

When Scholars Know Sin

Alternative Religions and Their Academic Supporters

By Stephen A. Kent and Theresa Krebs

Editor's note: On Saturday afternoon, May 23, 1998, during the Skeptics Society annual conference at Caltech—whose theme was understanding the role of religion and myths in modern culture—evangelical Christian author Richard Abanes launched a spirited attack upon an earlier speaker, religion scholar J. Gordon Melton. Abanes accused Melton of endorsing a religious organization known as The Family, whose activities involving sexual exploitation of members and their children made headlines in the 1980s. By immersing himself into numerous groups for years at a time in order to deeply understand their beliefs and customs, Abanes opined, Melton was co-opted by these religions not only to write positive evaluations, but also to come to their defense in their legal struggles. The article addresses the larger problem of scholars being co-opted by alternative religions.

WITHIN THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS questionable relationships have developed between social scientists and several controversial new religious groups—most notably The Family (formerly the Children of God [COG]), Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT), and Scientology. These organizations recognize that supportive social scientists are powerful allies in their efforts both to gain societal legitimacy and to silence critics. For their part, some social scientists appear to overlook their own unique position and value as legitimizing resources in the attempts by religiously ideological groups and their oppositional organizations to secure social recognition and acceptance. About this situation, Marybeth Ayella warns that “co-optation of the researcher can be a major problem for the unwary researcher, because he or she can become, without intent, a ‘counter’ in the ongoing stigma contest” between religiously ideological organizations and their countermovements (1990, 574; see also Robbins and Robertson, 1991).

With a critical eye toward recent events, this article examines research issues involving the scholarly study and public representation of some alternative religions. Specifically it argues that, on crucial social issues, controversial religious groups have courted researchers in order to enhance their public images, and some social scientists have participated in these efforts at the expense both of legitimate endeavors to advance knowledge according to accepted scientific standards of objectivity and of due attention to the use of their scientific expertise.

INTERFERENCE WITH ACADEMIC PUBLISHING

One vital aspect of science is that researchers must publish their results in peer reviewed journals or books. Research dissemination advances knowledge by allowing others in the field to receive, accept, replicate, or challenge the published findings. Interference in the peer review publication process is a serious act that threatens the

principles upon which modern science depends, especially because the appropriate scientific response to controversial research is to publish responses to it in the same or other scientific outlets. Recently, an academic article fell victim to publication interference by The Family with the collusion of one scholar (and probably a second) who had never read it.

The Family is an unorthodox Christian group based around the teachings of its founder, the late David Berg. In its early days in the late 1960s, members expected and even encouraged “persecution” from “the System,” which consisted of mainstream society, governments, and traditional religions (Wallis, 1981, 120, 126). After increasing criticism of the group during the 1980s and early 1990s over allegations of child sexual abuse (which led to controversial raids against Family homes around the globe), the organization undertook a campaign to represent itself as an orthodox, but persecuted, Christian religion. In doing so it began to protest “state sanctioned religious persecution” initiated by “[e]mbittered apostates and anti-cult organizations.” In order to emphasize its victim status, The Family’s self-description stressed its adherence to God’s Word upon which it based its self-described exemplary lifestyle and the socialization of the group’s children in a positive environment (World Services, 1993, 3).

Amidst The Family’s public relations campaign, one of the authors of this article (Stephen Kent, along with a former student) received publication acceptance of a lengthy study on the psychosexual history of David Berg in the annual, peer-reviewed publication, *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion (RSSSR)*. Several months before the release of the book, the publisher (JAI Press) mailed announcements of the forthcoming volume to academics and libraries around the world. An unnamed researcher, probably in the United Kingdom, received the notice, and alerted The Family.

As Kent was checking his page proofs, the publication’s editors informed him that an attorney representing The Family, a Family

spokesperson, and an American researcher all had sent letters objecting to the publication of his article (which the objectors had not read). The lawyer and The Family representative made vague overtures about a lawsuit. The American researcher, Mr. James R. Lewis, alleged "questionable" aspects of Kent's research on Berg, and also accused him of "violat[ing] professional ethics" (in Mobilio, 1994, 17). Remarkably, after alleging ethical problems with Kent's study, Lewis misrepresented his own credentials by identifying himself as "James R. Lewis, Ph.D.," even though he never completed his doctorate at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Indeed, at least three controversial religions and a professional colleague thought that Lewis had his doctorate (Church of Scientology International, [1994/1995?], [3], 67, 68; Church of Scientology International, 1995a, [3], 33, 35; Cult Awareness Network, [1996/1997]; *Royal Teton Ranch News*, 1994, 8; Scott vs. Ross, et. al. 1995a, 134).

