

# **Cultism, Terrorism, and Homeland Security**

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## **Abstract**

There have been renewed efforts since 9/11 to improve the human intelligence aspect of policing in response to terrorism. It is also now often observed that there are striking similarities (and overlap) between terrorist groups and cultic groups that are the focus of research conducted under the umbrella of the International Cultic Studies Association, Inc. (formerly American Family Foundation, Inc.). However, public policy makers have been slow to appreciate the currently available resource and potential asset provided by the cult-watch movement in general and by scholars who are prepared to undertake apostate studies in particular. Cult-watch groups are generally unsupported by government, and scholars brave enough to study leaver accounts often live a hand-to-mouth existence, with negligible financial support from academe and little moral support from their academic peers. This paper argues for a profound change in this attitude and provides suggestions for a framework in which academic groups (in particular, the ICSA), can make a significant contribution to contemporary public policy.

The London bombings in 2005 (featuring home-grown terrorists operating under the radar of intelligence agencies) marked a turning point in popular and official perceptions of the terrorist threat. The penny started to drop that better community policing (along with interfaith dialogue and cross-

cultural understanding) might provide a fruitful avenue on which to direct government resources. Nevertheless, while some efforts are made to reassure, placate and co-opt selected community leaders, real resources seem primarily directed to expanding empires within intelligence bureaucracies, where recruits are being enlisted at great pace—most likely in a long term effort to better liaise with (as well as infiltrate) ethnic/religious communities and to beef up long-neglected human intelligence.

Preventative detention and sedition laws can send a message to Muslim communities that they are mistrusted and targeted for special attention; such laws engender suspicion, heighten paranoia, and possibly run the risk of amplifying deviance in those pockets where it might exist. While limited preventative detention might be justified with adequate judicial safeguards, governments, in treading a delicate path, should err in favour of free speech, which is not only a fundamental freedom at the heart of the society we are trying to protect, but a useful ally in the so-called “war on terror.” Legislation that restricts free speech can certainly engender suspicion, induce non-cooperation, and destroy the credibility of community leaders seen to be in collaboration with governments that are running apparently contradictory policies.

Furthermore, the record thus far of dealings with those apostates (or informants) who have provided valuable intelligence to the police has conveyed the wrong message. Generous support and protection should be given to those technically in breach of counter-terrorism laws but who have recanted before they engage in acts of violence. If the “war on terror” is to be with us as long as governments predict, the strategy must be to attract future defectors—not deter them by providing lengthy jail terms to those who have already come forward.

Worthwhile intelligence flows naturally (and without financial cost) from those who are eager to provide it to those they are willing to trust. Alliances should be forged and information pathways strengthened with those within the Muslim community who are concerned about extremist, cultic elements seducing their youth.

It is argued that cult-watch groups, in particular those affiliated with the anti- or counter-cult movement, along with

scholars who have been associated with cult-watch groups and study the accounts of leavers, are well positioned to receive the type of information that governments are anxious to extract from target communities.

It is also vital for authorities to keep in mind that terrorist violence is not limited to Muslim groups. Aum Shinrikyo was a syncretistic, Japanese Buddhist cult that employed a weapon of mass destruction, sarin gas, in its attack on the Tokyo subway. A narrow focus on Muslim groups might blind us to potential problems in cultic groups around the world most often the subject of query or complaint to the cult-watch network.

### **Background**

The problem of individuals caught in the grip of destructive cults has been historically an "insignificant" public policy concern because of the relatively small number of people involved, and because catastrophic events involving cults usually occurred "somewhere else" and didn't involve large numbers of the general public. Episodes involving cults only intermittently crossed the radar of public policy makers and were of temporary concern—despite the profound consequences for individuals and families involved. The apocalyptic events of 9/11 have energised politicians as never before because public officials were themselves targeted by members of a religious cultic terrorist group, and because this time large numbers of the general public (who were not in any way involved with the group) were tragically affected by the loss of family members and friends in the most visibly horrifying way.

In other tragedies associated with religious cultic groups, such as Jonestown and Waco, the majority of casualties were connected with the groups. The perception of policy makers and the public was clouded by the unarticulated thought that there had to be something a bit strange about these people to get caught up in such groups (notwithstanding the innocence of the children and vulnerable others involved). In the case of the 1994 Matsumoto and 1995 Tokyo subway sarin gas attacks, in which innocent members of the general public were killed, the number of deaths was low compared to 9/11. Nevertheless, in Japan the attacks resulted in a profound shift in public attitudes to the way religious groups

are regarded and dealt with; although tellingly, this shift occurred only after members of the general public (and, I might emphasise, voting public) became victims.

Before that, the horrific murder of investigating attorney Tatsuhiro Sakamoto and his young family in 1989 and the murder of cult researcher Tadahito Hamaguchi in 1994 did not provoke as strong an official action against the organisation of Aum Shinrikyo as these events might have warranted. Apart from the usual view that the constitutional protection for religion inhibited inquiry, I suspect that many in officialdom harboured the thought that people who investigate or criticise intolerant religious groups are asking for trouble—or are even responsible for stirring it up. Indeed, this idea is sometimes echoed by those sociologists who have an unsophisticated understanding of the concept of deviance amplification—a genuine insight often used as a blunt instrument to blame the victims or to shoot the messengers.

