

# THE CULT AWARENESS MOVEMENT IN NORTH AMERICA: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

An interview with Dr. Michael Langone



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**Dr. Langone, welcome to the World Religions and Spirituality Forum.**

**WRSP:** The North American Cult Awareness Movement historically consisted of a number of small groups but has gradually coalesced into a few major groups. Would you briefly outline this movement history for us?

**Dr. Langone:** Your question suggests that the coalescing continued into the present. In fact, the coalescing to which you refer occurred in the late 1970s, when the Citizens Freedom Foundation (CFF) was formed (later renamed Cult Awareness Network - CAN). Prior to the formation of CFF, many small groups had been formed in various parts of the USA and Canada. Most of those groups joined together to form CFF, but a number of prominent groups retained their independence, including American Family Foundation (founded in 1979, renamed International Cultic Studies Association – ICSA - in 2004), Council on Mind Abuse (COMA) in Toronto, The Cult Project (later renamed Info-Cult/Info-Secte) in Montreal, and a number of programs of Jewish organizations in New York, Los Angeles, Baltimore, and Miami. Today, only Info-Cult and ICSA exist. When CAN went into bankruptcy because of lawsuits, it was taken

over by people associated with the Church of Scientology, I believe. I do not know whether or not CAN still functions as an organization. However, if it does, the perspective it advances is probably very different from that expounded before the bankruptcy.

There were also dozens of (mostly very small) Evangelical cult watch organizations in the USA. I remember a handbook that used to be published annually in the 1980s that listed dozens, if not hundreds, of such Evangelical organizations; I do not know if such a handbook is still published. Most of these small organizations focused on evangelizing to one group, in particular either the Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons.

During the past 35 years many other organizations critical of cultic groups have formed, e.g., FactNet, the Ross Institute, and Freedom of Mind. With the advent of the Internet, dozens of websites were created that focused on one particular group or leader. So far as I know, there is today no single directory of organizations and websites concerned about cultic groups.

Hence, to return to your question, the coalescing was a one-time phenomenon that occurred about 35 years ago and has not occurred since. Nor has there been any recent movement toward a second "coalescing."

**WRSP:** Do the separate organizations that make up the North American Cult Awareness Movement share interests and a mission in common, or are there important differences among them?

**Dr. Langone:** The common interest, in my opinion, is a concern for the casualties of cultic groups. However, there are sometimes marked differences in how these organizations conceptualize the issues and the actions they take to deal with the problems they perceive.

In my view, the so-called "cult wars" ("pro-cultists" vs. "anti-cultists") resulted from the fact that sociologists of religion and religious studies scholars did not study casualties, whereas mental health professionals and volunteers associated with cult awareness organizations worked almost exclusively with people and families who believed they or a loved one had been hurt as a result of a group involvement. Some so-called "pro-cultists" were aware that people were sometimes harmed by groups, and some so-called "anti-cultists" were aware that not everybody was harmed. However, nuance was not the norm, at least not until the past 10-15 years.

Within the North American cult awareness movement, ICSA and Info-Cult have championed, especially during the past 15 years, a more nuanced view of the phenomenon. All human beings have a tendency to overgeneralize. I believe that ICSA and Info-Cult differ from other organizations in this field in that we try, however imperfectly, to be aware of and resist the impulse to overgeneralize from one's limited experience. I believe that many individuals within the so-called "camps," would agree with a statement that I am fond of making: Some groups harm some people sometimes. We can disagree about the nature and magnitude of harm, the mechanisms by which it comes about, and the degree to which new religious movements are at risk of harming members. However, we ought to be able to agree that some people are harmed. My colleagues and I are concerned with this subgroup. We lose balance, however, when we act as though all "cults" harm all members. Such an overgeneralization usually results from

heavy exposure to victims' sometimes harrowing stories of abuse and, for this reason, is an understandable lapse in balance. Most helping professionals I know, however, can return to a more balanced, objective perspective if they are reminded that individual variation is the norm, not the exception, and that their clients are selected from a subgroup of casualties.

I would add that during the days of deprogramming some "pro-cultists" made the same kind of overgeneralization error, but from the other direction. They sometimes described all "anti-cultists" as overzealous anti-religious bigots willing to do anything to rip people out of cults. Though this caricature may have fitted a few people, it was by no means an accurate description of the majority of workers in this field.

