

***The Rise and Fall of a Public Witch Hunt:
Changing Media Attitudes to New Religious Movements Since 1988***
By Suzanne Evans

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[\[Listen to Hare Krishna Chant\]](#)

You might think I recorded this last Saturday morning on Oxford Street, central London, but in fact I captured these sounds on The Arbat, in central Moscow, in 1988, the year INFORM was founded. By this time, ISKCON had found itself at the centre of various scandals concerning sex, drugs and firearms and there had been internal power struggles. A case involving allegations of brainwashing had gone to the US Supreme Court - ISKCON lost – and the movements admitted to child abuse in its boarding schools in India and America. The exotic beliefs, dress and shaved heads of members of the Hare-Krishna movement gave obvious fuel to the criticisms of the anti-cult movement, as did the rigorous lifestyle demands made on devotees which, it was alleged, led to sleep and food deprivation. Hours of daily chanting started at 4am, and devotees were required to give up meat, fish, eggs, alcohol, tobacco, sports, games and sex except for procreation within marriage. Inevitably, ISKCON's street fundraising techniques were questioned, as was the end destination of monies supposedly going to charity. .

Today, in Britain – and I will be focussing on Britain for this talk - ISKCON has the ear of government through The Hindu Forum, the umbrella body members of the movement set up in 2004, and ISKCON members have been the driving force behind the creation of Britain's first state-funded Hindu school, set to open in September this year. Although the Krishna-Avanti school in Harrow, north London, alarmed other Hindus when it outlined a strict, clearly ISKCON-centred admissions policy it was subsequently forced to change on the grounds it would effectively bar Hindu children from non-ISKCON families, ten places are still to be reserved each year for children nominated by Bhaktivedanta Manor, ISKCON's UK HQ. This all strikes me as quite a coup for a group once labelled a 'destructive cult!'

This remarkable story of change and rehabilitation came about I believe primarily because ISKCON managed to secure the backing of the mainstream British Hindu

community when the future of the Janmashtami festival at Bhaktivedanta Manor was threatened. This skilful PR move gave the movement respectability. ISKCON have also managed to rehabilitate themselves because of a policy of general openness with the media, who are regularly encouraged to visit the temple.

However, other forces have also been at work to generally make stories about almost all cults less attractive to the media, and diminish their pariah-status in the public consciousness.

Back in 1988, the British media viewed 'cults' as almost literally the devil in disguise, potentially the greatest threat to the 'British way of life' since World War II.

Nobody liked them, except of course cult members themselves, who didn't believe they were in a cult, and had probably been brainwashed anyway, so their opinion hardly mattered. Cults were persona non grata in almost every section of society and the media at the time reflected this general social consensus.

The establishment saw cults as a challenge to conventional thought on matters such as education and family life, and a threat because of their strangeness and foreignness – the Unification Church for example, despite claiming to be anti-communist, was still seen as linked to communism because of its founder's birthplace. There were various calls in the 70s and 80s to legislate against them and the media reported with gleeful relish the fact that various cult leaders were banned from entering the country to corrupt the minds of our young people, and news that foreign nationals were refused permission to enter Britain to study Scientology.

The Church in particular took great exception to NRMs, especially those calling themselves Christian or using the word church in their names: The Children of God, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Unification Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Central Church of Christ, and so on – because they deviated from the norms of established Christian practice. And the influx of Eastern inspired philosophies into Britain through ISKCON, the teachings of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Sai Baba, the Bhagwan and the like, was deeply disconcerting to Christians who saw such movements not just as rivals to their own evangelical efforts, but in extremis, outright spinners of demonic lies. It was hardly surprising many anti-cultists were Christian.

Groups such as FAIR, The Cult Information Centre and the Deo Gloria Trust were extremely active, feeding the media a constant stream of what Shupe and Bromley¹ called 'atrocious tales;' stories of young people giving up their university degrees and future careers to shave their heads, don saffron robes, join a sex-cult or hippy movement, or of middle-aged family men and women handing over their children's inheritance to the Moonies, or the Divine Light Mission, or the School of Economic Science. And the dark shadow of suicide and brainwashing lay over each and every such media story. As Ian Haworth of the Cult Information Centre used to say, "there are three categories of religion – world religions, sects, which are spin offs of mainstream religions, and cults, which are the ones that use mind-control and brainwashing."

Of course, when these horror stories got in the press, they fuelled further anti-cult stories because, as James Beckford pointed out in his 1985 book *Cult Controversies*,² they had the unfortunate effect of convincing parents who had otherwise been fairly content with their son or daughter's participation in a particular movement to seek to remove them from it, in turn of course generating yet more negative publicity as they too unburdened themselves to journalists.