### **Cultism and Terrorism**

Nice academic distinctions have been drawn between a religious terrorist group such as Al Qaeda and other religious cults, but from the information-gathering perspective, a broad understanding of the phenomenon is efficacious. Indeed, cult-watch organizations of every kind receive complaints about groups that fit the definition on the basis of self-selection by defectors and complainants. Finer distinctions are left to the connoisseurs. Professor Ian Freckleton has noted that the term “cult” has “taken on pejorative connotations” and “for at least three decades has generally been employed judgementally, signifying little more than that the group concerned is said to be dominated by an influential figure and is dangerous or ideologically distasteful.”<sup>1</sup> Adopting that popular line, we can easily regard 9/11 as another catastrophic event involving suicide and mass murder perpetrated by a privately funded, religious cultic terrorist group; but if you want to call it a cult-like group, then that is your choice.

In Al Qaeda we have a charismatic, self-appointed religious leader with political or ideological ambitions who borrows from other ideologues to promote an intoxicating worldview. We also have indoctrinated followers who eschew their

personal ambitions and family obligations to dedicate themselves, without material or tangible reward, to the leader's cause. Not an army in the modern sense, and certainly not a mercenary brigade. What more do you need to call this thing a cult? You can call it a heretical sect if you like, ii or even a new religious movement. It makes no sense to say that a group cannot be designated a new religious movement or a cult because it also happens to be catalogued as a terrorist group. Perhaps we could call Al Qaeda a vanity cult or sect because it is largely self-funded by a man who inherited an unusual amount of wealth (and who was able to hook into and channel money from or launder money through largely inattentive religious charities). Al Qaeda is a leech on the body of Islam that has become bloated with success, arguably inadvertently nourished by the propaganda and some of the policies of Western governments.

The 9/11 catastrophe (and previous cultic atrocities) requires us to take a longer-term think about the way we regulate, and both directly and indirectly monitor religious groups—a more sophisticated public policy response based on some understanding of the dynamics of high-demand groups and the way in which religion is often used as a motivator for deviant religious objectives, or sometimes just as a convenient vehicle for very venal objectives. An integrated, structural approach to the problem has been slow in forthcoming from governments, who treated the long list of religious cult atrocities prior to 9/11 as intermittent, generally self-contained events that came to notice from time to time and then lapsed as concerns of public policy.

This time, however, a sub-state cultic religious terrorist group with limited resources was able to provoke Western leaders into a massive use of state power—using a sledge hammer to crack a nut. This response fulfilled all the dreams the cult leader ever had in terms of personal aggrandisement. Unfortunately, I don't think political leaders anywhere in the world at the time of 9/11 had an understanding of the types of groups the International Cultic Studies Association has been grappling with for years. Indeed, the penny is only now starting to drop, iii so we must seize the day in terms of educating policy makers about what we have learned about cultic behaviour and the

type of integrated public-policy response that might help us to address the problem in the longer term.

Those charged with the responsibility of giving advice to governments on security matters do not seem to want to characterise Al Qaeda as a cult, although interestingly they have no difficulty in seeing Aum Shinrikyo as both a cult and a terrorist group. Advisers stick to the view that cults are essentially inward-looking groups that isolate their members physically from society so that the cult leader can manipulate his followers for money and power over them, which often involves sexual gratification. To the contrary, terrorist organisations are seen as having an outward-looking political agenda that is a real threat to state sovereignty.

But if you scratch the surface of many of the groups viewed as inward-looking religious cults, you will find attempts to promote political goals and invariably a sense of world mission—that either involves the conversion of everyone else or, in some cases, the destruction of everyone else. Sometimes a retreat to another country or geographic area is only the end process of failed (albeit amateurish or sporadic) attempts to convert society to the aspirations of the cult leader. In any event, legislative definitions of terrorism in the wake of 9/11 refer to political, ideological, and religious motivations as underpinning the objectives and acts of groups designated terrorist.

By locating Al Qaeda in a broader context of a world jihadist movement, I believe we are painting the wrong picture and providing the wrong narrative, just as we are magnifying the significance of motley jihadist groups by declaring a “war” on terror. Too many politicians want to run with the clash of civilizations and turn it into a war of civilizations, rather than seeking to marginalise the fringe lunatics. Far better would it have been to characterise Bin Laden as the self-indulgent leader of a personal cult with his own idiosyncratic take on Islam—a heretic, in fact, not the warrior hero he has become in the eyes of too many, in large part because Western propaganda has inadvertently characterised or anointed him as a military leader with some substance, rather than as a religious cult leader who got lucky in his own perverse way on 9/11. Even Francis Fukuyama has now admitted that “before the Iraq war we were probably at war with no more

than a few thousand people around the world who would consider martyring themselves and causing nihilistic damage to the United States,"<sup>iv</sup> which puts the problem into a more realistic perspective. We should also consider the assertion that "no more than five out of the 14,000 such schools [pesantren—religious boarding schools] in Indonesia indoctrinate their students with a harsh and confrontational form of Islam and provide them with the religious justification for violence in pursuit of religious goals."<sup>v</sup>

### **Home-Grown Terrorists**

Professor Robert Pape observes that

Sociologists tell us that the key feature of a cult is not the content of its belief system or the presence of persuasive leaders, but the existence of a hard boundary separating a self-contained group from the society at large. A hard boundary is important because it enables highly intrusive control ... in the rigid manner necessary to maintain a system of shared beliefs that is markedly at variance with the surrounding culture.<sup>vi</sup>

He observes that the key factor in the mass suicides at Waco, Jonestown, and other settings was that "members of the groups lived in physical isolation from the surrounding society." Pape says that these cult mass suicides are examples of Durkheim's category of fatalistic suicides, whereas terrorist suicides are examples of altruistic suicide committed by members embedded in their communities, and where the act of suicide is in pursuit of socially acceptable political objectives. However, this analysis does not explain the dynamics of home-grown suicide bombers living in Western societies.