The intervention worked. JAI Press did not have liability insurance, and over the objections of the editors and the University of Alberta Vice-President for Research, the publisher (Herbert Johnson) withdrew the Berg article as well as another on Scientology that the RSCSSR had accepted. Kent's university refused Johnson's peculiar offer to publish both pieces if it "assume[d] all legal costs emanating from [Kent's] writings and any consequences thereof" against JAI Press (in Mobilio, 1994, 18; see Johnson, 1993, 1). The fact that Kent had passed several university ethics reviews involving his research on the Children of God (Bridger, 1995) did not sway the publisher's decision, nor was Johnson moved to change his mind after Lewis withdrew his objections. The article (Kent, 1994) eventually appeared in *Cultic Studies Journal* without incident.

Correspondence from RSCSSR's coeditor, David Moberg, to Lewis in January, 1994, underscores the implications of researchers' alignments with religious groups as they attempt to control (with litigious threats) the dissemination of scientific findings in scholarly publications. It also raises the important issue that some social scientists' co-optation by such organizations results in their diminishing the public image of other academics who conduct critically

insightful and revealing research. Moberg's letter to Lewis reads:

If only those materials that shed *favorable* light on new religious movements (NRMs) are published, then scholarly publications cannot be trusted to give honest reports and appraisals that include their [NRM's] weaknesses and flaws alongside of their strengths and virtues. Before

long journalists, politicians, religious leaders, historians, and others would discover this bias, and then all of the pertinent journals, serials, and books with materials on NRMs would be suspected of seriously distorting everything they publish. *The integrity of the scientific study of religion is clearly at stake in these issues of censorship.* Are we scholars/scientists, or must we become mere propagandists? (in Editor's introduction to Kent, 1994, 137 [emphasis in original]).

Indeed, sociologist Irving Louis Horowitz expressed similar concerns in 1983 with respect to the "slippage into unabashed support for [groups]" and the quality of publications produced by academics who attended expenses-paid Unification Church (Moonie) sponsored conferences (Horowitz, 1983, 180).

BIASED STUDIES

At the same time that Lewis intervened in Kent's publication process in early March, 1993, he and various academics associated with his organization, the Association of World Academics for Religious Education (AWARE) were engaged in producing a publication to help The Family cultivate a positive public image. In January, 1993, Family representatives had contacted Lewis (as the Executive Director of AWARE) and another unnamed academic "seeking advice on how to combat the negative publicity and other attacks they felt certain would result from [the group's] bold new public stature" in the United States (Lewis and Melton, 1994b, vi). Already in other countries around the world, The Family had been trying to distance itself from its controversial sexual practices such as "flirty-fishing" (religious prostitution), sexual sharing among members, and sexual abuse of children (Ward, 1995). The resultant collection of essays published by Lewis and J. Gordon Melton, entitled *Sex, Slander, and Salvation*, became a volume that The Family touted as proof of its legitimacy and the group has



Illustration by Joe Lee

distributed copies to media in an attempt to gain favorable press. At least one academic, however, who reviewed the book saw it otherwise.

Robert Balch's book review identified this publication as an opportunity to raise the vital issue of bias among social scientists who publish similarly skewed portrayals of other groups (Balch, 1996, 72). Most importantly, Balch recognized the study's disregard for "[Erving] Goffman's (1959) work on impression management, which describes how group members engage in 'teamwork' to prevent 'leakage' of potentially discrediting information to outsiders (including, presumably, social scientists)" (Balch, 1996, 72).

Former members of The Family, as well as some of The Family's own publications, provide important insights into the group's "backstage" arrangements that went on prior to contact that AWARE researchers and others had with it. The Family invited academics and other "Systemites" to what it internally called "Media Homes" (Kent, 1996c, 68). A former member who was familiar with these homes described such a place as "basically a nice, squeaky clean, polished-up home [which was] about as polished as you can get" (Kent, 1996b, 157-158). Another former member reported that part of making "everything look as perfect as possible" at the Media Homes required "mega-preparation" such as moving out crowded children, removing bunkbeds from overcrowded bedrooms, and placing single mothers elsewhere (Kent, 1996a, 39-40). The same former member claimed that The Family "only kept the best PR people there...the people who were, you know, prepared to talk and, you know, knew how to talk and wouldn't, you know, slip up or whatever" (Kent, 1996a, 39). In order to avoid revealing sensitive information, Family spokespersons underwent intensive rehearsals of "questions and answers—what to say about this, what to say about that" (Kent, 1996b, 155). The Family even produced several booklets of anticipated questions along with appropriate answers and maintained strict security regarding which among its publications members could provide to "Systemites" for perusal (Family Services, 1989, 1992a, 1992b; Berg, 1983, 432-468).

