

The mass media and New Religious Movements

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Introduction

One of the reasons why some rationalists dislike religion is that it is apparently inseparable from violent conflict. The history of religious wars in Europe and Latin America in particular has often served as a justification for abandoning religion altogether. In fact, many heirs of the various Enlightenments have confidently believed that the demise of religious belief and practice would entail a lessening of social conflict. Indeed, there is an expectation that religion will cease to be a source of conflict in a largely secular society. I want to argue, on the contrary, that the very opposite has occurred in countries where reported levels of religious beliefs and belonging have been declining for many decades but where unconventional New Religious Movements have developed.

My argument is paradoxical. It suggests that some aspects of religion have become more controversial and conflictual for the very reason that general levels of religious understanding and practice are so low. Unconventional forms of religion have become especially problematic at a time when large numbers of people find even the most conventional religious groups which encounter most hostility. In their turn, these controversial groups have sometimes exacerbated matter by responding with even more hostility toward their detractors. This vicious spiral has occasionally erupted into massive conflicts and bloodshed. Jonestown in 1978 and Waco in 1993 are the most tragic examples. But I believe that there are also echoes of this process to be heard in the suspicious frequently voiced by the nominally Christian public in the UK about non-Christian minorities. Tariq Modood's characterization of this phenomenon as "cultural racism" is challenging in conflicts involving so called cults. i.e. those New Religious Movements (NRMs) which have been outstandingly controversial since their emergence in the West in the 1960s. A central theme will be that there are connections between the low-level prejudice displayed against so-called cults in everyday journalism and the spectacular conflicts which erupt from time to time around controversial NRMs.

Controversial cults

It is not difficult to see why many of the NRMs which emerged in the USA and Western Europe in the 1960s, such as Scientology, the Unification Church ("Moonies"), the International Society for Krishna Consciousness ("Hare Krishna") and the Children of God (now called "The Family"), quickly became controversial. First, the simple fact that so many of them seemed to arrive at roughly the same time was enough to persuade some people that a new 'invasion of the body snatcher' had occurred. Second, the movements which drew on Asian philosophies and cultures tended to arouse suspicions merely for being foreign and therefore perceived as threatening. Third, the people who were targeted by the new movements were mainly young, relatively well educated, middle-class students. They were not down-and outs or obviously deprived. This meant that their

aggrieved relatives and former friends tended to have the money, connections and confidence required to make their complaints heard in centres of influence and power, at least at local levels.

The list of complaints began to emerge in the early 1970s to combat what they considered to be a major menace to young people. Allegations of economic exploitation, mental cruelty, the deliberate alienation of recruits from their families, deceptive recruiting practices, harmful diets and life-styles, sexual abuse and, of course, brainwashing were widespread. The high-water mark of anti-cult feeling probably occurred in the late 1970s following the death of more than 900 followers of the Revd Jim Jones at Jonestown, Guyana. This was also the period of the most rapid growth in membership of the most notorious cults.

Yet, for all the hostility and suspicion expressed toward NRMs at that time, only a tiny proportion of the population of any Western country had ever had any direct contact with any of the movements. Of course, some people came to know about them in the course of trying to 'rescue' relative or friends from the movements' clutches. But very few people attended NRM meetings or read their literature. Nevertheless, the movements' notoriety was confirmed many times by opinion polls which showed cult leaders to be among the most strongly disliked celebrities of their time.

My own research into cult controversies was able to confirm that even people directly affected by NRMs relied for their information overwhelmingly on the mass media. Very few people managed or tried to contact the movements directly. Instead, they preferred to contact journalists who had published stories about the movements. Indeed, the secretiveness or defensiveness of most controversial cults helped journalists to play a crucial role as go-betweens and arbitrators between NRMs, their members and angry outsiders. Only ex-members could rival the privileged position of a few investigative journalists; but most ex-members were understandably reluctant to talk freely about their former commitments. In these circumstances, the role of groups in the anti-cult movement (ACM) has assumed significant proportions. Cult controversies cannot be properly understood unless the symbiotic relationship between these anti-cult groups and journalists is taken into account. In the cases of France and Switzerland, for example, the tendency has been for the mass media to reflect the views of the ACM or of lawyers rather than of relevant academic experts. The same point has been made about Australia and the USA.