So all in all, the chance of NRMs having a good press in the 80s and 90s were about the same as the odds in favour of tomorrow's Daily Mirror launching a fund-raising campaign to boost the finances of poor old Heather Mills-McCartney.

Against this background, the anti-cultists were given an easy ride. For example, I recently re-watched a 1990 episode of *The Cook Report* called without any irony whatsoever, 'Kidnap,' in which the door-stepping investigative reporter praised the attempts of deprogrammers who had "devoted their lives to rescuing people from the clutches of cults," used words such as 'mind control' and 'brainwashing' without question, and justified enforced 'therapy' sessions lasting some 14 hours a day for up to three weeks on the grounds that this was apparently the only way "to administer an antidote to the poison that is (in this case) the London Church of Christ."

The launch of INFORM provided the media with a new, objective source of information, one for which many journalists were grateful – I certainly was - but

¹ Shupe, A.D. Jr and Bromley, D.G (1981) Apostates and atrocity stories: some parameters in the dynamics of deprogramming, in B.R. Wilson (ed.) *The Social Impact of New Religious Movements*.

others took a less than charitable view of the new organisation. Some journalists reported personal attacks made on Eileen Barker by anti-cultists who accused her of being a cult apologist in the pay of the Unification Church, for instance. Others simply couldn't understand INFORM's view given events at the time. While INFORM was suggesting cults should be called by the less derogatory term of New Religious Movements and that those who criticised them may have hidden agendas and could do more harm than good, Aum Shinri Kyo was bombing the Tokyo underground; David Koresh set in motion events that would lead to tragedy at Waco, members of Heaven's Gate hitched a suicidal lift on the back of the Comet Hale Bopp, and Joseph di Mambro and Luc Jouret led members of the Solar Temple to their deaths in Quebec and Switzerland.

The anti-cultists had the moral high ground and their human interest stories of family breakdown, financial misdemeanour and wacky beliefs certainly made far better media copy and were more easily reduced to soundbites than the reasoned, balanced arguments of INFORM.

To give you an example of just how easy a time the anti-cultists had, I recall being sent out to cover a story about an Australian father who had flown over to England to rescue his son from the Church of Scientology. I met the son at Saint Hill, the Scientologist's UK HQ in East Grinstead; he seemed extremely happy, perfectly in control of his own mind, and far from the brainwashed zombie the exit counsellor his father had hired would have us believe. Interviewing the exit counsellor, I asked her what I felt were perfectly fair questions - why, for instance, at 23 years of age, wasn't this 'child' entitled to go his own way without interference; was she aware of the damage forcible removal from cults could cause and wasn't she actually making matters worse by feeding the father a diet of anti-Scientology horror stories and driving a further wedge between them? The moment I switched off the tape, she went completely ballistic, said she'd never been asked such insulting questions by a journalist before - a comment that spoke volumes by itself - and telephoned my Producer to say she was withdrawing her permission to broadcast the interview and would sue the BBC if we did. My producer called the duty lawyer, who made it quite clear he didn't care two hoots about the exit counsellor's threats. Instead he insisted we drop the whole thing on the grounds the *Scientists* were so litigious!

² Beckford, James A. (1985) *Cult Controversies*.

Today, NRMs may not have a completely harmonious relationship with the media, but it seems to me the atmosphere between the two is certainly far less hostile. Among the journalists whose opinion I've canvassed on the matter was Jonathan Petre, a journalist at the Daily Telegraph for almost twenty years and until last week the paper's Religion Correspondent. I asked if he shared my feelings that cults were no longer such hot news: -

[\[Listen to audio – Jonathan Petre\]](#)

Jonathan Petre there with some very interesting points – how there are fewer flamboyant or scandalous charismatic leaders in evidence to interest the media; the improvements NRMs have made in their media handling; how they have - thanks in no small part to press attention I have to say - cleaned up their acts; and how journalists are better educated on the subject, thanks to the efforts of organisations such as INFORM.

There are many other reasons too for this change in media attitude to NRMs, some of which I'll mention briefly.

Clearly, the phenomenon of 'Pre-Millennial Tension' fuelled many cults and media attention on them. When nothing happened on 1st January 2000, there was perhaps a natural decline in interest among all parties. However, the world was said to have changed the following year and, I suspect, the most significant change in this story of diminishing media interest in cults was 9/11.

Overnight, the focus of world media attention when it came to religion was shifted almost totally and completely onto militant Islam. The fear that radical politicisation of a major, established world religion could be potentially transformed into a worldwide terrorist enterprise overshadowed and continues to overshadow any other religious topic of the day. I hope it doesn't sound too trite to say that from a media perspective, the issues surrounding NRMs might have looked almost petty in comparison to the potential threat from extremist followers of a faith supported by governments with nuclear capability, and one likely to become the world's largest religion by 2025.