I am not a psychologist, and I strongly advocate the need for a multidisciplinary approach in this area. However, it seems to me that members of high-demand groups can function among other members of society, although the control found in groups living within hard physical boundaries might be difficult to replicate and maintain. While physical isolation (which can take various forms, from camps to prisons,<sup>vii</sup> to weekend seminars) can be an important aid to indoctrination, it is the psychological barriers that cult

members carry around with them that create an invisible wall between the chosen elite and other members of society. Of course, the effectiveness of this wall depends on the effectiveness of the indoctrination, so that in some cases exposure to members of the wider society, and even inadvertent access to contesting viewpoints might result in a weakening or even a breakdown of the psychological conditioning received. Hence the observation that terrorist groups function most effectively when they operate in a wider society that shares a large proportion of the group's worldview.

It is often observed by security officials that the hardest thing to come to grips with is home-grown terrorist groups in Western societies (and let's face it: We are talking about tiny groups that have adopted a perverted view of Islam abhorrent to the moderate view adhered to by the vast majority of peace-loving Muslims). The head of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), Paul O'Sullivan, has noted that

the major challenge facing us is the terrorist that we don't know about ... If you look at the London Bombings of July 2005, you see examples of people who are apparently out there in the community, members of British society and then, in a short time, they engage in suicide bombings ... the speed of this radicalising process means that categorising people is futile. viii

However, it seems to me that by strengthening our information-gathering pathways, we would be better placed to obtain timely information about these groups precisely because they are operating in an environment hostile to their proposed methods. This hostile environment includes members of their own families and the wider Muslim community, of which the vast majority, certainly in Australia and the United States, have proven to be cheerleaders for the style of life, community tolerance, and widespread sharing of material prosperity generally found within Western democracies. ix

It was not surprising that the reaction of the families of the London bombers was one of utter dismay and disbelief. Nor was it a surprise to cult watchers that a group of normal

young men could do such a thing, although the existence or otherwise of a senior indoctrinator is still subject to speculation. The mother of one of the Kings Cross tube bombers said "something must have happened" to her son, who was devastated after 9/11 and cried for the victims. "If my son did this, I want to know what happened to him because something has to have happened. He was always laughing, always kind," she lamented. His wife thought he had "been acting funny lately." x Other parents claimed, truthfully, I have no doubt, that they were "devastated that our son may have been brainwashed into carrying out such an atrocity, since we know him as a kind and caring member of our family." xi Therapists who have worked with the families of cult members have heard these kinds of statements for decades.

If only there was an Islamic counter-cult group to which these family members might have taken their concerns, or that might in some cases have prompted them to become concerned. It seems to me that these bombers were of the "altruistic" category explored by Pape, yet they were operating in a physical environment not supportive of their actions—exhibiting just the sort of naïve altruism found among young people recruited by controversial cults, sects, and new religious movements operating in societies inhospitable to their objectives.

### **Cult-Watch Groups**

No one who has taken even a cursory interest in the study of cults would be surprised that such a level of indoctrination could be so readily achieved. We have seen it all before: college students from middle class families joining "weird" groups and changing radically in a few days; parents confused and bewildered; allegations of brainwashing; deprogramming controversies. xii Cult-watch groups represented at this conference form a large part of the nonofficial response to the phenomenon. We can thank people such as Professor Eileen Barker of INFORM and Mike Kropveld of Info-Cult, among others, who have contributed to the debate about the classification of watch groups and provided us with a broad picture of the cult-watch scene. Single-group-focused complaint groups rise spontaneously and morph sometimes into collections of individuals who attempt to understand the broader problem and

consequently to convey information and support to those who contact them. The use of the term "cult," while subject to continuing controversy and attack, is key in facilitating pathways from those who believe they themselves, or family members or friends, have been or are currently adversely affected by a high-demand group, to those who have established information and support organisations. That is why I believe "cult" remains a vital term to include in the name of watch groups, and why it is efficacious to embrace a broad, popular definition of the term.

I am well aware of the arguments between and about various categories of cult-watch groups. Some take the view that others are not appropriately qualified to give advice. Some look with suspicion upon counter-cult groups, seeing their activities as a form of proselytising. Faith-based watch groups might feel that secular anti-cultists are too critical of all religion. Some academic sociologists chant the mantra that some cult-watch groups are worse than the groups they criticise. <sup>xiii</sup> Academically based watch-groups might be criticised on the basis that in their attempts to be balanced they are too hesitant to be critical of cults, in their research they need to ingratiate themselves with cult oligarchs, or that they are insufficiently multidisciplinary. While some criticisms may be unfair or unfounded, they all deserve to be examined.

My own view from a public-policy perspective is that, bearing in mind the potential pitfalls, watch-groups are canaries in the mineshaft and provide an invaluable primary resource for academics and public officials. Hence we should let "a hundred flowers blossom, a hundred fields of thought contend," while under the auspices of the ICSA we seek to provide sensible guidance for the conduct of watch groups, for the conduct of research facilitated by watch groups, and for the multidisciplinary collation of information useful to public policy makers. The real and potential resource is there; the question remains whether ICSA and associates are up to this three-pronged challenge.