The anti-cult movement

Some anti-cult movement organizations have become influential and powerful enough to have the sympathetic ear of politicians, leading church representatives and sections of the medical and psychiatric establishments. National-level organizations have consolidated themselves, and cross-national links are slowly emerging. In short, today's ACM is much more substantial and effective than the predominantly conservative evangelical counter-cult movement directed against sectarianism and marginal versions of Christianity. Moreover, Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists, for example have always been the target of critical attacks mounted by representatives of mainstream churches, and these large sectarian organizations have also had to contend with the aggressive criticism

that disgruntled ex-members have showered on them. Yet, these 'established sects' have rarely had to cope with the incessant barrage of highly public and politicized attacks that the ACM now routinely directs against NRMs.

The fact that the ACM's dismissal of NRMs is not based on primarily theological considerations and that the aim is not usually to convert members into mainstream Christians enhances the movement's appeal to journalists. The latter find the ACM useful precisely because it attacks the very existence and *modus operandi* of NRMs without appearing to draw on religious' intent or any animus against religion as such. They prefer the strategy of exposing alleged illegality and exploitation in NRMs. In other words, the critics' aim is to disqualify 'cults' from the category of 'religion' altogether, thereby framing cult-related problems as 'economic', 'political' or 'psychological'. The media hysteria that surrounded the rumour of the suicide of members of the Great White Brotherhood in the Ukraine in November 1993 reflected a closely related aspect of journalism, namely, ignorance or misunderstanding of NRMs' teachings. Borenstein explains clearly how journalists and critics of cults' mistook some obscure statements made by Maria Devi Khristos, the movement's self-proclaimed Messiah, as evidence of suicidal intentions. There were also wildly inaccurate estimates of the number of her followers. Ironically, conspiracy thinking seemed to pervade the movement and its critics, for:

Like the White Brotherhood, the cult's critics were more than willing to assume that 'dark forces' were secretly working toward mysterious ends. At the same time that the journalists marveled at young people's capacity to accept the [movement's] doctrine...the majority of the reporters who covered the phenomenon proved only scarcely less prepared to suspend their belief.

Nor was the misunderstanding confirmed to Ukrainian and Russian journalists. The same mistakes were reproduced by writers for the *New York Times* and *Le Figaro*.

As I argued earlier, part of the success of the ACM is due to the high degree of religious illiteracy or the simple lack of familiarity with things religious among the nominally religious sections of most advanced industrial societies. It can therefore trade on fear of the unknown at a time when so few young adults have any experience of 'normal' religion with which they can realistically compare NRMs. As a result, it is not difficult to catch the popular imagination with allegations of a sci-fi nature about the supposedly weird and dangerous goings-on inside cults. Journalists find this approach to NRMs virtually irresistibly, even though, according to McDonnell, 'Religion does not fit easily into the dominant world-view of most contemporary broadcasters who are often ill prepared to deal with religion, being indifferent, or occasionally, actively hostile.' At least, sensational stories about NRMs require no knowledge of religion on the part of journalists, readers or audiences. The focus on the non-religious aspects of the movements means that there is no need to tackle issues of religious belief or experience. And the parallels that are emphasized with stories of fraud and exploitation in politics, business and crime provide the audience with a recognizable script. In short, the ACM presents journalists with material which needs very little adaptation before it can be easily digested by consumers with little taste for religion - let alone religious controversies. In this sense, it is not difficult for journalists to deal with religion,

especially when they concentrate on expressions of religion which challenge or lie outside the scope of conventional ideas or practices. Indeed, the very controversial character of some religious phenomena is helpful to journalists because conflict can easily be made to serve as the thematic 'line' of a story. Thus, although journalists may feel uncomfortable having to report on, for example, angry protests against publication of Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, which call their own professional objectivity into question, the story-line conforms readily with the 'script' of social and cultural conflicts.

Before I analyse the ways in which the mass media's tendency to portray NRMs as controversial helps to generate and perpetuate conflict I should like to insert a note of caution. I want to warn against a tendency which is marked in some academic writing about NRMs. There is a tendency to discuss NRMs in isolation and to overlook the fact that many other social phenomena, including other religious phenomena, are also reported unfairly in the mass media. For example, Meg Carter's (1995) feature article in the Independent on the growth of independent religious broadcasting stations in the United Kingdom claimed that journalists and programme-makers tend to be biased against religion. She quoted a spokesperson for Ahmadiyya Muslim TV as claiming that, 'Only extremist ideas are newsworthy to mainstream media.' The same article also explains that this exclusive concern with extremism has made religious organizations defensive about journalists. According to Francis Goodwin, the founder of Christians in Media, 'There is a paranoia because nine-tenths of churches' contact with the media comes when they are caught on the back foot, defending themselves against something in the News of the World.'

