

UNDERSTANDING THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE: THE INFO-SECTE/INFO-CULT PERSPECTIVE

An interview with Michael Kropveld



Mr. Kropveld, welcome to the World Religions and Spirituality Forum!

WRSP: What was it that first led you to consider founding the organization that became Info-Secte/Info-Cult?

Mr. Kropveld: I started Info-Cult/Info-Secte in 1980 in Montreal, Quebec, Canada following a brief experience in 1977 in California with the Unification Church (UC) because of the involvement of Benji, a close friend. He had gone to San Francisco to visit his cousin who was with the Creative Community Project (CCP). He stayed there, and when I had some vacation time, I went to visit him, supposedly to do some traveling together. I ended up staying for a while with the CCP and never did go traveling. After I returned home much later than I was supposed to, friends became very concerned about Benji and me. As a result, they did some research and found out that the CCP was in fact a part of the UC. Having read all about the “brainwashing” and the dramatic changes that people underwent in the UC, a few friends

including myself, went to San Francisco to talk to Benji. Unfortunately, we never got to see him as he had been sent to Canada. When we returned to Montreal, we immediately told his parents, and together we realized that the only way we could save Benji was to deprogram him.

After the story about Benji's kidnapping and deprogramming was featured in a series of newspaper articles, we received many calls for information and help, and so we organized a volunteer group called the "Cult Information Center" to respond to these numerous requests.

For a much more detailed story of our experience, you can read Josh Freed's book, *Moonwebs: Journey into the Mind of a Cult (1980)* and watch the film "Ticket to Heaven."

WRSP: Info-Secte/Info-Cult has undergone considerable organizational change since its inception. Would you provide us with an overview of these organizational changes?

Mr. Kropveld: Organizational changes evolved gradually. Not long after we started the "Cult Information Center," it was clear that we needed a full-time funded center in order to respond effectively to all the requests we were receiving. We approached a number of private and public organizations, and we were finally able to obtain funding from the Montreal Jewish Community. The Cult Project, our name at the time, was housed in the B'nai Brith Hillel Foundation of Montreal and started in April 1980 with myself as director. We also obtained grants from the Federal and Provincial governments for specific projects and we received some donations. Another organizational change occurred 10 years later, when we decided that it would be more appropriate to function as an independent non-profit, non-denominational, bilingual organization. Info-Cult ("Info-Secte" in French) moved out from under the auspices of the Jewish Community into its own offices, easily accessible to the public.

WRSP: Has there been any change in Info-Secte's/Info-Cult's sense of its mission since its inception? If so, how would you describe those changes?

Mr. Kropveld: Since 1990, our mission has remained the same and is stated in our letters of incorporation as follows:

"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. The objectives of Info-Cult are to: promote the study of cult phenomena, sensitize, inform and educate the public about these phenomena, and assist people with problems related to these phenomena."

Like the groups it observes, visits and studies, Info-Cult has developed and modified its perception and understanding of the cult phenomenon. Networking with the international scientific community and with various spiritual, religious and esoteric groups have also helped to increase the organization's understanding of groups and how they function.

Today, Info-Cult is more open to differing perspectives, although there are some people and organizations who still label Info-Cult as an "anti-cult" organization. I discuss this in some detail in my article, "An Example for Controversy: Creating a Model for Reconciliation" (Kropveld 2003).

WRSP: What are the primary resources and services that Info-Secte/Info-Cult offers to the public?

Mr. Kropveld: In keeping with Info-Cult's mission to promote the study of cult phenomena, educate the public and offer counseling, we have a one-of-a-kind multimedia library that houses a unique collection of materials from a variety of sources. Info-Cult's website and Facebook page offer a range of references and information that are updated regularly. As well, Info-Cult provides counseling and consulting services that are tailored to meet the individual needs of a range of people. The annual international conferences, organized by the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) in collaboration with Info-Cult, provide a forum for researchers, healthcare professionals, former members, concerned family members and the public to present their views and to dialogue.

WRSP: What is the primary clientele that Info-Secte/Info-Cult serves?

Mr. Kropveld: The primary clientele that we serve are concerned family and friends as well as former members.

We also address the needs of a wide range of clientele, including:

- Representatives from community groups, mental health professionals, youth protection workers and law enforcement officers, all of whom may be looking for information about a specific case or wanting to refer clients to us.
- Students from high schools, colleges and universities looking for information for cult-related research projects.
- Media seeking information either about a specific group or the phenomenon in general,
- Present members who want to provide us with information about their group, or who have questions about their continued involvement with their group.

WRSP: How does Info-Secte/Info-Cult currently secure funding for the organization?

Mr. Kropveld: Info-Cult receives funding from various sources, including an annual grant from the Quebec Ministry of Health and Social Services, and some discretionary funds from certain Ministers of the provincial government. Other sources of funding come from foundations, religious communities, individuals, as well as fees for certain services (such as speaking engagements and consultations). Funding is an ongoing preoccupation, and for the past few years we have been exploring different ways of ensuring the continuity of Info-Cult. To the best of our knowledge, Info-Cult is the only non-profit organization of its kind in North America to receive government funding.

You can find more detailed information about our funding and Annual Reports on our website ("Annual Reports and Financial Statements" n.d.).

WRSP: One of the sensitive issues in reporting on various religious organizations, particularly the newer and more controversial ones, is what terms to use in identifying them. There is a variety of terminology

in use: new religious movements (NRMs), new religions, alternative religions, sects, cults, dangerous cults, and so on. What is the Info-Secte/Info-Cult approach to this issue?