Another way that The Family controlled information that researchers acquired was by destroying controversial sexual material involving children. In 1991 The Family's World Services department issued a directive entitled "The Pubs Purge," which ordered an "extensive purge of [particular] publications" by burning or blocking out portions "with ink or white-out as well as the specific pages that should be removed from within the remaining books" (World Services, 1991). The documents purge was not motivated by the organization's denunciation of Berg's teachings, but rather by the realization that these publications provided the group's critics with evidence that child/adult sex had been allowed. Consequently, the directive never acknowledged any harm from the sexual practices, but blamed the need for the purge on "them that [sic] are defiled & unbelieving" (World Services, 1991, 2). Not surprisingly, therefore, when AWARE researchers and others conducted their study of media homes and examined the group's publications in other Fam-

ily facilities, they found nothing amiss. One researcher contributing to the AWARE study, for example, stated that: "[a] study of a cupboardful of COG to Family literature was undertaken with the assistance of a YA [Young Adult] who pointed out important passages in the *Mo Letters*, the *Book of Remembrance* and the children's comic, *Life With Grandpa*" (Palmer, 1994, 9).

Other academics wrote general letters of endorsement for The Family (Palmer, 1993; Shepherd, 1993; World Services [1994b?]; [1994c?]) and spoke favorably about it on a video that the group used as another form of legitimization (The Family, 1994). Some of this questionable research is being incorporated, uncritically, into the wider academic literature on The Family's effects on its youth (Bainbridge, 1997, 224, 237).

During the early days of July, 1993, an AWARE-sponsored team, under the direction of Lewis and Melton, conducted a study of another controversial group, Church Universal and Triumphant. CUT needed some positive press, since the armaments that the Branch Davidians used against federal agents drew attention once more to the arsenal that CUT had amassed and on which the press had reported (Wiley, 1990; *Washington Post*, 1994, A4). Indeed, during the middle of AWARE's CUT study, local Montana newspapers carried articles that outlined the federal government's allegations of "[h]igh-ranking Church Universal and Triumphant staff members involved in stockpiling, moving and guarding weapons since 1973 in violation of its tax exempt status" (*Billings Gazette*, 1993; Ronnow, 1993b; 1993c). Moreover, the IRS was investigating various financial dealings ([USA] and *Philipson v. [CUT] and Francis*, 1991, 2). The AWARE scholars, therefore, avowedly approached the study prepared "to believe many of the worst charges leveled against Elizabeth Clare Prophet's Church Universal and Triumphant in the mass media" (Lewis and Melton, 1994a, viii). Like The Family study, however, the AWARE team produced and published a book of essays that was as much an apology as a social scientific product.

In an analysis of the study, sociologist Robert Balch and student Stephan Langdon recorded in detailed notes their observations of fellow researchers collecting and discussing data. Balch and Langdon reported that the AWARE "study design virtually assured that if malfeasance existed within the Church, it would not be discovered" (1998, 192). Based upon their observations, they concluded that, for the most part, the study "failed to dig into the issues that made [CUT] so controversial in the first place" (1998, 198). The study failed to address such critical issues as the organization's allegedly excessive commercialism, the use of Church funds to pay off a civil penalty against Mrs. Prophet, and IRS charges against the group for arms violations (1998, 198-199; *Billings Gazette*, 1993, 1, 13A; McMillion, 1994, 9; Ronnow, 1993a, 1). Worth noting is that less than two weeks after the AWARE study concluded, a CUT lawyer said "in a letter to [the] Justice Department [that] 'the church wants to accept responsibility for weapons through the [IRS] settlement process'" (McMillion, 1995, 10).

Lewis described his published scholarship as “undermin[ing] the notion that nontraditional religions exercised extraordinary forms of influence” over its members and, hence, he categorically rejected the idea that CUT “brainwashed its adherents” (Lewis and Melton, 1994a, viii). Challenging, however, to Lewis’s rejection of the idea that controversial religious groups exercise extraordinary influence over their members is trial evidence, which revealed aspects of CUT’s coercive controls over its members ([CUT] v. Gregory Mull, 1981, 5; [CUT] and Elizabeth Clare Prophet v. Linda Witt, 1989, 23; Balch and Langdon, 1998, 199). Throughout the investigation, however, both Balch and Langdon “observed and experienced subtle pressures not to raise critical questions about either [CUT] or the study itself” (Balch and Langdon, 1998, 203). After Langdon “continued to raise questions about issues that were not being investigated, some members of the research team (ironically) began to question his objectivity” (Balch and Langdon, 1998, 204).