**WRSP:** What was the driving force behind the emergence of the North American Cult Awareness Movement? How did the initial constituency of the movement influence its organization and activities?

**Dr. Langone:** In the 1970s, when the North American Cult Awareness Movement emerged, the driving force was families whose adult or teenage children had joined a group that seemed to cause marked changes in personality and behavior. As a mental health professional, I heard many parents say something to the effect of "that is not my kid" to describe the magnitude of the changes that they perceived. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the large majority of families who became involved with CAN or other organizations had children who had joined one of five groups: the Unification Church, ISKCON, Scientology, The Way International, and Divine Light Mission. Nearly half had joined the Unification Church. (By the early 1990s the number and variety of groups had broadened markedly.)

Virtually all of the people who formed cult awareness organizations were parents. Conferences during this period were dominated by parents, with a small number of former group members and helping professionals. By 2014 this situation had changed dramatically. At ICSA's 2014 annual conference, for example, nearly 70% of participants were former cult members and only 10% were family members who themselves had not been in a group. Many of the former members were also helping professionals or researchers.

In the early 1990s I conducted a study in which I asked former cult members to rate 20 terms on how much other former members would relate to the terms. Terms such as "cult" and "brainwashing" were at the bottom of the list, whereas terms such as "psychological abuse" were at the top of the list. I theorized that former members related to terms that described their experience, whereas parents related to terms ("cult," "brainwashing") that explained, however inadequately in objective terms, what they had observed in their children, i.e., change that was out of character, sometimes rapid, and difficult to understand. (<http://www.icsahome.com/articles/outreach-to-ex-cult-members-langone>)

**WRSP:** In the early days of the North American Cult Awareness Movement, the explanation for individuals affiliating with new and controversial religious organizations (often referred to as "cults" was "brainwashing" and a remedy that was widely used for brainwashing was "deprogramming."

**Dr. Langone:** That is true. But there were two views of "brainwashing" that were often mistakenly conflated. The view that received the most media attention was, not surprisingly, the most extreme.

Popularized by people like Ted Patrick, the “father” of deprogramming, this view depicted “brainwashing” in ways consistent with films such as *The Manchurian Candidate*. Helping professionals tended to propound “softer” views of “brainwashing,” usually based on social psychological principles of compliance and influence. Many sought clarity by promoting alternate terms, e.g., “mind control,” the “systematic manipulation of psychological and social influence.” However, the tension between popular media simplifications and the observations and studies of professionals tended to taint whatever term was adopted. Moreover, the need to communicate with the public (especially before the Internet gave more direct means of communication) made it difficult to avoid the terms “cult” and “brainwashing.”

Deprogramming (with the implication of “snatching” a person from the street) depended upon extreme views of “brainwashing,” because deprogrammers and families caught up in legal battles would often use the “necessity” or “choice of evils” defense for the kidnapping, i.e., the consequences of not kidnapping and deprogramming the cult member were so severe that the kidnapping was justified. However, while deprogramming was going on, some people attempted interventions that didn’t require kidnapping, that depended upon the cult member voluntarily talking to people who were critical of his/her group. The many successes of these people undermined the “necessity defense” of the abductors, so deprogramming became less common as its justification became more untenable.

Initially the term “voluntary deprogramming” was used to distinguish it from abduction deprogrammings. But the connotations of “deprogramming” were such that in time “exit counseling” or “thought reform consultation” came to replace “voluntary deprogramming” as the preferred term of interventionists. In North America, deprogramming virtually disappeared by the turn of the century.

Because of the human tendency toward overgeneralization, there are always people who lean, even if temporarily, toward simplistic notions of influence. An ongoing educational need within our organization is to teach people to make distinctions and to recognize that influence exists on a continuum from none to extreme and that most cultic groups most of the time are not on the far extremes of influence.

**WRSP:** Like all organizations that are staffed primarily by volunteers, the Cult Awareness Movement must have faced some organizational and financial challenges as it developed? Would you describe the major challenges based on your experience?

**Dr. Langone:** The organizational and financial challenges varied among organizations. Some organizations were projects within existing organizations with established funding bases, e.g., the cult awareness organizations associated with Jewish organizations. American Family Foundation (i.e., ICSA) initially depended upon grants from foundations and wealthy individuals. CFF (later CAN) was more of a grassroots organization, and its funding came from a larger network of small donors than was available to AFF at the time.

