

Cult Critics & Cult Apologists: Can there be middle ground?

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Abstract

The phenomenon of new religious movements (NRMs) or “cults” has given rise to two polarised camps – scholars who seek a value-neutral approach, and vociferous critics, often referred to as the “anticult movement”. The discussion draws on a number of old controversies surrounding NRMs, in an attempt to consider whether there might be scope for resolving differences. Terminological issues are an initial problem, and concepts such as “cult”, “anticult”, and “cult apologist” are examined. It is argued that the “cult critics” have now come to use the term “cult” in such a broad sense, spanning an unwieldy range of phenomena, encompassing political groups, business organisations, therapy and self-help groups as well as religious ones, that it has come to lack any predictable content. This is particularly problematic since the critics tend to essentialise the concept, contending that there are identifiable “marks of a cult”, stemming from R. J. Lifton’s model. This model has given rise to the well-trodden debate about brainwashing; although the debate is old, some new modifications of the theory are considered here. These are Steven Hassan’s “B.I.T.E.” (Behaviour, Information, Thoughts, Emotions), involving a distinction between brainwashing and mind control; Janja Lalich’s “bounded choice” theory; and, most recently, the concept of spiritual abuse, which has gained momentum within some Christian organisations. Further division between critics and NRM scholars relates to the locus of expertise, and the methods used by each group to study NRMs. In particular, there is lack of agreement between the roles of participant-observation and ex-member testimony. It is concluded that, despite irreconcilable differences, some limited common ground between critics and NRM can be found. Although some scholars have dismissed the testimony of ex-members, the author argues that ex-members have an important role in NRM research. Both parties agree that NRMs can exert psychological pressure (although not best described as brainwashing or mind control) and that leavers can encounter personal problems that require appropriate counselling. Both parties might agree on providing accounts of NRMs which are recognisable, although not necessarily endorsable, by their supporters.

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Keywords

Brainwashing, cults, mind control, new religious movements, research methods, spiritual abuse.

Ever since new religious movements (NRMs), or “cults”, aroused public attention, there has been a rivalry between their critics and most of the academic community. Before the wave of NRMs of the 1960s and 1970s, most of the criticism was generated by countercult Christians, mainly in the Protestant evangelical tradition, and there was little response by the academic community. The new wave brought new stakeholders into the debate: the so-called “anticult movement” (ACM), and an academic community, initially of sociologists, who claimed to adopt a more neutral and “value-free” approach.

The earlier countercult movement offered a critique based mainly on (usually mainstream Christian) theological grounds, claiming that NRMs’ teachings were heretical, and that they failed to offer a means of salvation, which could only be provided within the mainstream Christian fold. While this critique continues, the anticult movement claims that its purpose is not to make theological criticisms, but rather to expose the malpractices of these groups, to warn seekers of the perceived dangers, and to offer counselling and “rehabilitation” to those “victims” who have left. In what follows, I aim to highlight the principal grounds of controversy between academics and critics, and assess the extent to which it is possible to find any common ground.

Characterising the factions

At the outset, it is important to couch the discussion in terminology that would be acceptable to both sides of the debate. Academic researchers resent being called “cult apologists”, and in any case dislike the term “cult”, while the so-called anti-cult movement frequently contends that its supporters are not against “cults”, but are merely opposed to their malpractices. It is difficult to alight on appropriate vocabulary that each side would find acceptable. Michael Langone suggests a renaming of the two factions with the terms “critics” and “sympathisers” (1993:32): probably both sides of the debate would regard this as an improvement, but the suggestion is not altogether satisfactory. First, it suggests that NRM scholars cannot be critics and, second, the term “sympathisers” is only marginally better than “cult apologists”: an apologist positively speaks out on behalf of a group, while a sympathiser is one who approves of the phenomenon. As Chryssides and Geaves (2014) argue, there is an important difference between sympathy and empathy, and that the latter – not the former – is characteristic of the student of religion. “Empathiser” might seem to be a more appropriate term, but unfortunately it can readily be conflated with “sympathiser”. The words “academic” or “researcher” are less pejorative than “cult apologist”, but to use them in contrast to the critics would be to suggest that the critics are invariably non-academic, or that they do not research their material. While it is true that some of their writing may lack academic rigour, it would be unfair to suggest this of all of them. In what follows I propose to settle for the term “critic”, as Langone recommends, but to contrast this with “NRM scholar”. This is not to imply that the critics lack scholarship, but rather that they do not wish to adopt the

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term “NRM” (new religious movement), which many of them regard as a euphemism for the word “cult”.

To mention these terminological issues is to anticipate much of the ensuing debate, and in what follows I propose, first, to examine further the terminology “anticult”, “cult apologist”, and “cult”, all of which highlight important differences between the two camps. Second, I shall consider the different analyses that both parties give to the NRM phenomenon; and third, I wish to examine the question of where expertise lies. Finally, I shall identify possible areas of agreement, and issues that remain unresolved.

Anticultists and cult apologists?

The critics typically claim that they are not “anticult”, and that the term is unduly negative. Their aim is not the elimination of the so-called “cults”, but to challenge their practices, while fully supporting freedom of belief. They will also point to what they perceive as the more positive side of their objectives – to free individuals from oppression, liberating them from the psychological manipulation, and helping to restore them to what they regard as normal family life. Some claim that they are positively defending human rights, since they believe that cult members are deprived of rights such as liberty, security, privacy, and property. (See, e.g. Dvorkin 2015).