An observation I would like to make here involves my own position as patron of one Australian group, Cult Information and Family Support, Inc. (CIFS), which substantially consists of run-of-the-mill Anglicans and other Christians who meet in a church hall. Although I personally start to fidget if high-

demand groups are criticised on the basis of theology, and I am often vocal in my criticisms of this approach, CIFS members tolerate this sceptic in their midst. It seems to me that while strict secularists might wish to criticise all religion, we have no hope for the future unless secularists and religionists are able to work together to formulate acceptable rules of conduct for cults, sects, religions, watch groups, and nonreligious groups alike. CIFS has been listed as an anti-cult group rather than a counter-cult group, but it is truly a bit of both—with an emphasis on examining issues of harmful practice.

It is also possible that in two ways, at least, counter-cult groups play a role that cannot be replicated in secular or academic watch groups. First, it might well be that a person who comes out of a harmful high-demand group might find solace and support from among members of established religions, particularly if the leaver was formally a member of an established group and is familiar with the culture of that group. Second, from my own observation, it seems that family and friends of a person in a harmful high-demand group are more comfortable and more willing to discuss problems with a group of people who belong to established churches of the same broad faith as their own. Hence, Christian parents might feel more comfortable accessing the services of a Christian-based counter-cult group and Jewish parents might feel more comfortable accessing a Jewish-based counter-cult group. These are questions our academic colleagues in various disciplines might be able to throw some light upon—and they may have already done so.

This raises an interesting point. After the London bombings, a prominent member of the Australian Islamic community, Walid Ali, had this to say on ABC Radio National:

I think that perhaps it might be useful for us to use an alternative model, and where my thoughts went on this was that really if you think about the type of behaviour we're talking about, it seems to fit all the hallmarks of a cult, really, and so it might be useful for us, instead of constructing theories around the idea specifically of Islamic or Islamist extremism, and trying to deal with that as though it's some kind of new animal. It might

be better to think about it in terms of a cult ... I think it's the same sort of sociological or human behaviour ... cults often play this role in the lives of their members, of fulfilling some kind of spiritual void, which is of course why they're always linked to some kind of spirituality. Usually it's some kind of offshoot of Christianity, but of course that doesn't mean it can't happen to other faiths. xiv

This sentiment has recently been reiterated by a Canadian Liberal MP of the Muslim faith, Wajid Khan, who said,

The onus is on our community to address this problem ... We're talking about a cult, a small number of extremists. The majority of us are moderates. But these are the voices that haven't been heard. That has to change. We can't let these people get their roots down here ... parents have to stop turning a blind eye if they notice changes in the behaviour of their teenaged children. xv

What we need, without any doubt, is the establishment of Muslim-based counter-cult groups. ICSA can provide the blueprint and the guidance. Under present circumstances, we might even be able to get governments to help—if they can only be helped to understand the need. I have already written to and spoken with the Australian Attorney-General recommending the establishment of an "Islamic cult-watch group along the same lines as CIFS." The Attorney advised me that he would refer my speech to this conference to his departmental officers, to see whether there were any ideas worth following up. I think we should bundle up the entire proceedings for his department to study.

### **Parliamentary Champions Needed**

Politicians in democratic systems, and particularly in lower-house electorates, are in the game of building alliances, attracting supporters, raising funds, avoiding criticism, and getting re-elected. When it comes to pursuing the complaints of family members and friends of people caught up in high-demand cultic groups, or of defectors from such groups, it is only a very courageous, or some might say stupid, politician who takes up the cause.

I am known to you because as a member of the New South Wales Legislative Council (what you would call a state senator) I took up the cause of parents and friends of people caught up in a high-demand group known as Kenja, as well as many defectors from that group who gave me their written testimonies. Being in the state upper house was efficacious, because having been elected for two terms and on a party-selected state-wide ticket, I was not susceptible to the normal concerns of a lower house member, who can be subjected to a political campaign spearheaded by any interest group, including a religious or quasi-religious cult, in the member's local electorate. Nevertheless, my 1993 call for a select committee of inquiry to investigate "the increase in activity of cults in New South Wales, including deceitful recruitment practices; physical and financial exploitation and abuse of cult members; fraudulent fund-raising activities; and the misuse of mind-influencing techniques" met with some serious opposition—and from some unexpected quarters.

Indeed, one controversial group, which is generally on the lists of those groups most complained about (or, to use a euphemism, "enquired about") to "cult-watch" groups, spearheaded a letter-writing campaign against my private member's motion on the grounds that it was an attack on religions. My proposed motion, on the basis that it might be an attempt to investigate religious groups, mainstream or otherwise, was characterised as an infringement of religious freedom and attacked on the basis that "such persecution has its roots in Nazi Germany where the Jews were targeted as 'cults.'" <sup>xvi</sup> According to this view, any group that can capture the legal designation of "religion"—an ever-expanding category—would simply not be accountable to parliament. Happily for me, a Jewish Rabbi retorted that

I would ask you to do all in your power to ensure that an enquiry takes place and that appropriate legislation be enacted. I do not believe that such legislation will affect the religious or civil liberties of any honest individual or religious faith—only those who practice deceit and mind control will be disadvantaged. Further, to draw a parallel between the suffering of Jews and others during the Nazi Holocaust and NSW ...

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legislation is not only grotesque and vulgar but is an indictment against those who enunciate such ideas. xvii

However, despite such support, I was subjected to a considerable campaign of personal vilification and intimidation by more than one group; which became intense when I referred serious complaints of sexual abuse made by former members of one group to the NSW police and ended up giving evidence in court on behalf of the prosecution. Ongoing harassment included the following: spurious allegations made against me; anonymous defamatory letters about me distributed to the media and my parliamentary colleagues (which I am sure raised a few eyebrows); in a bizarre incident my wedding was invaded by members of a group; I was followed; I received veiled threats against myself and my family; and I had one of the most vicious and slanderous dirt sheets imaginable distributed anonymously over the Internet. Sadly, some of this garbage was also used by political competitors who selectively distributed adverse publicity based on it to members of my preselection panel.