AFF had been set up such that the Board elected its successors, and there were no power struggles to speak of, for the original board worked congenially and made sure that its successors did so as well. CFF, with its many affiliates, had to struggle for several years before a functional level of centralized control was established in the mid-1980s. CAN then became quite effective in its mission. Its affiliates

provided useful psychological support to families and former members, many, perhaps most, of whom never attempted a deprogramming. CAN also effectively reached out to media and was probably behind many exposés of various groups.

AFF focused more on developing resources and organizing professionals and had a much smaller public “footprint” than CAN.

Over the years AFF/ICSA became less dependent upon large grants as its network grew. Our current financial goal is for the organization to sustain itself through memberships and small grants within 5-10 years.

Because AFF/ICSA has tried to unite its four constituencies of former members, families, helping professionals, and researchers, it has had to contend with the sometimes conflicting needs and perspectives of these four groups. Coherence is achieved in part by enunciating the organization’s mission as applying research and professional perspectives to help people harmed by affiliation with cultic groups. The organization’s website and publications try to advance a nuanced view of the subject of harm (e.g., not everybody in cultic groups is harmed). Sometimes this perspective comes into conflict with new members of the network (and sometimes old ones) who are more concerned with “fighting cults” or “exposing cults” than with helping victims. Most people come to realize that it is more practical and feasible to focus on help and education than to change public policy or “put cults out of business.” But some remain committed to these ambitious goals and may associate with other organizations that have more activist leanings than ICSA (some of these people still remain affiliated with ICSA, while others do not).

**WRSP:** Many of the new religious organizations that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (Unificationism, The Family International, The International Society for Krishna Consciousness) seem to have dramatically altered their organizational styles and become less radical in their practices. Do you agree, and, if so, how do you interpret these changes?

**Dr. Langone:** I definitely agree. Tension exists in all groups, especially in groups that try to exert high levels of control over members. Groups may appear to be much more coherent and unified than they actually are, especially when leadership is concerned with the organization’s public image. Therefore, there are bound to be currents under the surface that will lead to a diminution of control and an acknowledgment of abuses. Ironically, the valid criticisms of a group’s critics may contribute to a group’s moving toward lower levels of control and abuse.

ISKCON is a case in point. In the early 1980s cult critics talked about child abuse in ISKCON (and other groups). In the mid-late 1980s, ISKCON had to confront this abuse when formerly abused children became old enough to speak out. To its credit, ISKCON tried to deal with the issue. For example, it published in its own journal what I believe was the first scholarly treatment of the subject, an article by sociologist Burke Rochford (<http://www.icsahome.com/articles/child-abuse-in-the-hare-krishna-movement-rochford>). And members of ISKCON reached out to its critics, including AFF/ICSA. In our 1999 annual conference we had a panel discussion on human rights in ISKCON in which ISKCON members participated. We have had ongoing dialogue since that time.

Though some groups can change for the better, others may change for the worse. And some may be skilled at deception, so they may present themselves as “reforming” when they actually are not.

As with individuals, groups vary and change over time. So I would use the adage “trust but verify” when relating to groups claiming to “clean up their acts.” I try to remain open minded, but not naïve.

Sometimes even a group that may be making genuine attempts at reform may have an exceedingly difficult time building bridges to its critics. I attended a conference in Italy several years ago in which a member of an Italian Children of God (or spin-off group) member asked something to the effect of “what can we do to make you (i.e., “anti-cultists”) see that we are changing?” I said that there are so many people who experienced such profound abuse (including sexual abuse) in that group that reconciliation may be impossible. I said that they (he and his group) should change because they think it is the right thing to do, not because they want to alter our opinions of them. If they are only concerned with the latter, then their motivation is suspect.

The ICSA directors recently authored an article on the benefits of dialogue (<http://www.icsahome.com/aboutus/benefitsofdialogue>). We believe that dialogue with groups that are sincere in their desire to develop accountability mechanisms and avoid abusive behaviors can help a lot more people than can treating casualties one at a time. Not all dialogue will be fruitful. But some will be. Hence, dialogue is worth attempting when feasible.