Despite periodic assertions that such groups seek positively to promote freedom, a cursory glance at the critics’ aims indicates a combative stance towards NRMs. The objectives, and in some cases even the names of monitoring organisations, indicate marked opposition: for example, the French government agency MIVILUDES (Interministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combatting Cultic Deviances),⁹³ by the inclusion of the word “combatting” suggests a confrontational stance. UNADFI (National Union of Associations for the Defence of Families and the Individual Victims of Sects)⁹⁴ a French non-governmental organisation defines its aims in part as “to prevent the actions of sectarian groups, movements and organizations”, while in Britain the Family Survival Trust (formerly FAIR – Family Action Information and Resource) includes in its mission statement “to prevent, and to provide information on coercive control, cultic behaviour and psychological manipulation” (Family Survival Trust 2020). In Poland, the office of the Ministry of the Interior offers “anti-sect” training for educators and law enforcement personnel, and in Lithuania some ex-members of NRMs founded The Cult Prevention Bureau. Words like “prevent” and prefixes like “anti-” are fairly clear indications of opposition. Opposition to NRMs is not confined to these organised groups, but extends to governmental policies in numerous countries. The French and Belgian governments formulated lists of “sectes” – the word itself is pejorative in French – although the function of such lists was far from clear and included well-respected religious organisations such as Adventists and Pentecostals (Assemblée Nationale

⁹³ The acronym MIVILUDES stands for “Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires”. In January 2020, the organisation was dissolved and its work relocated within the Interministerial Committee for the prevention of delinquency and radicalization. See Fleurin 2020.

⁹⁴ UNADFI stands for Union nationale des Associations de défense des Familles et de l’Individu victimes de sectes. Its stated objective in French is “prévenir les agissements des groupes, mouvements et organisations à caractère sectaire...”.

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1995). More substantially, various governments have imposed restrictions on registration, which typically affect permission to assemble, to purchase property, and to obtain financial benefits from the state. Often permission to register depends on a minimum number of converts, excluding immigrants who have entered the country as missionaries. Such policies by their very nature discriminate against new religious organisations, and impede their progress (Chryssides 2019:227-248). At the time of writing, some of the most serious opposition is to be found in Russia, where Jehovah's Witnesses have been branded as an "extremist organisation", had their properties confiscated, and been banned from meeting, largely at the instigation of Aleksander Dvorkin, a former professor of missiology and member of the Russian Orthodox Church, who chaired a governmental law-enforcement agency, particularly targeting Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, and the Unification Church.

Turning to the label "cult apologist", it may be tempting to think that, if one is not critic, one must be on the opposite side, defending NRMs against criticism – hence the label. "cult apologist". It is important, however, to note what an apologist actually is. In the early years of Christian history, writers like Tertullian and Justin Martyr wrote works bearing the title *Apology*. They were writing as Christians – Tertullian in fact was an early convert at the time – appealing to the Roman authorities for tolerance and for an end to unjust treatment. Their *Apologies* were written from the standpoint of the Christian faith, setting out its key beliefs and practices, and commending it to the Roman authorities. The word "apology" literally means "to speak on behalf of" (Greek *apō* – "for", and *logos* – "word") and, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, means "something that is said or written to defend something that other people criticize". As Eileen Barker points out, academic writing on NRMs aims to be value-free: we do not seek to commend the religions under discussion but to explain their beliefs and practices as objectively as possible. This can sometimes involve setting the record straight if a religious organisation has been inappropriately described or maligned, but there is an important difference between correcting inaccurate information and positively commending the community under discussion.

Generally, the critics' attitude to academic scholarship is negative, for a variety of reasons. Some critics fail to understand the nature of neutrality and scholarship aiming to be value-free. In 1987 FAIR News printed an editorial in which the author suggested that value-free meant value-less. As Eileen Barker pointed out, this is simply a silly criticism, since the two concepts – value-free and value-less – are by no means mean the same (Barker 1989: x; FAIR News 1987: 5). A somewhat more plausible critique of academic neutrality comes from Alexandra Stein, who accuses the so-called cult apologists of cultural relativism. Presumably the rationale behind this criticism is that, since academics tend to avoid making value judgements, and more especially do not adjudicate on questions of truth in the religions they study, they must regard all NRMs as equally legitimate, worthwhile, or true. However, it should be obvious that this is a non-sequitur: a refusal to assess a religious community's claim to truth is certainly not tantamount to implying that it is as true as any other. To withhold judgements about truth is merely to acknowledge that truth claims are the province of the philosopher and the theologian, rather than the sociologist or the scholar of religion, whose aim is simply to understand the worldview and the practices of the

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community under study. It is likely that Stein is conflating relativism with acceptance of religious pluralism: it is obvious in the study of new religious movements that there are many varieties of belief and practice, but this self-evident fact does not commit the scholar to claiming that each has an equal claim to truth, or that truth is relative. Indeed, the fact that in the main those who study NRMs remain on the outside indicates that they have already made decisions about issues of truth.