While I don't blame this incident for having ended my parliamentary career, it certainly didn't help. Unfortunately, I suspect that my experience had a chilling effect on other potential parliamentary champions. However, the events of 9/11 have heralded a new consciousness that has dramatically altered the climate in which we can with greater confidence raise concerns about destructive religious cults. Therefore, we must seek new parliamentary champions to become policy entrepreneurs in this vital area, and develop a plan of action to educate them, provide them with specific action plans, encourage them, support them, and protect them to the best of our abilities.

### **Research Methodology**

It is interesting that when I raised the Kenja issue in state parliament, I relied extensively on testimonies from former group members and the complaints of family members and friends of people in the group. As a lawyer, I instinctively adopted the role of advocate, knowing full well that other parliamentarians would take up the cause of the group complained about. Indeed, when my speech calling for a select committee of inquiry was interrupted by a Member of

Parliament who was vociferously defending the group, I suggested in all fairness that she should get herself on the proposed committee. As an example of my commitment to free speech, I even tabled a pile of letters from members of the group that contained outrageous attacks upon me personally and that were part of an orchestrated letter-writing campaign. However, being apprehensive about the nature of the organisation, I did not seek access to the group itself or personally approach the group for a response. Although I might have been criticised for this *modus operandi*, later attacks upon me by the group revealed my instinctive wisdom in not allowing myself to be compromised in any way by making personal contact with current group members.

It is fascinating to me how so many so-called social scientists dismiss out of hand the accounts of leavers or complainants, or apostates, if you want to call them that. Some cults, sects, and/or new religious movements like to cite sociologists to damn apostate accounts. Indeed, one controversial group cites an eminent sociologist of religion, I am presuming correctly, as stating,

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. xviii

With all due respect, this is nonsense. How can anyone even pretend to be an objective researcher when he is prepared to dismiss, out of hand, the evidence of complainants? Of course witnesses can be biased. I am sure the victim of a rape has a jaundiced view of the perpetrator. Some rape victims have even been known to embellish or fabricate—but nobody with any common sense at all is going to peremptorily dismiss the testimony of any witness. Even prison inmates are brought into court as witnesses.

In the case of the testimonies I gathered from former members of Kenja, I would bet my bottom dollar on their veracity. Indeed, an incredibly perceptive and empathetic article has recently been written by Australia's leading public intellectual, political scientist Robert Manne, which is a devastating indictment of the Kenja organisation and which attributes the breakdown of Cornelia Rau, the subject of an infamous mistaken internment case in Australia, to the disgraceful psychological treatment she received in Kenja. <sup>xix</sup>

It gives me little satisfaction at all to say "I told you so"—indeed, I spent several hours back in 1992 and 1993 (years before Cornelia Rau even joined the organisation) detailing comprehensive allegations against Kenja, and I remain to this day dismayed that the government of the day neither had the wit nor wisdom, nor cared enough about the suffering of individuals, to seriously investigate what should be done about the organisation as such and the methods employed within. Action was taken by the police to lay criminal charges against the leader of Kenja; this action arose from the complaints of several young women—because I personally presented evidence to them and became a witness for the prosecution. The leader was convicted on some counts, but then the convictions were set aside by the Australian High Court and subsequently a decision was made not to have the matter tried all over again. However, it is worth noting that the leader has now again been committed to stand trial on a number of other charges for alleged offences against other young women.

I don't have the time here to outline the types of action I think should be taken with respect to groups like Kenja, and the methods they employ. What I do want to talk about is the type of research methodology I believe should be adopted when one is dealing with controversial and

sometimes dangerous groups—and I mean dangerous to the researcher. It seems to me that scholars will tend to specialise in one or other of the different research approaches viable in this fraught area. I cite with approval Eileen Barker when she says, “it is important to understand the movement from a variety of perspectives, which, themselves, need to be understood as part of the ongoing process of the situation.” xx

However, I believe that it is difficult for any individual scholar to attempt successfully to gain access to a controversial new religious movement and at the same time study the accounts of leavers. Even further, I think that some scholars may have to choose to specialise in either leaver research or invited-access research. A researcher who has been labelled an apologist by some cult-watch groups, whether or not fairly, cannot hope to have much street credibility with groups of leavers and anti- or counter-cult watch groups. Conversely, a scholar who has been designated a “cult critic,” again, whether or not that label is deserved, cannot hope to gain sufficient trust of movement oligarchs to facilitate adequate research access. Furthermore, a scholar who has been labelled might well be subjected to deliberate compromise by the group being researched. Groups that are regularly subjected to the most criticism (often for good reason) do liaise and collaborate, and they are quite capable of vicious attacks upon potential critics.

While it has been observed that cult-watch groups have been unsuccessful in providing early warning of violence, cult research groups also have been relatively unsuccessful so far as I am aware. In my view, it is difficult to sit on the barbed wire fence (as we say in Australia) in an effort to strive for academic even-handedness. This approach is likely to lead to public-policy impotence. I have no doubt that the type of timely information most needed by public officials is that which can be provided by leavers and families and friends of people in high-demand groups. The only way we are going to find cancer is by searching for the cancer—not in trying to determine how healthy the body might otherwise be.