There is nothing particularly new about the claim that the media portrayal of virtually all religion tends towards the sensational, but the point needs emphasizing here for two reasons. The first is that an exclusive focus on the tribulations of NRMs runs the risk of sounding like one-off special pleading or whingeing on their behalf. This only reinforces the impression that NRMs are deviant and therefore in need of special treatment. The second reason for not isolating NRMs for analytical purposes is that comparison with journalists' treatment of other phenomena can strengthen the case for demanding more professional conduct from them. Comparative studies of the media's portrayal of NRMs and of other controversial phenomena might be rewarding.

Let me give a comparative example. It is well known that journalists' reporting of crime and of court cases is uneven. Careful empirical research conducted in Scotland confirmed that a major distortion takes place: crimes involving physical violence are over-represented in Scottish newspapers by 13 per cent. Most other types of crime are under-represented in newspaper reports. The conclusion is that journalists are selective about crime reporting and significantly biased towards the reporting of crimes of violence and indecency. We need to bear these, and similar, findings in mind when considering the unquestionably unfair reporting of NRMs' activities. Sensationalism is not the exclusive preserve of 'cult controversies'.

The portrayal of NRMs in the mass media

Conflict and newsworthiness

The most elementary observation about print and broadcast media's portrayal of NRMs is that the movements' activities are newsworthy only when conflicts are involved. In the quarter of a century that I have been studying NRMS in Western Europe, North America, and Japan, I have rarely found articles or programmes which did not use conflict as (a) the main occasion for portrayal and (b) as the principal means of structuring the account. Even those accounts which aspire towards a balance, i.e. two-sided, presentation of the issues tend nevertheless to allow the conflictual aspects to predominate. 'Cults are problematic' is the inescapable refrain of this type of journalism. The audience very rarely has the opportunity to receive information about NRMs which is unrelated to conflict concerning one movement is pounced on as an excuse for investigation all the other movements in the catch-all category of 'cults'. The aftermath of Waco was full of stories along the lines of the *Boston Globe's* 'If you think Waco, Texas was bad, consider who could be next'.

These stories about the so-called cult menace are as much about speculation as about news. They use events relating to one particular movement as a platform from which to launch 'scare' stories about the possible threat that the entire category of cults represents for other people in other places. This was an especially noticeable feature of reporting in Western European papers about the siege at Waco. In the absence, day after day, of new facts about the Branch Davidians, journalists from various countries turned to the questions of whether the authorities there ought to be taking pre-emptive steps to avert such a possibility. Opinions were divided, but the view which prevailed was that the problem of armed cultists was a uniquely American phenomenon. Nevertheless, there was also a strong note of warning against the risk of allowing a similar conflict to develop in European countries. Vigilance was the order of the day. The virtual globalization of mass communications thereby helps journalists to frame NRMs as primarily conflictual even in countries where the movements are virtually unknown or unproblematic.

Conflict as the leitmotiv

Conflict is the leitmotiv which connects journalistic portrayals of NRMs. This is evident in the extensive use that journalists and programme producers make of the 'negative summary event'. This is the practice of creating continuity between episodic (especially slow-moving) stories by adding a capsule summary of the negative features of the phenomenon which is in focus. This reminds the audience of the sequence of reported events into which the current story can be slotted. It also stamps a particular 'mood' on the story even if the very latest episode has not been primarily about conflict. For example, brief news reports about NRMs' attempts to buy residential property or to open new centres are often accompanied by longer 'reminders' of the movement's past conflicts and problems. What should be the most bland and innocent new items are

thereby framed in a threatening fashion. And, according to Roland Campiche, a Swiss television channel opened its programme on 'cults' in January 1996 by insisting that everybody was directly affected by them because 'this can happen to you too'. In a detailed analysis of French-language media construction of 'cults', following the murder-suicide of members of the Order of the Solar Temple (OST) at Cheiry and Salvan, Campiche emphasized the indiscriminate way in which journalists used the term 'cult' and attributed mental instability to OST members without, however, stimulating a debate about the issues.