Language and terminology

The term “cult” needs to be addressed, since this is a common source of division between critics and NRM scholars. The critics continue to insist on its use, claiming that the alternative expression favoured by academics – “new religious movements” – is a euphemism. One main problem with the term “cult” is that it is pejorative. Some may see this as a merit; indeed, one academic, whose mother was involved in an NRM, has stated that she feels that she needs a term like “cult” to express her infuriation at the way her parent was treated. Some ex-members of NRMs have claimed to have felt a sense of liberation when an authority has said, “You’ve been in a cult!” – a remark that acknowledges the sinister nature of the organisation they had joined, and expresses sympathy for their predicament. Since the word “cult”, therefore, imports a value judgement, it can only properly be applied after the true nature of the organisation has been ascertained. It cannot legitimately be applied *ab initio*. If one of the characteristics is that it exerts undue psychological pressure, or has authoritarian leadership, such aspects need to be established before using the label.

The use of the term is rendered more complex by those critics who employ the expression “destructive cults”. The phrase leaves it unclear as to whether the adjective “destructive” is an amplification of the concept of cult, indicating that all so-called cults are destructive, or whether it implies a contrast between destructive cults and benign cults (Chryssides and Zeller 2014: 322). One seldom hears critics mentioning benign cults, or applying the term to organisations that might generally be agreed to be innocuous, such as a Christian monastic group.

These observations highlight a more general problem, namely the scope of the term “cult”. In this author’s early years of research, an NRM-monitoring organisation presented a list to a committee of which he was part, which contained over 100 items, including groups and practices as diverse as the Unification Church, Scientologists, Baha’i, Christadelphians, Gestalt, “biorythms” (sic), dream groups, reflexology, and Seventh Day (sic) Adventists (FAIR 1982). The obvious problem with such a list is that the criteria for inclusion are nebulous. It is not obvious why astrology, neuro-linguistic programming, and tarot – sometimes included in similar lists – do not appear: one wonders whether these omissions are deliberate or accidental. One key consideration in academic study is that concepts should have what Steven Sutcliffe, in a slightly different context, has termed “predictable content” (Sutcliffe 2003:29). In other words, it is important that, when devising categories, it should be obvious which items fit, and which do not. For example, if we consider terms like “male” and “female”, we would typically agree, faced with a room full of people, who fell into each category. (The fact that male/female need not be a binary, or that we can occasionally be mistaken, is irrelevant: we can readily classify most people.)

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The problem is compounded by the fact that writers like Steven Hassan, Janja Lalich, and Alexandra Stein, among others, use the term “cult” to include political organisations, therapy groups, certain types of business organisation, and self-improvement techniques. The term has spanned movements and techniques as diverse as those on the 1982 FAIR list mentioned above, together with the marketing company Amway, the Democratic Workers Party, and others that do not claim a religious identity. It may be asked whether bracketing such radically different movements and practices is helpful; normally good academic research highlights differences rather than conflates them.⁹⁵

Are there “marks of a cult”?

Failure to acknowledge such diversity has caused critics to define “marks of a cult”. One principal difference between critics and NRM scholars is that the former adopt a form of essentialism, claiming that there are key characteristics that are shared by NRMs. By contrast, scholars such as Eileen Barker insist that essentialism is inappropriate, and that one feature of NRMs is that they are all different. The “Marks of a Cult” theory appears, sometimes with minor modifications, in various prominent critical writers. The critics’ literature typically portrays the “cult” as having a number of characteristics, which derived from the R. J. Lifton’s study of US servicemen who were made prisoners during the Korean War of 1950-1953. This approach has been adopted by Margaret Singer, Janja Lilich and Steven Hassan, and can be found on many cult-monitoring web sites. (Lifton 1989: 429).

Lifton’s eight “marks” are: (1) milieu control; (2) mystical manipulation; (3) demand for purity; (4) the cult of confession; (5) the “sacred science”; (6) loading the language; (7) doctrine over person; and (8) dispensing of existence. Some explanation of how these are interpreted by the ACM may be appropriate. (1) The first of these involves control of the environment: for example, Unification Church workshop members typically studied Sun Myung Moon’s teachings in a controlled environment, in a relatively remote location, with a tightly scheduled programme. (2) Happenings may be attributed to divine activity: thus, a leader might suggest that God had brought members to the location, that God was leading them into acceptance of the truth, or that hostile spirits were causing attendees to fall asleep at lectures. (3) The third criterion entails that the cult offers either purity of life, in contrast to a tarnished external world, or that it presents unique truth, amidst a world whose citizens are in error. (4) Members are encouraged, even required, to confess misdemeanours; auditors in the Church of Scientology, for instance, cause “pre-clears” (their term for those who have not yet reached the appropriate level of spiritual attainment within the organisation) to recount past incidents in their lives, which are then placed on records which are filed. (5) “Sacred science” entails that the cult has teachings that have absolute and unquestionable truth – supremely important and undoubtable, and there can even be sanctions for causing dissent within the organisation. (6) “Loading the language” involves what Lifton called “thought-terminating clichés” – employing labels that lack clear meaning, but serve to terminate further

⁹⁵ The term “new religious movement”, of course, also requires a definition that enables predictable content. I have discussed possible definitions elsewhere, e.g. Chryssides 2012.