Mr. Kropveld: “Is group X a cult or not ?” is the question most often asked when people contact Info-Cult. Our view is that the use of the word “cult” to describe a group is very limited. Indeed, the book I co-authored with Marie-Andrée Pelland, *The Cult Phenomenon: How Groups Function*, (2006), was motivated by the need to respond to the thousands of callers asking this question. The key message of our book is that groups exist on a continuum, from those that value the integrity and opinions of each of its members, to high-demand groups that function according to their leader’s wishes and demands. The book also examines how Info-Cult has evolved over the years with regard to its view on how groups function, the reasons individuals join such groups, and the nature of the relationship between groups’ leaders and their members and society.

Info-Cult does not keep a list of “cults.” There is often an assumption that if a group is included on such a list, it implies that the group is harmful. This is inaccurate in the same way that the absence of a group from such a list does not imply that the group is harmless. Whether or not a group can be considered a cult, and whether or not it can be considered dangerous, involves a complex assessment that considers several influencing factors. Accordingly, Info-Cult does not respond with a simple yes or no response to the question of whether or not a group can be considered a cult.

To further respond to your question, I would like to cite excerpts from a presentation I gave a few years ago at a conference in Thailand. It was entitled “*Cults and Globalization: Reflections and Questions*”:

I have often heard the statement, “We all know what a cult is.” In my opinion, however, the belief that we all know what a cult is, is both a presumption and a generalization. In fact, no one agrees on how to define a cult. For example, in France, a country that has taken an active approach to dealing with cults, a former president of MIVILUDES, the French government agency that deals with this issue, stated, “There is no legal definition of a cult in France, not more than elsewhere in the world. I don't know any country in the world with a definition for it.” The many government reports that have focused on cults over more than twenty years confirm this statement.

Regardless of the label that we use to describe a group, the fact remains that the dynamics of groups, of any kind, are complex, and we should observe and understand each one individually. Above all, we should avoid the temptation of lumping groups together. At the same time, it is wise to keep in mind how we use terminology related to the issue of cults and new religious movements, in particular, terms that promote a dichotomy of good versus evil, such as “anti-cult movement” (ACM), “pro-cult movement” (PCM), and “cult apologist.” These divisive labels function as “thought-terminating clichés,” to use an expression from Robert Lifton’s seminal book, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*.

WRSP: What are important considerations that may account for the very diverse governmental responses we can observe?

Mr. Kropveld:

From a socio-historical perspective, the issue of cults in relation to the country's history can have a significant impact on the actions that a government chooses to take. The following considerations can help to shed light on a government's decision to act or not to act:

- Whether, during the course of its modern history, the country has come up against an anti-democratic or totalitarian group.
- Whether the government has been confronted by violence (group suicides or murders, terrorist attacks, etc.) perpetrated by alternative religious groups or cults? For example, the murders, arson and “assisted suicides” carried out by members of the Order of the Solar Temple elicited different responses in France, in Switzerland, and in Canada and the province of Quebec
 - Canada did not set up a commission;
 - Quebec’s coroner published a report into the deaths. This was the only government document following this tragedy;
 - France’s government set up a parliamentary commission;
 - Switzerland's government set up a commission of inquiry.

From a political perspective, the following considerations can be taken into account:

- The relationship between religion and government;
- Privileges granted to certain religious groups, if any;
- The presence or absence of a state religion;
- State financing of certain religious groups;
- The government's approach to intervention and response to public pressure.

WRSP: Western democracies tend to give considerable latitude to religious groups, and there is relatively little governmental regulation of them. One response has been the emergence of non-governmental “watchdog” groups. What do you see as the public role of these watchdog groups?

Mr. Kropveld: From my perspective as founder and executive director of Info-Cult, I see the role of watchdog groups as multifaceted. Here are a few examples of the roles that these groups can play – they may:

- Respond to requests for information and assistance;
- Assist individuals who may be harmed directly or indirectly by the groups;
- Serve as a resource for mediating conflicts between family members and their loved ones involved in a group, between government agencies and groups, and between former members and the group in which they were involved;
- Provide training sessions for healthcare professionals, youth protection workers and law enforcement officers, among others. These sessions should be based on the most up-to-date practice and research;
- Educate the public, and in so doing, protect the consumer against potentially harmful groups;
- Gather information about groups from different points of view;

- Encourage and carry out interdisciplinary research

WRSP: How do you assess the similarities and differences between groups that follow the emergence and activities of new religious organizations, such as Info-Secte/Info-Cult and INFORM?

Mr. Kropveld: I'm glad you qualified your question by indicating organizations such as Info-Secte/Info-Cult and INFORM. There are countless numbers of individuals, groups and organizations around the world that respond, in one way or another, to the phenomenon of cults/new religious movements. In fact, there is a continuum of views, which in turn influences how different organizations approach this issue. I consider Info-Cult to be similar to INFORM with regard to how we approach the issue, but it is different in some of the services we offer and how we deal with individuals looking for help. We are not an academic organization, neither are we an activist group seeking to combat the cults.

WRSP: Mr. Kropveld, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

Michael Kropveld is the Executive Director and founder of Info-Cult, the largest resource centre of its kind in Canada on cultic thinking. Since 1980, Mr. Kropveld has worked with more than 2,000 former members and families. He has spoken, to hundreds of professional and community groups on the cult issue, in Canada and internationally. He is also involved in counselling and consulting, and as an expert witness on cult issues. He has been featured on hundreds of radio and television programs locally, nationally, and internationally. In 1992 he was awarded the Commemorative Medal for the 125th Anniversary of Confederation by the Government of Canada "in recognition of significant contribution to compatriots, community and to Canada.nb" (email: infosecte@qc.aibn.com)

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Interview Post Date:

22 December 2015