Cross-references to conflict

A third aspect of the journalistic construction of cult conflicts is that stories are frequently cross-referenced to other mass media items. TV programmes, for example, use still shots of newspaper and magazine headlines as devices for emphasizing shock and horror. Similarly, the still photographs of cult leaders which are sometimes used in TV programmes are shown staring out of the pages of the print media. Presumably the intention is to try to enhance the sense of realism and veracity by showing that stories about a particular NRM or leader have already appeared in the print media and must therefore be true. Since the information and images that are 'quoted' in this way between different stories and/or media tend to be overwhelmingly unflattering and critical, the effect is likely to reinforce the generally negative image of NRMs. In turn, this hardens public opinion against the movements and fuels the anti-cult campaigns. Yet, the extent to which the aftermath of the Aum Shinrikyo tragedy was reported in sensational and voyeuristic terms in Japan provoked critical responses, especially when television broadcasts repeatedly showed footage of the murder of one of the movements of one of the movement's top leaders at the hands of an assassin with gangster connections. There were also complaints about the fact that television broadcasts frequently gave opportunities for the movement's executives to proclaim their innocence to a public audience. Their appearances 'became so popular that fan clubs sprang up', according to Ishii.

An allied feature of the reporting of cult-related conflicts in which the journalists have difficulty gaining access to relevant material is that they tend to substitute their own operation for the ostensibly central subject. This was especially clear in the case of Waco where access to the Branch Davidian compound was denied to journalists. The focus of many stories therefore became the media circus on the compound's perimeter. The fact that so many journalists were present seemed to guarantee the importance of the event at moments when nothing significant appeared to be happening. Writing stories about the stories being written by other journalists took the place of direct reports on the siege of the Branch Davidians. Perhaps this practice also helps journalists to cope with the competition for customers between different publications or programmes. They can keep a story running despite the lack of directly relevant material.

Conflict feeds on stories of conflict

The next point is that, just as anti-cult activists commonly supply journalists with negative copy about NRMs, the hostile depictions of the movements in the mass media are then recycled as further evidence in the anti-cult propaganda campaigns. There is in fact a mutually beneficial and reinforcing dynamic at work. It is difficult for NRM leaders or for disinterested parties to break into this cosy circle in order to challenge or correct the dominant imagery. Given the public's heavy reliance on the mass media for information about unconventional religion, the close alliance between the ACMs and journalists makes it unlikely that non-controversial, neutral or favourable material about NRMs could be published or broadcast.

The logic of suspicion which turns many investigative journalists into allies of the ACM helps to set the scene for the official agents of control. Knowing that the public has a very poor opinion of NRMs, largely as a result of stereotyping in the mass media, police officers do not take much of a risk if they take high-handed action against these unpopular movements. Journalists function as the principal gatekeepers of public opinion especially on matters with which the person-in-interest is not normally familiar. Their overwhelmingly critical portrayal of the movements can therefore contribute indirectly towards the latter's control. Indeed, as many informed commentators on the debacle at Waco have pointed out, the FBI, the US Department of Justice, journalists and programme-makers all tended to favour the testimony of psychological experts whose anti-cult views were well known in advance. One of the many scandalous aspects of the whole affair was the studied refusal to give credence to the testimony of sociological, anthropological, historical and theological experts on controversial NRMs. Very few scholars with first-hand experience of researching these movements in their natural setting over many years would have advocated or supported the strategy and tactics adopted by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) and the FBI. Instead, the authorities gave credence selectively to opinions rooted in individualistic abnormal psychology. This is always newsworthy, as was shown by the all-consuming fascination with the psychological condition of David Koresh. By contrast, the strictly social dynamics of exclusive, high-demand religious groups and the cultural force of apocalyptic millennialism were absent from the mass media coverage. Similar observations have been made about the lack of attention to the view of relevant academic experts in media coverage of the Solar Temple deaths and the Heaven's Gate suicides.

Conflicts, journalists and control

If the mass media portrayals of NRMs, based mainly on the one-sided evidence supplied by activists in the ACM, are sufficiently numerous and disturbing, there is a strong probability that social control agents will have to be seen to respond. Legislators and police officials in particular find themselves under pressure to say what they intend to do about the alleged wrongdoings and outrages perpetrated by cults. 'Could Jonestown happen in Britain?' or 'what are you doing to prevent another Waco happening here?' are the kind of questions put with monotonous frequency to officials in the wake of those two

tragedies. Journalists seem to be relatively uninterested in the specific circumstances which led to such spectacular disasters. Instead, all the emphasis is on the *presumed and unquestioned* resemblance between the People's Temple or the Branch Davidians and 'cults' in the journalists' own countries. The authorities are forced to respond to these leading questions and are not given the opportunity to express doubts or reservations about the practice of 'lumping all cults together'.