I believe we should adopt a triangulated approach to research—to the extent that individual scholars and groups of scholars specialise either in leaver research or invited-

access research, and in other methods, such as examining the official record of government and cult encounters, an approach I adopted in my doctoral thesis. It seems to me that the ICSA has extraordinary street credibility in the area of leaver research and contact with parents' and friends' watch groups, including counter-cult groups. ICSA should be leery, however, of diluting this credibility by attempting to cover all bases. ICSA should stick with its core business. Indeed, I see no reason why the ICSA should necessarily invite controversial group representatives to its conferences. Some will only try to disrupt and intimidate. Let those who specialise in access research invite representatives of controversial groups to their conferences. xxi

The ICSA should focus on its client groups—the anti-cult groups, the leavers, the cult-specific complaint groups, the counter-cult groups, and invite reputable scholars from the cult-research groups to contribute to the debate. In addition, ICSA should:

- foster scholars (on a multidisciplinary basis), specialising in leaver accounts;
- provide scholarships for researchers in this field;
- band leaver researchers together into a special academic network for methodological guidance and, not least, protection; and
- invite and fund official visitors, particularly public policy makers, to ICSA conferences. (If the Moonies can do it, so should the ICSA.)

The ICSA needs, in addition, to take a more proactive role in fertilising the blossoming of various types of watch-groups, by:

- keeping a comprehensive inventory of watch-groups worldwide,
- providing start-up kits, including standardised log-in sheets, standardised question forms for complainants, standardised information gathering and annual reporting criteria, and
- providing general conduct criteria for the guidance of watch groups.

In other words, the ICSA should not hesitate to assume a pivotal umbrella role for anti- and counter-cult watch groups, and it should seek to establish research-based groups that specialise in multidisciplinary leaver and cult-critic research. Perhaps the ICSA should look at establishing branch offices on every continent, with these offices possibly operating as specialist academic cult-research centres and maintaining close links to those watch groups that can play a pivotal role in the timely acquisition of information public policy makers need. We certainly need you!

### **Interfaith Rehabilitation and the Prerogative of Mercy**

It is occasionally noted in academic books on terrorism that amnesty programs have had some success in breaking the cycle of violence. For example, in 1990, Jerrold M. Post observed that

As important as it is to inhibit potential terrorists from joining terrorist groups, it is equally important to facilitate their leaving those groups ... Amnesty modelled after the highly effective program of the Italian government can contribute to that goal ... In the long run the most effective way of countering terrorism is to reduce external support, to facilitate pathways out of terrorism, and, most important, to reduce the attractiveness of the terrorist path for alienated youth. xxii

With respect to facilitating pathways out of terrorism, it seems to me that governments need to pursue decisive, circuit-breaking policies that reach out to potential leavers, facilitate their rehabilitation, and most importantly, send a strong message to others that they too can come in from the cold. In Australia, the case of Jack Roche is an example, in my view, in which such an opportunity was not taken, although it is never too late to re-evaluate policy.

Jack Roche is a convert to Islam who fell in with some unsavoury characters. He subsequently became indoctrinated into such a deviant stream that he was persuaded that it was a good idea to case the Israeli Embassy in Canberra and the Israeli Consulate in Sydney for

a proposed terrorist attack under the direction of al Qaeda. Somewhere along this path, Jack Roche resolved to phone ASIO to “volunteer information about his travel to Afghanistan and possible Australian links to al-Qaeda.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Apparently he left messages, but they didn’t get back to him! Thankfully, the mission was aborted, and he was later arrested, charged, and sentenced by a state court to nine years in prison with a four-and-a-half-year nonparole period, despite a letter from the federal authorities attesting to the fact that he had cooperated with investigations.

While providing a straight amnesty or pardon for an indoctrinated and bewildered follower such as Roche would be politically unthinkable (a large proportion of the Jewish and wider community would be understandably outraged), I believe that a creative form of sentencing and program of inter-faith rehabilitation would be an appropriate path to take. A course of rehabilitation (re-education, if you like), involving a committee of Imams, Rabbis, and other faith leaders, cooperating to take Jack Roche into hand and pointing out the error of his former deviant thinking, as well as educating him into the possibilities of interfaith tolerance, might well be appropriate. As a follower who had already exhibited serious doubt about the course he had embarked upon, he would probably be receptive to this approach and would perhaps provide an important role model for other recanters.

I believe that the federal Minister for Justice has power to offer the prerogative of mercy in special cases. If mercy could be extended conditional on a program of rehabilitation that actively involved members of his targeted community, perhaps with a form of continuing detention commensurate with this objective, I think this approach would be well worth considering. Religious figures with a thorough understanding of the complexities of cults, sects, and/or new religious movements would be well placed to take the lead in this sort of interfaith rehabilitation exercise.

### **Monitoring Religious Groups**

When I first sought an inquiry into cults in the NSW State Parliament in 1992, I had a perception that there was a difference between groups pejoratively described as destructive cults and genuine or authentic religions. To my

mind, the term *cult* conveyed negative connotations and should attract government concern, whereas *religion* was something beneficial and positive, probably deserving of government support. However, in the course of researching my doctoral dissertation, I came to understand that cults and religion form part of the same continuum, particularly for the purposes of legal definition, which has profound public-policy implications.