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discussion, for example that a piece of literature is “apostate”, or that someone is “worldly”. (7) People are considered to be less important than the ideology, and leaders may treat members inconsiderately, making them conform to their predetermined standards. (8) Dispensing of existence can entail deciding who belongs to the organisation and who does not, as well as deciding who will survive some final judgement, and who will perish.

NRM scholars find a number of problems with this approach. First of all, it involves essentialism by implying that there is some kind of common essence to all the so-called cults. Second, it fails to acknowledge that NRMs developed over time: initially, there may be a leader who is thought to be charismatic by supporters, but as a movement expands, the majority of new seekers do not initially meet the leader, or even meet him or her at all, let alone come under the leader’s personal influence; and after the leader’s death she or she is no longer able to exercise power over members. Third, as with the concept of “cult”, many of these features lack predictable content, or fail to identify distinctive features that are not found outside the controversial organisation. For example, most institutions – both secular and religious – have their own special vocabulary (“loading the language”), and many mainstream religious believers seek purity of life, and at times attribute events to divine activity.

It does not follow, however, that there are no legitimate uses of the word “cult”. It may signify a loosely organised movement, with no clear central authority, as is the case with the “cult” of the Virgin Mary, or the “cult of Elvis”. At times NRMs can begin in a “cultic” way. The Church of Scientology is one example: initially L. Ron Hubbard’s 1950 book *Dianetics: The Science of Mental Health* was not published in the name of any organisation, but as a popular self-help psychology book which caught the imagination of the American public, and which could plausibly be described as a “cult book”. Hubbard’s ideas subsequently moved from the book’s popularity to what Max Weber called institutionalisation (Weber 1947: 36-77), when in 1958 some of his supporters helped to set up the organisation which continues today. The word “cult” need not be abandoned completely: it simply needs to be used properly, with clear meaning, and non-pejoratively.

Differences in analysis

Differences between critics and NRM scholars are not merely about terminology, but about the processes leading to joining NRMs, and what happens within them. One of the longest-running debates has been about brainwashing. NRM scholars have argued that the term has no clear meaning, and that critics have exaggerated the coercive techniques that are allegedly employed in recruiting and retaining members. Among NRM scholars, Eileen Barker is usually credited with the most decisive refutation of brainwashing theory in her *The Making of a Moonie* (1984), in which she demonstrated that, of those attending a two-day workshop in London in 1979, 15% dropped out, only 30% progressed to the seven-day workshop, and 18% to the 21 day one. A mere 8% joined as full-time members for over a week, and after two years, only 4% remained; 3.5% on 1 January 1983 (Barker 1984:146). This indicates that if the Unification Church sought to use coercive strategies, they were singularly ineffective. Notwithstanding Barker’s substantial

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research, responses from critics tended not to offer counter evidence, but commented that sociologists work with generalities, and that monitoring organisations like FAIR invariably encountered families of long-standing members that remained in the organisation. Other critics simply dismissed academic research; Casey McCann, who later became chair of FAIR, described academics as “an inordinately complacent and self-satisfied lot of mystagogues” (FAIR News, October 1984, 16). (One wonders how many academic conferences he attended, or how many reviewers’ comments from journals he had seen!) Critics continue to cling on to brainwashing theory: an article in *FAIR News* in September 2015 was headed “Should We Call a Spade a Spade?”, in which the author, on the subject of radicalisation, wrote:

The danger facing young people therefore is not that they may be “radicalised”. ... Rather it is that we do not call a spade a spade and describe what is actually happening to them by using the right word – brainwashing (Khodabandeh 2015: 1).

Modifications to “brainwashing” theory: (1) Hassan’s concept of “mind control”

A number of critics, recognising difficulties with brainwashing theory, have suggested modifications. In his *Combatting Mind Control* (1988) Steven Hassan attempts to distinguish between brainwashing and mind control (which he equates with thought reform). Brainwashing, he notes, was the term devised by journalist Edward Hunter in 1951 to describe the treatment of Korean prisoners of war by the Chinese, involving control of the physical environment, and coercive measures, of which the prisoners were fully aware, but were nonetheless forced to comply, and were able to abandon on exit. By contrast, mind control is a manipulative process of which the subject may be unaware, and frequently involves two factors: hypnotic processes, and group dynamics. The subject, he claims, is placed in an environment which induces a trance-like state, which can be quite pleasant, but which diminishes one’s critical faculties, enabling the implanting of irrational beliefs, and influencing one’s subsequent actions. Group conformity is a further factor: Hassan cites the experiments in social psychology carried out by Solomon Asch and Stanley Milgram, who demonstrated how experimental subjects would engage in uncharacteristic behaviour to conform to group norms or an authority figure. In a similar way, he believes, an NRM and its authority figure can cause supporters to block out critical information, often creating a barrier to outsiders through “loaded language” or causing them to regard those outside the organisation as enemies, and instilling fear about leaving the group. The processes result in control of belief, information, thought, and emotions, resulting in maintaining loyalty and devotion to the organisation and its leader.