This dramatization of the situation increases public nervousness and official defensiveness, neither of which is conducive to clear thinking and fairness. There is a danger, then, that inadvisable, panic reactions may follow. In the case of the Branch Davidians, for example:

The ante at Waco was upped because of the intervention of television reporting. Lives were endangered because the story line was created and embedded in a pernicious dualism which legitimated the 'authorities' and discouraged unconventional perspective and opinions. The shared mentality – the corporate mentality – was served as the cultural mainstream was reinforced, not challenged. Waco's Branch Davidians, then, were victims of a media-induced disaster, executed before the eyes of the nation on television. The polarization that led to the catastrophe at Waco was inherent in neither the religious group itself – nor even in the FBI.

Some commentators have blamed the editor of the *Waco Tribune-Herald* for running the first episode of a hard-hitting expose of the Branch Davidians immediately prior to the BATF's assault on the compound. This allegedly broke an agreement with the BATF to withhold publication: and it probably forced the Bureau to take its ill-conceived action earlier than it had intended. On the other hand, it seems that the FBI placed considerably tighter restrictions on journalists covering the siege than is normal in similar events. In other words, the trade-off between journalists and authorities worked to the greater advantage of the latter.

Not enough attention has been given to the consequences of sensationalist depictions of religion in a secular age. To adapt the old adage, I'm not trying to blame the messenger for bringing bad news but I *am* accusing the messenger of fermenting mischief by relentlessly peddling negative stereotypes of NRMs.

One conflict can hide another

Journalists' fascination with the tragedies of Jonestown and Waco stemmed not only from the exotic and improbable details of the two communities' ways of life but also from the suspicion that the cult controversies were only the tip of the iceberg. Investigative journalists had a field day with their inquiries into the possibility either that people in authority had bungled the operations to prevent loss of life and/or that attempts had been made afterwards to cover up the errors made by the forces of order. In other words, cult-related conflicts were connected with broader concerns about the use and misuse of state power. This was especially evident in journalists' accounts of the alleged

ineffectiveness of Japanese police attempts to collect to connect the Sarin gas attacks in the Tokyo subway system to the leaders of Aum Shinrikyo.

Other examples of stories linking cults with conflicts against the state include the bombing by police of the anarcho-ecology group, MOVE, in Philadelphia on 13 May 1985; the killing by police in 1983 of all six followers of Lindberg Sanders, a self-styled 'Black Jesus', in a shoot-out in Memphis; and various armed assaults on dissident Mormons in Utah. The result is usually a polarization of journalistic and public opinion between, on the one hand, the view that agents of the state acted negligently or illegally and, on the other, the view that the same agents should have acted more decisively to suppress the movement in question before the problem had become unmanageable by peaceful means. But the more general point is that it is invariably the conflicts associated with NRMs which make them newsworthy even when responsibility for the conflicts is attributable to the state.

An interesting twist on this theme quickly emerged in European print media accounts of Waco. The long and slow-moving story of the 51 day siege provided an opportunity for journalists to investigate in depth the issues of gun ownership and control in the USA. In fact, the amount of attention devoted to their context of the action taken against the Branch Davidians sometimes outweighed reports of events at Waco. The conflictual image of cults was thereby reinforced by linking them with a separated conflict about firearms. One conflicted was 'nested' in another.

Journalists and academic researchers

I now want to discuss some aspects of the relationship between journalistic and academic interest in NRMs. My remarks are an attempt to place mass media portrayals of the movements in a broader context in the hope that a clearer understanding will emerge of the differential difficulties facing journalists and academics. These two broad and heterogeneous categories of people have different and equally legitimate reasons for wanting to know more about NRMs. But it may be naïve and unhelpful to expect that they should share the same point of view or ultimately agree with on another.

The French statesman and scholar, Alexis de Tocqueville, was among the first to recognize in the mid-nineteenth century that newspapers, magazines and other printed media of communication would become more and more important to industrial societies. They would be important as replacements for 'parish pump politics' in an age of accelerating rates of social and geographical mobility. They would also act as a check on the power of politicians. They would therefore be essential to the stability and dynamism of democracy. But Tocqueville was equally far-sighted in his fears that the print-media might become an instrument of manipulation and tyranny. In fact, he had few illusions about democracy or about the temptations for democratic majorities to act and think in thoroughly oppressive and stifling ways. His only hope for the health of democracy rested on the criss-crossing, countervailing play of different interest groups and voluntary associations serviced by self-critical journalists and owners of the new media. No single group, majority or publication could be trusted to protect democracy from their separate selfish interests in controlling it.

