course, all the information has to be assessed, and we need to be able to acknowledge when we don't know which is the “most correct” – assuming such a thing exists. Sometimes people (particularly media people) seem to think that the truth lies somewhere in the middle between two extreme positions. But this is as silly as saying “X thinks that 2+2 makes 4, while Y thinks that 2+2 makes 5, so the correct answer must be 4.5”.

Furthermore, if we want to communicate our version(s) of reality to someone else who is coming from a different perspective, then we have to learn how to translate so that other people can “hear” what we are saying. To do this effectively, one has to understand where it is that they are coming from.

WRSP: During the 1960s and 1970s there was a set of new religious groups that commanded national and international attention and gave rise to the term “cult”. Are there groups that have emerged in recent years that have or will garner that degree of attention?

Dr. Barker: it's always difficult, indeed, foolhardy, to predict the future. However, it is clear that there have been enormous changes over the past 25 years in what has been attracting public attention. There was, for example, the Satanist scare, then the millennialism scare, and then, since 9/11, there has been the radical Islamist scare.

In some ways, very generally speaking and not counting terrorist movements, the new new religions have not been so frightening as the waves that became visible in the 1960s and '70s, partly because they are less inclined to be of what Roy Wallis termed a world rejecting nature, but are more likely to be world accepting or world accommodating. There seems to have been a rise in movements that reject institutional control – very relatively speaking – and which belong to what is sometimes called the new spirituality. There has also been an upsurge in movements that rely heavily on the Internet for their existence and recruitment. Several of these include what Carol Cusack has termed “invented religions” or Adam Possamai calls “hyper-real religions”.

But, at the same time, there is, arguably, a growth in “high control” groups where a charismatic leader is granted authority by a small number of followers who would appear to be very much under his or her control.

Such movements may occasionally hit the headlines, but there does not seem to be the kind of

cult scare that we witnessed in the past in most of the contemporary West. However, one should not forget the reaction to what they term “evil cults” such as Falun Gong in places like China; and even in the West there are organisations such as the French government agency, MIVILUDES (Interministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combatting Cultic Deviances), which is convinced that cults (*dérives sectaires*) pose a real threat to French society.

WRSP: The response to new religious groups seems to vary widely among European nations and other nations around the world. Why is it that some nations respond more strongly than others and respond to some groups more strongly than others?

Dr. Barker: Different nations feel threatened about different aspects of their society and they are likely to react to those movements that they see threatening those aspects that they most value or feel are most insecure. For some it is a fear that a movement has an effective organisation and communication structure that poses a threat to the state structure; for some it is a fear that individual liberty is under threat; others are concerned about medical or welfare issues; others are concerned about military matters; and yet others have theological or, perhaps, ideological ideals they want to protect.

I think this is an interesting area and that a comparative study of social reactions to new religions worldwide could tell us a lot about the different societies. Unfortunately, although we can make some informed guesses, we haven’t really got enough systematic empirical data to be able to make reliable generalizations as yet.

WRSP: As you look back over the past twenty-five years, what do think are the one or two greatest accomplishments for INFORM?

Dr. Barker: Through the manner in which we have collected, assessed and disseminated information about the movements, I think we have managed to persuade a significant section of “the middle ground” that the methodology of the social sciences can play an important role in contemporary society. By providing information that is as reliable as possible, decisions about how to respond to “the other” are less likely to produce hasty and injudicious results, and I believe INFORM has played a role in providing such information. But, of course, we’re by no means perfect!

WRSP: What are INFORM’s accomplishments during its twenty-five years of work? What are INFORM’s ongoing projects?

Dr. Barker: We now have a well-trained staff of researchers who are both generalists and specialists in particular fields. During the years we have built up connections with an extensive international network of scholars and other specialists and people with information about the

movements.

As well as having a large collection of several thousands of books, articles and other materials concerning minority religions, we have entered some information about over 4,000 different organisations on our electronic data base, over 1,000 of these being religious movements that were founded in their present form since World War II and which are currently active in the UK.

We have organised over 50 seminars, workshops and international conferences on a variety of issues, such as NRMs and the law, children, the media, money, gender, violence, prophecy, and counselling (for a full list of topics, see <http://www.inform.ac/node/51>). These have included a wide range of perspectives provided by both speakers and audiences, including members (both converts and those who have been raised in their movement), relatives, former members, scholars, and other professionals.

We have now published the first four volumes in our Ashgate-Inform Series on Minority Religions and Spiritual Movements, with a dozen or so further books either with the publisher or in the process of being edited. All of the currently released books have a paperback version and are available at a discount if bought on the web! (See <http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=4189>)

Our greatest achievement has, however, been the fact that we have helped literally thousands of enquirers over the past quarter of a century and have built up a reputation where we are largely respected and trusted by those who turn to INFORM for reliable information.

WRSP: As you look forward, what do you think are the greatest sources of promise and challenge for INFORM in its next twenty-five years?

Dr. Barker: Just to keep going and responding to the changing scene as objectively, honestly and humanely as possible.

WRSP: Dr. Barker, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

Eileen Barker (PhD, PhD h.c., OBE, FBA) is Professor Emeritus of Sociology with Special Reference to the Study of Religion at the London School of Economics, University of London. Her main research interest is “cults”, “sects” and new religious movements, and the social reactions to which they give rise; but since 1989 she has also been investigating changes in the religious situation in post-communist countries. She has over 300 publications (translated into 27 different languages), which include the award-winning *The Making of a Moonie: Brainwashing or Choice?* (Blackwell, 1984); *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (HMSO 1989); and, most recently, the edited volume *Revisionism and*

Diversification in New Religious Movements (Ashgate 2013). In the late 1980s, with the support of the British Government and mainstream Churches, she founded INFORM, an educational charity based at the London School of Economics, which provides information about minority religions that is as accurate, objective and up-to-date as possible. She is a frequent advisor to governments, other official bodies and law enforcement agencies throughout the world, and has been invited to give guest lectures in over 50 countries.

WRSP Interviewers: Dr. Catherine Wessinger and Dr. David G. Bromley