Hassan develops these ideas into a more complex model, which he refers to as the “B.I.T.E. Model”. The acronym stands for “Behaviour, Information, Thoughts, Emotions”, which Hassan believes to be four key aspects of the “destructive mind control” exercised by “cults” upon their followers. Hassan develops these four presumed aspects of mind control further on his Freedom of Mind Resource Center web pages. There one finds a more complex model, with 36 points in

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the main web site, and a further-developed 44-point model: 82 points, if one includes subheadings (Freedom of Mind 2020).

It would be impossible here to discuss even a fraction of Hassan's points, but some samples will suffice. Some are, not unexpectedly, based on Lifton, for example "unethical use of confession" (II.6), "use of loaded language and clichés" (III.3), and "labeling alternative belief systems as illegitimate, evil, or not useful" (III.10). Other points are typically echoed in ACM literature, for example regulating one's diet, sleep deprivation, financial exploitation (I.5-7), and "love bombing" (IV.6). Presumably Hassan does not wish to claim that all NRMs possess all of these features – a claim which would be manifestly false – but rather that these are characteristics that can be found in at least some "cults". Some are certainly recognisable: for instance, discouraging "non-cult sources of information" is characteristic of a number of NRMs; the Church of Scientology, the New Kadampa Tradition, and Jehovah's Witnesses only make available their own literature (although they do not necessarily instruct their members to read nothing else); corporal punishment is imposed on children within the Twelve Tribes; and assuming new names and identities is practised by numerous spiritual groups in Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions. Shunning (IV. 5 e) is a widely publicised practice within the Plymouth Brethren and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other examples on Hassan's list do not appear to be exclusively applicable to NRMs: prescriptions about sexual mores can be found in mainstream Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; the instruction to "encourage only 'good and proper' thoughts" (III.4) would surely be endorsed by any religion; instilling belief that one is not living up to one's true potential (IV.4a), again, applies to many mainstream as well as new religions; and confession of sins is routinely practised in mainstream Christian worship.

Other points in Hassan's itemisation seem bizarre. His list of characteristics of undue influence include "Punish disobedience by beating, torture, burning, cutting, rape, or tattooing/branding" (I.15) and, curiously, "singing and humming" as an example of thought-stopping techniques. Hassan does not specify which organisations he has in mind when he itemises "[t]errible consequences if you leave: hell, demon possession, incurable diseases, accidents, suicide, insanity, 10,000 reincarnations, etc." There are several reasons for regarding this list the strange. In his *Combating Cult Mind Control* he states that rape and torture are characteristics of brainwashing, not mind control, yet they continue to appear on his list of mind-controlling tactics. Of course, the longer the list, the more likely one is to alight on a characteristic that can apply to a particular cult, and it is therefore easy for a less critical reader to assume that, having found one matching characteristic, there must be more. Since he claims to be writing not merely about religious movements, but about political, psychotherapy/educational, and commercial mind-controlling cults, compiling a cumulative list of their presumed characteristics is unhelpful. To give an analogy, suppose I attempted to list features of university life, and itemised: bureaucracy, heavy workloads, unfair marking, pointless meetings, student protests, sexual harassment, fieldwork, animal experimentation, boring lectures, examinations, work placement, volunteering, student societies, and chaplaincy. This would be an unhelpful list, since some members might experience some of these aspects, but no single lecturer or student would experience all of them.

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The list needs to be made coherent by relevant selection, either by specifying lecturers' duties, disciplinary matters, course curricula, or whatever its purpose is. In fact, a "marks of a cult" list is even more problematic than my imaginary "marks of a university": at least we have a clear idea of what universities are, and where to find them; the concept of "cult" remains nebulous. By listing characteristics that can be found across the totality of so-called "cults", which apparently includes therapy groups, self-help groups, and business and political organisations, Hassan has inevitably alighted on characteristics that can be found in some of these groups, but failed to offer any collective qualities that could be regarded as universal "marks of a cult".

(2) Janja Lalich: "bounded choice"

A further attempt at improving on brainwashing theory comes from Janja Lalich, who proposes a hypothesis which she labels "bounded choice". According to Lalich, it is an oversimplification to believe that one can be hypnotised by a charismatic figure; rather, being drawn into a cult involves four factors: (1) "charismatic commitment"; (2) a transcendent belief system; (3) systems of control; and (4) systems of influence (Lalich 2004). The first factor entails being drawn to the personality of the charismatic leader; the second entails accepting the worldview that he or she offers, which is a closed system, which followers may not question. However, since intellectual assent is insufficient to maintain allegiance, the leader imposes a system of control, so that members physically demonstrate their allegiance, perhaps by adopting a dress code, or by learning the group's special vocabulary, or by paying acts of homage to the leader, for example the Unification Church members' ritual of bowing before the portrait of the Reverend Moon and his wife.

Lalich's bounded choice theory offers a somewhat more sophisticated explanation of NRM membership. The observation that one demonstrates allegiance finds some support in Eileen Barker's "charismatisation" theory: the followers learn how to bestow charisma on the leader, rather than simply recognise an incoherent quality that he or she possesses. Thus, acceptance of charismatic leadership is an interactive rather than a one-way process. However, if bounded choice theory is intended to differentiate cultic membership from mainstream religious allegiance, it is questionable whether these elements are unique to NRMs. A monastic community, for example, has its special rule of life, and its special forms of dress, and its members' choices are "bounded": as long as they remain in the group they must adhere to the lifestyle of their order, and for many, abandoning their way of life is not an option, since they may no longer possess the qualities demanded by the outside secular world, or be able to find a niche in mainstream society.