Tocqueville's fears about the fragility of democracy have been echoed over the past 150 years by commentators from virtually every political persuasion. There is widespread agreement that free and lively media of mass communication are vital to the health of all societies. We are therefore in the debt of journalists. But, just as importantly, we must not become dependent on them. Non-journalists need to keep a critical distance from their work and to maintain a constant dialogue with them. Let me try to substantiate these general arguments by reference to the different interests that journalist and academic researcher typically have in NRMs. I shall analyse three dimensions on which the interests of journalists and researchers tend to be sharply different, whilst also insisting that each of these two categories of professional 'knowledge workers' is diverse.

Time

For a variety of good reasons, very few journalists can afford to work on items about NRMs for longer than each 'cult controversy' lasts. This is because the owners and manager of the mass media lose their audience if the focus is not kept on 'newsworthy' stories. NRMs are only newsworthy when a problem occurs. Scandals, atrocities, spectacular failures, 'tug-of-love' stories, defections, exposes, outrageous conduct – these are the main criteria of NRMs' newsworthiness. And they tend to generate news stories and television documentaries that present the issues in terms of a polarisation between favourable and unfavourable attitudes towards 'cults'. When the controversy has passed, the journalists usually have to move on to other stories. As Wright has argued, however, it is uncommon for journalists to report the concluding stages of stories which show that NRMs were not guilty of the criminal or immoral charges on which the stories were based in the first instance. He calls this 'front end/back end disproportionality'. As a result, the public rarely learns about the collapse of legal cases against NRMs or the withdrawal of accusations against them. The impression of guilt therefore lingers in public opinion. Exceptions may occur, of course, when a journalist takes time out, for example, to compile a book-length publication. But even then, the structure of journalists' book tends to reflect the same criteria of newsworthiness. And, of course, the unspectacular, non-sensational NRMs are permanently invisible in journalists' accounts.

Not only is the time that most journalists can afford to spend on 'cult' stories very limited but, equally important, there is formidable pressure on journalists and programme-makers to produce their work quickly in order to be competitive in the media market. They are under pressure to provide 'instant explanations'. Since they often lack the time to consult more than a few informants, it is understandable that they prefer the testimony of outspoken and willing informants who tend to take extreme positions either for or against NRMs. Journalistic stories have little place for reservations, nuances and careful comparison. But Silk (1995, 1997), Bunting (1997) and Dart (1997) have explained the difficulties facing journalists who write about any kind of religion, including NRMs. In each case the explanation refers to commercial pressures and the need for journalists to be responsive to fast-moving events.

By comparison, academic researchers who are professionally concerned with NRMs tend to be just as interested in them when no controversies are apparent as when there is clear evidence of problems. This greater continuity of interest is dictated by the

nature of scholar's interests and methods of research. They tend to ask questions about, for example, patterns of recruitment, retention and defection which can only be answered methodically on the basis of time-series data. Ideally, scholars also try to compare their operations in different countries, or to compare their operations in different periods of time. It is almost as if researchers considered the occasional cult controversy as a rude interruption of the routine life of NRMs – quite the opposite of most journalists. As a result, dull or boring NRMs could be just as exciting to academic researchers as the most eye catching cult. The public may interpret academic interests in NRMs as a form of appeasement or as ivory tower indifference. Neither interpretation is fair.

Objectivity

One person's objectivity is another person's bias. This is not a sign of cynical world – weariness on my part. It is a recognition that criteria of objectivity are variable and socially constructed. Everyone wants to be seen to be objective – but only in their own way.

How do journalists create objectivity? Their favourite strategy is to combine a dash of *vox populi* with a squirt of balance. The *vox pop* aspect usually consists of comments elicited from passers-by or by-standers. If these comments can be attributed to identifiable individuals, it heightens the appearance of verisimilitude and realism. Balance requires something more artful. It usually requires finding space for opposing views, in the belief that readers, listeners and viewers will mistake this adversarial structure for a representative sample of opinions. The journalist seems to have made obeisance to objectivity if a story or programme is not one-sided but two-sided. Arguments with more than two sides are usually considered too complicated for 'good' journalism. The inclusion of a non-committal contribution by an academic frequently serves as another journalistic device for constructing a kind of objectivity. It can be very uncomfortable being the filling in the sandwich!