**WRSP:** In your view, what are the appropriate roles for cult-watching groups, government agencies, and academic scholars in studying and responding to new religious organizations as they appear?

**Dr. Langone:** I look very skeptically at attempts to pass laws designed to criminalize “mind control” or otherwise attempt to “put cults out of business.” I believe that when government tries to eliminate problem A, it has a knack for creating problems B and C, even when it succeeds in eliminating A, which tends to occur rarely.

I have often said things to the effect that the challenge for a free and open society is to defend itself against those who want to close the society without becoming like its opponents. In other words, one can’t defend freedom by ending it.

In my view government’s role should be limited to supporting research (so that we better understand the problems), giving assistance to the casualties of high-control groups, and educating people, especially youth, about the ways in which manipulators can persuade us to do things that we probably wouldn’t do if we were aware of the manipulation. Such manipulation is by no means limited to new religious movements. Indeed, cultic dynamics of control can arise in any kind of group, including mainstream churches and psychotherapy. So long as there are people willing to manipulate and exploit other people there will be “cults.” As free and open societies need to protect themselves in ways that preserve their freedom and openness, individuals need to learn how to protect themselves in ways that preserve their autonomy and critical thinking without closing themselves off to authentic spiritual messages.

Cult watch groups should not all be the same. Otherwise, why not coalesce into one organization? As noted previously, I think their common concern is those who are hurt in cultic groups. Some focus only on helping. Some may focus on education. Others on research. And still others on activist goals, sometimes goals with which I may personally disagree. However, if it is to be a free country, then I ought to respect their right to disagree with me. I ask in return that they respect my right to disagree with them. Indeed, I would argue that if they are to be consistent with their criticisms of cults as being overly controlling and not allowing dissent, they must be respectful of their opponents.

Academic scholars provide a vital service by delving into matters in much more depth than laymen, helping professionals, or journalists have time for, even if they have the conceptual tools to do so. Sociologists and religious studies scholars have provided valuable background information on specific groups. Psychological researchers have developed methodologies for measuring harm and for measuring the abusiveness of groups. Though all such research has its limitations, it is a giant step above the subjective impressionism that characterized much writing in this field's early days.

If there is genuine and substantial dialogue among researchers, helpers, activists, group members, and victims of groups, research can have practical applications. For example, when you, Eileen, recently told me about your research (Shame on me for not having read your paper yet!) on SGAs (second generation adults – people born or raised in cultic groups) – you reported an interesting finding. If I understood you correctly, the first group of SGAs to reach adulthood tend to leave in large numbers. Groups respond to this exodus by relaxing some of the controls that hurt members of this first cohort, as you call them. The second cohort of SGAs, perhaps the younger brothers and sisters, grow up in less abusive environments and are less likely to leave. Such research is relevant to clinicians, who are probably more likely to have treated first cohort SGAs (at least thus far). This research is a warning to be on the alert for SGAs whose experience, even from the same group, may be different from those whom the clinician may have treated up to the present. Once again, individual variation is the norm, not the exception.

**WRSP:** Based on your experience, how has media coverage of new religious organizations and the “cult issue” changed since the cult awareness movement began?

**Dr. Langone:** I don't know that I can point to major changes in how media cover cults. Some journalists have given us insightful and balanced reports. Most still operate on constraints of low word counts and tight deadlines. There is still a tendency to sensationalize. But the subjects of their reports have changed. In the 1970s and '80s there were lots of reports of deprogramming and exposés of large groups. Today, the groups on which journalists report are less well known. There has also been a disturbing rise in the number of people seeking to do “reality shows” on cults. Sometimes I facetiously remark that there are more would-be reality shows seeking former cult members than there are former cult members willing to be part of reality shows.

I have theorized, though I have no solid evidence, that the Internet has made it more difficult for well-known groups to recruit because today's young people can slide their fingers over their phones and discover the group's dirty linen on the Web. We appear to get fewer help requests from known groups. Perhaps the groups that are thriving are those that have not yet had criticisms posted to the Web.

**WRSP:** Given that the Cult Awareness Movement has evolved through its history, what are its primary priorities at the present time?

**Dr. Langone:** I think one has to ask that question of each organization, for their priorities differ. I have spoken about ICSA, but I can't speak knowledgeably about other organizations.