(3) Spiritual abuse

A further, more moderate theory of undue influence employs the concept of "spiritual abuse". The term appears to have originated in the late twentieth century, and different authors have identified different characteristics. David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, who are early proponents of the concept, define it as "the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining or a decreasing that

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person's spiritual empowerment" (Johnson and VanVonderen 1991:20). Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond's (2013) *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse* has proved particularly influential in UK church circles, and was taken up by the Churches Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS), renamed in 2018 as Thirtyone:eight. The somewhat enigmatic new name alludes to Proverbs 31:8: "Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable" (Contemporary English Version). Oakley defines spiritual abuse thus:

Coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or using the pulpit to control behaviour, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a "divine" position, isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context. (Oakley and Kinmond, 2013: 21).

It should be noted that spiritual abuse is not the same as "cult abuse" in Hassan's and Lalich's sense. As noted above, the term "cult" has been applied to nonreligious as well as religious organisations, hence the term "spiritual abuse" can only be applied to the latter. In that regard the concept is narrower, but it also has a wider application in that it is also applied in the context of mainstream Christian churches, and indeed a number of denominations, including the Church of England, have formulated official guidelines relating to the phenomenon (Church of England 2020). There is no obvious reason why the term should not be applied outside of the context of Christianity, however, and it has been used occasionally in the context of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam.

Essentially, spiritual abuse relates to an unequal power dynamic between a religious leader and the subordinate adherent. A religious leader might seek compliance from a member, claiming that God has spoken to him or her, using the authority of the Bible in pursuit of one's own ends, or threatening the follower with supernatural consequences, for example that they would have to justify their behaviour at the Last Judgement, while others have been warned of adverse consequences for their children's well-being: the Bible depicts God as "punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" (Exodus 20:5). In his *Churches that Abuse* (1992) Ronald Enroth catalogues a variety of serious examples of abusive treatment within Christian congregations, but Thirtyone:eight suggests that spiritual abuse can often be less obvious, and even unintentional.

While these examples of alleged spiritual abuse are no doubt recognisable, the concept has attracted criticism. The Evangelical Alliance has criticised the term for being vague, unworkable, and potentially discriminatory. Its 2018 report "Reviewing the Discourse of 'Spiritual Abuse': Logical Problems and Unintended Consequences" the authors acknowledge the existence of coercive and controlling behaviour within Christian organisations, but argue that such abuse is already adequately covered by the concept of emotional and psychological abuse, and that there is

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no need to devise a separate category for its occurrence within a religious context. The Alliance is also concerned that the notion of spiritual abuse potentially threatens the rights and equality of religious groups, and could be harmful to interfaith relations, since the practices that certain religious organisations consider acceptable may be regarded as abusive by others. To take some examples,⁹⁶ the Southern Baptist Convention explicitly states that the husband is the head of the household, and that – as the Bible states – his wife and family should obey him (Ephesians 5:23-24). Many conservative Christian churches, as well as Muslim communities, firmly hold that homosexual relationships are contrary to their religion’s teachings: are such claims to be construed as spiritually abusive towards the LGBT community, or can they be justified in the name of religious freedom and freedom of speech? Is it spiritually abusive to be criticised for not being able to speak in tongues, or having a Bible that is not sufficiently “well-thumbed”? I have certainly come across Christian believers who have castigated others on such grounds. The Evangelical Alliance has cause for unease with the concept. The concept of spiritual abuse seems somewhat clearer than the concept of brainwashing; however, the fact that it applies specifically to religious communities can be seen either as a merit or as a weakness. The debate is still in its early days, and awaits fuller discussion.

The question of expertise

A further important divide between NRM scholars and the ACM is the question of where expertise lies. Academics justifiably claim to have obtained appropriate institutional accreditation, to research their material thoroughly, to weigh up alternative hypotheses and interpretations, and to reach measured conclusions. The process of peer-reviewing serves as an assurance that the quality of one’s work is of appropriate standard and, even if reviewers do not necessarily agree with the views presented, they nonetheless vouch for the material’s integrity and scholarly value. By contrast, the NRM-monitoring organisations have tended to originate, not from scholars, but from other stakeholders, mainly concerned parents whose sons and daughters have become involved in an NRM, and ex-members. The majority tend to lack college qualifications in religion or social sciences, although a few who have emerged from NRM membership has subsequently gone on to acquire qualifications in social science or in counselling. In the main, those to whom the media often gives the label “cult expert” are self-styled authorities, who typically present a one-sided and negative view of “the cults”. In some cases their sole credentials involve having belonged to a controversial organisation, sometimes for a very short period of time, and not always a religious one; indeed a number of these so-called experts’ background lies in political movements. At times they inflate their status, using pretentious titles like “executive director” or claiming an institutional affiliation when they merely teach a few extramural classes.

Such criticism has provoked a reaction from the Apologetics Index, who make the following response:

⁹⁶ These examples are my own, not those of the Evangelical Alliance.