There is no universally agreed version of objectivity among academics. And there are conflicts and tensions between academics about the objectivity of their work. But certain strategies are conventional. They include filtering out personal values and emotive language; basing findings on representative samples; comparing NRM members with matched samples of non-members; conducting research over relatively long periods of time; taking account of all available publications on a topic; and, in the sharpest contrast to journalists, participating in both mutual criticism and self-criticism. This list is far from exhaustive but it gives a clear enough indication of how academic researchers construct their versions of objectivity. It is unlikely that the items, individually or collectively, will be considered adequate grounds for objectivity in the eyes of non-academic critics.

Practical and theoretical interests

As I indicated above, NRMs are interesting to journalist by reason of their newsworthiness as deviant, threatening, or simply weird. 'Cult' is therefore a self-contained and self-standing category which is of interest to the mass media for its own

sake. Journalists need no other reason for writing about media for its own sake. Journalists need no other reason for writing about any particular NRM except that it is counted as a cult. This categorization is sufficient to justify a story, especially if the story illustrates many of the other components which conventionally make up the 'cult' category. This puts pressure on journalists to find more and more evidence which conforms with the categorical image of cults and therefore confirms the idea that a NRM is newsworthy to the extent that it does match the category. It is no part of conventional journalistic practice to look for stories about NRMs which do not conform with the category of cult. Nor do journalists methodically chart the activities of NRMs which never display supposedly cultic tendencies. Journalists are in the business of, among other things, 'moral gatekeeping'. Gatekeepers do not need to concern themselves with people whose right to pass through their gates is not in moral question.

Self-critical academic researchers, on the other hand, question why and how particular moral boundaries are established and protected. The fact that some NRMs are newsworthy because they act illegally or immorally is not in itself sufficient reason to study them. It is much more likely that NRMs will be of interest to researcher because they represent part of a broader, theoretically interesting topic. NRMs may challenge, for example, prevailing sociological ideas about secularization, the dilemmas of the liberal state, the limits of tolerance in democratic societies, the processes of religious conversion, the routinisation of charisma, and so on. In short, NRMs are interesting just as much for what they reveal about other aspects of society and culture as they are for what they reveal about themselves. And the interpretations that social scientists place on NRMs' activities are then subjected to constant criticism and testing.

Conclusion

The mass media can function as one of the vital foundations of healthy democracies. But it would be a mistake to forge that they can also serve the interest of dominant groups by stifling new ideas and change. This is why portrayals of NRMs in mass media tend to favour conservative, majoritarian distrust of novelty, dissidence, rebellion, or mere indifference. Nevertheless, journalists have on occasion played a significant role in exposing problems and scandals in NRMs and in putting pressure on errant movements to change their ways. Egawa Shoko, for example, is one of the few Japanese journalists who issued warnings about the dangerous aspects of Aum Shinrikyo at a time when academic observers saw few problems with the movement. It may also be true that 'While the more sensationalist sections of the media will continue to enjoy a "good" story, the more serious media have become more discerning of differences and have invited NRM representative to present their own case. Stuart Wright has also detected 'signs of improvement' in 'the general state of reporting on non-traditional religion'.

On the other hand, for the reasons that I have already discussed, the prevailing interest among journalists (or, at least, the owners and managers of the mass media) is not well adapted to the task of understanding NRMs as historically changing, but not always sensational, phenomena which reflect features of the societies and cultures in which they operate. In my opinion, the progressive growth of dispassionate, but compassionate,

understanding of NRMs as social and cultural phenomena which are related in complicated ways to other phenomena is also a contribution towards a better society.

It might be tempting to conclude that journalists and academic researchers should work together in the best of all possible worlds. But the imbalance of power between them is too great for this to succeed. No, my proposal is that democratic, open societies require critical and self-critical scholarship as a counterbalance to the commercial and political forces which drive even the best journalists to limit the scope of their work on NRMs. We should not pin our hopes on the search for common ground between journalist and academic researchers. Instead, we should concentrate on improving our objective understanding of NRMs. The challenge is to counterpose information based on careful, critical scholarship to the generalizations and stereotypical images which all too often pass for 'in depth' journalism.