As in Japan, where the 1995 sarin gas attacks led to a fundamental rethinking in the way in which the state privileges and monitors religious entities, and where post-Aum amendments have been made to the Religious Corporations Law of 1951, "which presumes religions' potential to do harm and casts the state as a monitor of religion to protect the populace," the 9/11 tragedy has similarly resulted in a greater awareness throughout the world of religions' potential to do harm. Although this is often perceived by liberal academics to be a negative and unfortunate trend, which may have an unfair impact upon benign or beneficial religious groups, I see it as a healthy scepticism that legitimately questions the hitherto sacrosanct and privileged position of religions howsoever defined—and particularly because the concept is so loosely defined.

But just how do we go about monitoring religious groups that have the potential to do harm? This in an era in which lawyers are preoccupied with debates about international human rights and religions have managed to get widespread support for the notion that they deserve especial protections and privileges from the state—a form of special pleading that goes well beyond the freedom of an individual to believe in and practice a religious faith. At the pointy end of concern, governments have shown little hesitation after 9/11 in proscribing religious groups designated "terrorist." Hence, in Australia, for example, we have new legislation under which a number of undeniably religious groups have been designated "terrorist" and have been banned. All sorts of serious criminal offences are incurred for membership in or dealings with these groups. The Australian Attorney-General has claimed in support of harsh security laws that the basic right to security is a fundamental right that trumps other rights.

Conversely, there has been only cautious movement to seek to monitor the myriad not-for-profit religious organisations that benefit from government largesse in the form of tax-exempt status and a myriad other perquisites yet are hardly accountable at all to the general public from who they derive their financial support. <sup>xxiv</sup> With respect to the United States, a contributor to the *Cultic Studies Review*, Christopher Centner, has written that

The United States is very circumspect about monitoring religious movements. The Constitution makes faith an individual choice not subject to government scrutiny. Consequently the intelligence community does not monitor religious movements, nor would it be feasible to do so. It monitors terrorist groups and calls them such only when they enact violence. Americans cannot expect their government to detect potentially violent religious movements early in their development. The academic community might, however, be well positioned to warn the government when a religious or ethnic movement is moving toward violent action.

<sup>xxv</sup>

If this constitutionally required circumspection is impregnable, that is unfortunate for the United States—although there is a world of difference between covert surveillance of specified targets and general indirect monitoring based on a regulatory regime that does not target any specific religious group and operates to protect the integrity of all groups.

I believe that Australia does not have the same constitutional impediments as the United States, such as they might be, although a certain amount of sensitivity to religious paranoia is a prudent political choice. In any event, I support an indirect form of scrutiny that does not involve the type of intrusive surveillance that one might expect of intelligence agencies. Surveillance is resource intensive, both in personnel and equipment, and certainly not a feasible means of achieving coverage without the type of pervasive state apparatus associated with totalitarian regimes.

In addition, despite some claims of past success, from my own observation of the tin-pot, hand-to-mouth nature of most academic research units in the social sciences (notwithstanding the brave efforts of many researchers), I don't believe the academic community is in a position, without government structural assistance, to provide the type of effective forewarning system that might be hoped for. xxvi However, a great deal might be achieved by government in partnership with the academic community, and in particular the international network of cult-watch groups and academics presently operating under the informal leadership of the ICOSA.

The imperfect but promising working model I examined for my doctoral dissertation is the Charity Commission for England and Wales, which provides a gate-keeping model for the admission or otherwise of third-sector groups to the nirvana of tax-exempt and government-favoured status. It also provides some mechanisms for the disqualification of groups previously admitted, although, in my view, both these functions would be improved with a more straightforward mechanism for the receipt of objections and complaints about privileged groups.

In the course of my research, I came across an interesting observation from a member of the Legislative Council of the parliament of the state of Victoria in Australia. In 1982, the Honourable Haddon Story noted that

there is a large file in the Attorney-General's Department of complaints about all sorts of sects or pseudo-sects in the State, and about the harm that can be caused to people who allow themselves to be "sucked in" by them, to their detriment. No country that I know of has been successful in finding a formula for dealing with these sorts of problems. xxvii

A formula has been elusive because in a contest between damaged individuals and organisations claiming religious status, the political process tends to favour the organisation and the so-called human-rights lobby tends to favour the freedom of religious groups to exploit individuals over the rights of complainants—such is the nature of politics. However, now that the propensity for some religious groups to do harm has been well and truly scorched onto the

psychology of the West, it is time to lobby for the establishment of regulatory frameworks for third-sector entities that deal with these complaints in a serious and systematic way.

When a nascent religious organisation wishes to claim third-sector privileged status, a system of notification advertising for objections should be implemented, with an adjudicative process established to deal appropriately with any complaints. The same avenue for complaint should be facilitated with respect to existing religious groups that enjoy a financially privileged status. Any adjudicative system, whether it is a judicial, or quasi-judicial tribunal, or another administrative commission, should be supported with a research arm to advise on the level of complaint relative to the statistical size of an organisation. Advice could also be provided on the seriousness and frequency of such complaint. Of course it goes without saying that instead of sitting in departmental files, any evidence of criminal activity should be referred to the appropriate policing authority for immediate action.

### **Conclusion**

Cult-watch groups can only be effective as pathways for complaints and intelligence; they can only serve their purpose if they continue to criticise deviant religious practices, obnoxious movements, and charlatans with maximum freedom of speech. I note with concern the sometimes well-meaning moves to restrict free speech with respect to religions, of which cults, sects, and new religious movements form an inseparable part so far as legal definitions of religion are applied. Hence, moves at the UN level to devise a code of conduct for what can be said about religion are really attempts to institute blasphemy laws all around—a trap that religious vilification laws can so easily fall into. Now we have Islamic clerics in Australia pushing for new laws to “criminalise the mockery of religious prophets.”<sup>xxviii</sup> But one man’s prophet is a conman to another. To the contrary, what is really needed is a genuine undertaking by religious groups to devise codes of conduct for themselves so as to eliminate unacceptable religious practices and to deal by exclusion with those intolerant religious groups that persist in aberrant behaviour. The way in which religions respond to apostates and critics is one aspect that requires

guidance for appropriate norms of behaviour. I note that Dr. Thiessen is scheduled to present at this conference on the need to define precise criteria to distinguish between ethical and unethical proselytising. It is this type of detailed examination that should recommend itself to public policy makers.