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Cult apologists employ a number of tactics in their fight against the anti-cult and counter-cult movements ... Some academic cult apologists attempt to create a credibility gap between themselves and what they refer to as “so-called ‘cult experts’” or “self-proclaimed ‘cult experts’.” In doing so they try to create the false impression that a) there are no – or few – academics within the anticult- or countercult movements, and b) that one can not be an expert without being credentialed (Apologetics Index 2018).

It is certainly true that some NRM critics have good academic qualifications or hold academic posts, although academic literature tends to be dominated by contributors who seek to adopt a neutral stance on NRMs. The second statement – (b) – above, however, needs to be challenged. The academic community has room for independent scholars, some of whom make excellent contributions to journals and conferences, and who do not necessarily have formal qualifications in religious studies or in sociology; those who referee for academic journals are not normally told the author’s credentials, and there is no editorial policy that excludes such independent scholars from contributing. Nonetheless, the notion of being an “expert” demands having some kind of evidence of expertise, and having one’s material peer-reviewed ensures that appropriate quality is maintained.

Whatever credentials might be presented, however, the notion of a “cult expert” is inherently absurd. The fact that there are estimated to be between 500 and 1000 new spiritual organisations in Britain, 5000 in the US, and 183,000 registered religions in Japan should be sufficient indication that no single person or group could claim expertise over such a wide area (Cult Education Institute 2000; Facts and Details 2012; Hilpern 2013; Hunt 1994).⁹⁷ The concept of the “cult expert” ought to be no more credible than someone who claimed to be a “people expert” or a “book expert”. With the proliferation of NRMs, and their liability to constant change, no academic would credibly claim to be an “NRM expert”: while one may have a basic knowledge of the best-known new religions and spiritualities, even maintaining expertise on one single organisation can prove to be a daunting task.

Notwithstanding the implausible versatility of the “cult expert”, the media continue to use the title and draw on such people for comment, and there are several reasons why the “cult expert” is privileged over the academic. First, the claimed range of expertise enables the media to find a convenient port of call when comment on a new religion is needed; finding a specialist academic can be more difficult and time-consuming. Second, the cult expert speaks the language of the audience: he or she can keep it simple, without taxing the audience with uncertainties, complexities, or different potential viewpoints. Third, academics require time to research the material and ensure the reliability of the data; by contrast, the cult expert is all too ready with an instant answer. When the collective suicides of Heaven’s Gate were discovered in 1997, only a

⁹⁷ These statistics do not have scientific validity, and there are obvious problems about statistical information of this kind. They are simply used here to give a rough impression of the scale of the phenomenon on which the “cult expert” claims expertise.

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very small number of academics had heard of the group; the ACM, on the other hand, implying that there is a certain sameness in all “cults”, and bearing in mind the previous mass deaths in Jonestown, Waco, and the Solar Temple, could come up fairly instantly with the verdict that “this is a typical cult”, and that it highlighted the dangers that were involved in joining these new organisations.

Research methods

The issue of expertise relates to research methods. Sociologists and scholars of religion tend to look to a religion’s practitioners for data, often employing participant-observation, while the critics emphasise the testimony of ex-members. Critics may argue that when academic scholars are over-friendly, they may ingratiate themselves to a religious community, placing themselves in a position where they are reluctant to criticise, or to give unfavourable evidence in situations such as acting as expert witnesses in litigation when called upon to do so. The scholar is sometimes in a difficult position: maintaining good relationships ensures that he or she continues to receive good information, while writing material that is to the group’s detriment may cause information and invitations to be withheld. Particularly problematic situations arise when controversial organisations offer benefits to scholars. In the 1980s and early 1990s the Unification Church became controversial for inviting academics to attend seminars under names such as the New Ecumenical Research Association, the International Conference for the Unity of Sciences, and the Assembly of World’s Religions, paying travel and accommodation expenses. Critics were quick to accuse those academics who accepted such invitations as being bribed, being “pampered” in luxurious hotels, lending credibility to a disreputable organisation, and placing themselves in a compromising position where they felt obliged to speak favourably about Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Movement.

Ex-member testimony has proved controversial among NRM scholars. Thus sociologist Bryan Wilson writes:

The apostate is generally in need of self-justification. He seeks to reconstruct his own past, to excuse his former affiliation, and to blame those who were formerly his closest associates. Not uncommonly the apostate learns to rehearse an “atrocious story” to explain how, by manipulation, trickery, coercion, or deceit, he was induced to join or remain within an organisation that he now forswears and condemns. Apostates, sensationalised by the press, have sometimes sought to make a profit from accounts of their experiences in stories sold to newspapers or produced as books ... Neither the objective sociological researcher nor the court of law can readily regard the apostate as a credible or reliable source of evidence. He must always be seen as one whose personal history predisposes him to bias with respect to both his previous religious commitment and to his former associates. (Wilson 1990: 19).

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Writing slightly earlier, James Beckford (1985: 197) suggests that ex-members may be embarrassed at having been persuaded to join an NRM, and feel stigmatised. Hence they can feel the need to exonerate themselves by devising a scenario that accounts for their recruitment into the cult, such as an unduly persuasive leader, or the process of brainwashing. In some cases, the ex-member can approach celebrity status, by being encouraged by the media or by the ACM to tell his or her story, which can be adapted or enhanced to fulfil the expectations of those who hear it. Daniel Carson Johnson goes so far as to suggest that some of the apostates that are presented in such circles are entirely fictitious.