Secondly, the dramatic changes seen in British society since INFORM was founded has surely had an impact on attitudes to NRMs. The 2001 census showed British

people are involved in over 170 different faiths – I suspect it is probably more now – and the Church no longer wields the authority or commands the respect it once did. And the weird and wacky ideas promoted by NRMs are now almost mainstream: -

- Britain now has the highest percentage of vegetarians in Europe, with claims that up to 2,000 a week are converting to a meat free diet
- We spent around £200 million on complementary and alternative therapies last year – 33% of us have tried at least one
- 47% of British women believe in telepathy
- A Nottinghamshire County Council poll found 45% believed in UFOs (70% of Americans believe)
- A quarter of us believe in reincarnation, and research by Petplan insurance found that 13% of pet owners even believe their pet has lived before

Also, social changes have meant that some criticisms made of NRMs no longer seem so serious. For instance: -

- Media stories of cults causing family breakdown are arguably not taken as seriously in an era when a quarter of all children live in single parent households and almost two in three marriages ends in divorce.
- The greatest threat to our personal finances now lies with spotting internet fraudsters who 'phish' our bank accounts and fleece even the not so gullible of thousands of pounds.
- A greater emphasis on personal freedom means as long as we act of our own free will, we can spend our money how we like, be it to leave our house to our grandchildren, give £1m to our local Chinese takeaway, or bequeath it to an Indian guru.
- All religion is being painted as deviant by an increasingly aggressive secularist movement
- All religions are now protected by religious hatred legislation and all of us, especially the media, has to be much more careful.

And of course more widespread and less individually-centred social problems such as binge drinking, drug abuse, paedophilia, teenage stabbings are currently the major headline grabbers. The media agenda has moved on.

In fact, when what could be called anti-cult coverage does occur within the mainstream press now, it seems usually to be targeted towards much older NRMs, such as the current news concerning sexual abuse of children at the Mormon temple in Texas; or towards offshoots of established religious groups, such as the Russian doomsday sect slowly emerging from their hideout in a cave near the Volga river. Certainly, when Aquarius PR launched a website for former Jehovah's Witness recently, www.exjw-reunited.co.uk we managed to secure considerable and completely positive coverage by building on stories around the blood transfusion issue, which of course most non JW's think is completely irresponsible.

So, the conventional print and broadcast media may have moved on to new targets, but the media battle is certainly not over for NRMs. They are still warring with their traditional adversaries - ex-members, the families of members, churches, and so on, and the arguments have changed very little. Still there are allegations of brainwashing, financial duplicity, family break-up, etc. but now the battles are fought on the new media of the internet.

The internet has proved a double edged sword for NRMs. As a world-wide, easily accessible information marketplace, it has proved an invaluable tool for religions labelled cultic to fight back with their version of 'The Truth' or simply just fight back. One excellent example of this is how Scientologists used You Tube to great effect after they felt they had been stitched up by Panorama, BBC1's flagship investigative news programme – see

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxqR5NPhtLI&feature=related>

By broadcasting the astonishing footage of reporter John Sweeny losing it big time, Scientologists quite effectively pre-empted any damage the programme could do, destroying its credibility even before those of us who know anything about NRMs realised what a pretty dreadful and poorly researched programme it was anyway.

And many NRMs use the internet very effectively as a marketing tool. You can now take the famous Scientology personality test online, for instance (at <http://www.oca.scientology.org/>), but you do still have to hand over your name and address and you have to contact your nearest Church of Scientology to get the results!

On the other hand, the nature of the internet means NRMs struggle to have control over what is written about them on the net. You cannot deal with the internet in the same way as the conventional media. Sticking with the example of Scientology, the church has attempted to deal with negative online postings in much the same way as it attempted to deal with print and broadcast media organisations, by threatening legal action. Most recently, Wikileaks, www.Wikileaks.org, the website that publishes anonymous submissions and leaks of sensitive corporate and government documents, was the subject of threats from the Church of Scientology, which said “unpublished and copyrighted “Operating Thetan” documents must be removed from the site immediately or an injunction would follow. Wikileaks responded, perhaps unsurprisingly, with a statement stating: "in response to this attempted suppression, Wikileaks will release several thousand additional pages of Scientology material next week."

So, to sum up, I believe the mainstream British media is much less interested in at least the ‘older’ NRMs that hogged the headlines when INFORM was founded, although as Eileen pointed out yesterday, there is still huge interest in newer issues such as Islamic fundamentalist groups and ‘witch-child’ stories connected with the black churches. However, the modern media has never had a great deal of respect for religion of any kind, and as the national newspapers and broadcast increasingly hire non-religious specialists to report on religious news – there are currently only two dedicated religion correspondents working on our daily national newspapers - no one with a reputation to protect in this field - can afford to be complacent.

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