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## Notes

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i Ian Freckelton, "'Cults,' Calamities and Psychological Consequences," *Psychiatry, Psychology, and Law* 5, no. 1 (1998). pp. 3-4.

ii Sect—'A body of persons adhering to a particular religious faith. . . a group regarded as deviating from the general religious tradition

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or heretical,' Macquarie University, *The Macquarie Dictionary* (Sydney: Macquarie Library Pty Ltd, 1981).

iii Even to the extent that the Australian government is actively considering the use of deprogramming for terrorists, "Abbas Happy to Deprogram Aussie Terrorists," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 March 2006, "Australian Government Considers De-Programming Terrorists," *The Age*, 9 March 2006, Patrick Goodenough, "Can Terrorists be 'Reprogrammed'?" *CNSNews.com*, 10 March 2006.

iv Francis Fukuyama, *After the Neocons* (Allen & Unwin, 2006).

v Daniel Benjamin & Steven Simon, *The Next Attack: The Globalization of Jihad* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 2005). P. 112.

vi Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2005). pp. 178-179.

vii It is incredible that Zarqawi's touted successor, Abu Mustafa, was detained in Abu Ghraib in 2004, where he reportedly 'joined a prison yard religious school which, the cleric in charge openly admitted, taught not just the Koran but holy war.' Michael Ware, "Zarqawi Disciple Ready to Fill Void," *Weekend Australian*, 10 June 2006. In 1994 Zarqawi and his colleague Al-Maqdisi commandeered a dormitory of Swaqa prison in Jordan, where they proceeded to indoctrinate political prisoners and isolated them from other inmates, Paul McGeough, "The Making of a Monster," *Goodweekend: The Sydney Morning Herald Magazine*, 16 October 2005. p. 23.

viii Tom Allard, "Citizen to Terrorist a Quick Step: ASIO Chief," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 March 2006.

ix I agree with my former parliamentary colleague Petro Georgiou that key components of Australian multiculturalism are a valuable resource in the so-called war on terrorism, Petro Georgiou, "Multiculturalism and the War on Terror," *AustralianPolicyOnline*, 20 October 2005.

x Sharon Churcher, "suicide Bomber Cried for Sept 11 Victims," *Daily Telegraph*, 18 July 2005.

xi James Button, "London Bomber Slipped the Net Twice Before," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 July 2005.

xii Michael D. Langone, "Assessment and Treatment of Cult Victims and Their Families," in *Innovations in Clinical Practice Vol 10* (Sarasota, Florida: 1990).

xiii For example, 'the equally perturbing rise of anti-cult groups which are just as threatening as the cults from which they profess

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to rescue people' is noted in Lynne Hume, "Witchcraft and the Law in Australia," *Journal of Church and State* 37 (1995). p. 145.

xiv Radio National, What Makes a Suicide Bomber? *Geraldine Doogue Interview with Walid Ali* (ABC Online 16 July, 2005).

xv "Onus on Muslims to Stop Extremist 'Cults', Canadian MP Says," *Ottawa Citizen*, 10 June 2006.

xvi Rev Linda Fitzpatrick, Letter to NSW MPs, 21 April 1993.

xvii Rabbi Pinchos Woolstone, Letter to the author, 27 April 1993.

xviii 'Apostates: An Analysis', in *Freedom*, Vol. X Issue X, (Sydney, Church of Scientology, 1995). p. 12.

xix Robert Manne, "The Unknown Story of Cornelia Rau," *The Monthly Essays*, September 2005.

xx Eileen Barker, "Harm and New Religious Movements (NRMs): Some Notes on a Sociological Perspective," *Cultic Studies Review* 2, no. 1 (2003). p. 3.

xxi AFF (ICSA) claims that 'unlike most academic researchers who study new religious movements,' it 'works cooperatively with activist organisations—small and large—around the world. Unlike most of these activist organisations, however, AFF is open to dialogue with cultic groups and academic researchers not focused on harm.' Michael D Langone, "Cults and Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Pre-Proposal for Avoiding Future Carnage," (Bonita Springs: AFF (ICSA), 2004).

xxii Jerrold M Post, "Terrorist Psycho-Logic: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Psychological Forces," in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, Walter Reich (Ed.). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). p. 40.

xxiii ASIO, "Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Report to Parliament 2003–2004," (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2004). p. 16.

xxiv The Australian government has recently implemented an endorsement process so that third-sector organisations wishing to access categories of tax benefits must register with the Australian Business Register.

xxv Christopher M Centner, "Cults and Terrorism: Similarities and Differences," *Cultic Studies Review* 2, no. 2 (2003).

xxvi Even if those involved in the study of new religious movements were able to agree on a prognosis.

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xxvii Victoria Legislative Council, "Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)," (Melbourne: Victoria Parliament, 1982). 24 June. pp. 1857–1858.

xxviii Richard Kerbaj, "Imam's Secret Talks for Future," *Weekend Australian*, 17 June 2006.

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