Understandably, ex-members such as M. James Penton (2004: 233) are irked by such comments. Penton argues that this is an over-generalisation, and that ex-members have a variety of backgrounds, and that such statements are not backed up by any scientific evidence. On this matter, I believe Penton is right. While it may be true that some ex-members embellish their accounts of the life inside an NRM, those who have come out of the older new religions, such as the Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses, have no occasion to explain how they joined, since they may never have joined in the first place, being second- or third-generation adherents. Ex-members often bring to bear valuable insider knowledge about an organisation, particularly if they have had a leadership role, with access to information that might otherwise be inaccessible. In the case of the Watch Tower organisation, William J. Schnell (1959) provides valuable insights into the Society in the 1930s and its progress in Austria and the US, and Raymond V. Franz (2000) gives unique information about how the Governing Body operates and reaches its decisions. Like any other testimony, of course, it must be critically evaluated, but it should certainly not be dismissed.

Scholars often write as if the ex-member is someone other than themselves. However, it should be noted that there are NRM scholars who are themselves ex-members, and indeed some who are themselves NRM members. Academic scholarship has come beyond the phenomenologist's model in which academics stand on one side and attempt to create a "bridge of understanding" with the religion they seek to comprehend. As I have argued elsewhere, the insider/outsider model is grossly over-simplistic, and it must be recognised that there exist a variety of positions, both on the part of practitioners and on the part of those who study them (Chryssides and Geaves 2014: 241-274; Chryssides and Gregg 2019: 3-29).

Can there be common ground?

Having highlighted a considerable number of differences between the two sets of stakeholders, is there anything on which both parties might agree? The main issues that continue to divide relate, first, terminology: the critics still want to retain terms like "cult", "brainwashing", and "cult apologist". Second, the critics tend to favour essentialism, which has become exacerbated by extending the term "cult" to political groups as well as business organisations and self-help techniques. Academics in general, and NRM scholars specifically, favour acknowledging differences, and regard questions like "Why do people join cults?" as ill-framed. Third, the issue of emphasis is divisive: cult critics continue to emphasise the sinister aspects of NRM allegiance, and often wish to single out "cults" for special legislation, which NRM scholars would regard as

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discriminatory. Fourth, there also remains the question of expertise: while acknowledging that academic credentials are not the only legitimating qualifications, it is vital that those who wish to comment with authority on NRMs, and those who offer counselling can demonstrate their competence. It is also a matter of regret that the critics often seem reluctant to turn to academia for information.

There are, however, some points that the two factions might share in common. I doubt if any NRM scholar has ever denied that new religions have created problems on various occasions. Even though sociologists and scholars of religion seek to adopt a neutral stand when investigating the subject matter, no scholar could possibly condone Jonestown, Heaven's Gate, Waco, or satanic child abuse, and much of the literature on such topics has been written, not merely out of intellectual curiosity, but also with the purpose of providing accurate information to those who are caught up in NRMs, or who might be considering appropriating their forms of spirituality. We might also agree that there have been many occasions on which seekers and members have been placed in controlled environments, subjected to psychological and emotional pressure, and been expected to part with substantial sums of money. We can acknowledge too that leaving an NRM can be difficult, even impossible, and that those who leave can need good professional counselling. The fact that several ex-members have gone on to gain expertise in counselling is undoubtedly to be welcomed.

Despite these points of agreement, however, important differences are set to remain. NRM critics risk exaggerating the perceived dangers of membership: only too often one finds reference to phenomena such as the Jonestown atrocity in discussions of NRMs more widely. Most NRMs do not involve mass murder or suicide, and to emphasise the "killer cults" is to induce undue fear on the part of friends and families. I think it might also be reconsidered whether it is sensible to lump together spiritual groups, therapy groups, certain forms of business organisation, and human potential groups under the name of NRMs or "cults". Unfortunately, the media and the critics have tended to take the lead in deciding that these are "cults", and academia has followed on. This has unfortunate consequences: not only are they significantly different in character, but the so-called "cult expert" can appeal to experience in one area to justify presumed expertise across the board. Being involved in a radical political organisation or in a therapy group, even if there are similar tactics such as psychological pressure and soliciting money, is not sufficient to gain an understanding of religions – and vice versa. While it has been argued that certain groups are really business organisations masquerading as religions, and while there are borderline cases where it is not clear whether a group can properly be regarded as religious, it seems self-evident that neurolinguistic programming, for example, is not a religion, even though it has sometimes been classified as an NRM. Both parties would do well to assess where they have real expertise lies and not to push the boundaries beyond their proper limits.

The scholar of world religions Wilfred Cantwell Smith contended that an account of religion should be recognisable by the community itself. The word "recognisable" is important: it does not necessarily mean that our accounts would be endorsed by the practitioners – the "insider" version is not necessarily definitive. (Smith 1959:42; Chrystides 2019:373). If a religious group can

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recognise, although not necessarily endorse, the accounts given by the various interest groups, then we have gone some way towards ensuring fair treatment. It is to be hoped that both parties might at least agree on the aims of fairness and accuracy, and the debate can continue with constructive dialogue rather than rivalry and animosity.

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