**WRSP:** One of the society-wide changes that seems to have occurred over the past several decades is that harm created by a range of social institutions (government, corporations, families, churches) are more actively reported and discussed in the media. Are there characteristics of harmful practices committed by religious organizations that distinguish them from those committed by other institutions?

**Dr. Langone:** I think that the phenomenon of conversion puts religious organizations in a distinct category (although some psychogroups seek to bring about changes that are tantamount to religious conversions). Most institutions or organizations that seek to manipulate us do so for fairly specific ends. Advertisers want us to buy their product. Corporations may want us to have warm fuzzy thoughts about them. Politicians want us to vote for them. Some televangelists may want us to send in money.

Proselytizing religious organizations, however, want us to undergo a fundamental shift in identity, a religious conversion. The change they seek is much deeper (when they succeed) than the change that other manipulators seek. For this reason, deconversion can be much more painful than merely discovering that one got snookered into buying a pair of sneakers that one really didn't need.

We tend to have favorable attitudes toward conversion. When I think of conversion, for example, I often think of William James's wonderful book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James talks mainly about religious conversions that had profound and largely positive impacts on his subjects' lives. In the cult arena, however, we see victims of what could be called "engineered conversions," conversions that reflect outside forces sculpting an individual, rather than inside forces unfolding and emerging.

The person undergoing the engineered conversion may experience it as very positive at first. And some undoubtedly adjust to their new life and adapt to their new group, even after their initial conversion ardor has faded. But some may feel betrayed and abused, especially if they were objectively abused, e.g., sexually, psychologically, financially. The passion of their pain, of course, is more attractive to media than the joy of those who experience positive conversions.

Families observing from the outside may be more aware of the manipulation than the person being manipulated, so they understandably are not so positive in their view of the group.

I will sometimes quote the last sentence of George Orwell's *1984* to illustrate the importance of identity change to the "full-fledged" cultic dynamic that results in the casualties that my colleagues and I see. The authorities could have simply put a bullet in the head of the main character, Winston Smith, and that would have ended their conflict with him. But they exerted much effort to convert him. They needed more than to stop him from dissenting. They needed more than obtaining his compliance. They needed him to believe. He demonstrates the fruits of his engineered conversion when he says at the end of the book: "I love Big Brother."



This kind of profound identity change that results from external pressures is what enables religious influences to have potentially more impact on individuals and families than influences in other spheres of life.

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

A much longer exposition of the issues discussed in this interview can be found at:

<http://www.icsahome.com/articles/changes-in-the-north-american-cult-awareness-movement>

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Michael D. Langone, PhD, a counseling psychologist, received a doctorate in Counseling Psychology from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1979. Since 1981 he has been Executive Director of International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), a tax-exempt research and educational organization concerned about psychological manipulation and cultic groups. Dr. Langone has been consulted by several hundred former cult members and/or their families. He was the founding editor of *Cultic Studies Journal* (CSJ), the editor of CSJ's successor, *Cultic Studies Review*, and editor of *Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse* (an alternate of the Behavioral Science Book Service). He is co-author of *Cults: What Parents Should Know and Satanism and Occult-Related Violence: What You Should Know*. Currently, Dr. Langone is *ICSA Today's* Editor-in-Chief. He has been the chief designer and coordinator of ICSA's international conferences, which in recent years have taken place in Washington DC, Trieste, Montreal, Barcelona, New York, Rome, Philadelphia, Geneva, Denver, Brussels, Atlanta, and Madrid. In 1995, he was honored as the Albert V. Danielsen visiting Scholar at Boston University. He has authored numerous articles in professional journals and books, including *Psychiatric Annals*, *Business and Society Review*, *Sette e Religioni* (an Italian periodical), *Grupos Totalitarios y Sectarismo: Ponencias del II Congreso Internacional* (the proceedings of an international congress on cults in Barcelona, Spain), *Innovations in Clinical Practice: A Sourcebook*, *Handbook of Psychiatric Consultation with Children and Youth*, *Psychiatric News*, and all of ICSA's periodicals. Dr. Langone has spoken widely to dozens of lay and professional groups, including the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion; the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Pacific Division; the American Group Psychotherapy Association, the American Psychological Association; the Carrier Foundation; various university audiences, and numerous radio and television stations, including the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour and ABC 20/20.

WRSP Interviewer: Dr. Eileen Barker