One reason that Horowitz warned about academics involving themselves in Moonie-sponsored research was his fear that the groups would then use the findings in attempts to legitimize themselves. Canadian sociologists Marlene Mackie and Merlin B. Brinkerhoff concurred with Horowitz’s apprehension in relation to academics and the Unification Church (Mackie and Brinkerhoff, 1983, 35-36). Moreover, sociologists have long understood that groups such as Scientology, the Unification Church, ISKCON, and other ideological groups solicit “endorsements from academics who claim that the supposedly widespread intolerance and persecution against these contemporary non-normative organizations is analogous to the persecution suffered by such currently accepted and generally tolerated groups as the Mormons and the Quakers” (Kent 1990, 402-403). What they neglect to mention, however, is that both the Mormons and the Quakers made dramatic adjustments in their public postures that lessened their tension with society.

As expected, therefore, CUT used the results from Lewis and Melton’s superficial study in an attempt to gain legitimacy within the community and among its members. Following publication of *Church Universal and Triumphant: In Scholarly Perspective* that Lewis and Melton coedited in 1994, CUT’s newsletter, *Royal Teton Ranch News*, carried a front page headline that proclaimed, “Study Debunks Anti-Church Myths.” Headlines on following pages sound equally victorious: “Reality Wins Over Perception: Church is Entering Mainstream” (1994, 2); and “Moving Beyond Stereotypes” (1994, 8). In an interview in the same issue, Lewis stated his hope that the AWARE study “will be a paradigm for future studies” (*Royal Teton Ranch News*, 1994, 8). None of the articles in the newsletter mentioned that Lewis ran the independent publishing firm (Center for Academic Publication) that produced the study—the same press that published *The Family* anthology.

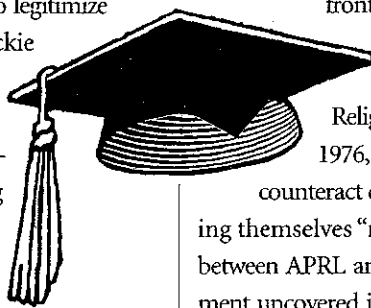
Nowhere does CUT or the book on it produced by Lewis and

Melton mention that CUT seemingly had a hand in the very foundation of AWARE—an arrangement that would have significant implications for its ability to produce a critical study were the facts to have warranted one. In the 1992 press conference statement sent to the media that announced AWARE’s formation (AWARE, 1992), the other contact person aside from Lewis himself was Henry Kriegel, a high ranking CUT member who ran his own information organization—The First Amendment Crisis Task Force (Kriegel, 1992). Almost certainly, the list of prominent researchers and academics who were to involve themselves with AWARE, including prestigious members of its Advisory Board, were unaware of the foundational CUT connection.

INFORMATIONAL “FRONT” GROUPS

AWARE, however, was by no means the first, or the only, informational group apparently working for a controversial religious organization that involved academics. Perhaps the first informational “front” group was APRL, which initially stood for the Alliance for the Preservation of Religious Liberty and later became Americans Preserving Religious Liberty (APRL, 1982, 1). Beginning in late 1976, APRL was active in the United States in efforts to counteract criticisms leveled against a number of groups calling themselves “new religions.” The often claimed relationship between APRL and Scientology finally was established by a document uncovered in the FBI raids against Scientology offices in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. on July 7, 1977. Many of the confiscated documents came from Scientology’s Guardian Office, which was dedicated to handling public relations (sometimes through illegal means). One undated memo entitled “PR General Categories of Data Needing Coding” contained a list of what it called “Secret PR Front Groups.” Leading the list was “APRL, Alliance for Preservation of Religious Liberty” (FBI, 1977, 97, 104).

APRL appears to have ceased operations in the early 1980s, but soon another Scientology information front organization was up and running—Friends of Freedom, under the directorship of Reverend George Robertson of the controversial fundamentalist Christian ministry Bible Speaks (MacSherry, 1992, 16). Bible Speaks acquired considerable notoriety when a former member successfully sued the founder for \$6.6 million for unduly influencing her to donate large sums of money to the group (*New York Times*, 1986, 45). Apparently Robertson is guarded about revealing information concerning his school attendance, degree(s), and personal background (MacSherry, 1992, 18). He is less guarded, however, about speaking out against his avowed enemy—the Cult Awareness Network (CAN). CAN was a privately funded, high profile organization that supplied usually critical information about controversial groups to concerned citizens and the media. In correspondence with Board Members and Advisory Committee members of



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Friends of Freedom, Robertson stated his goal was to "do to CAN what Swartzkopf [sic] did to Hussein" (Robertson, 1992, 2). In its newsletter called *CAN Opener*, Friends of Freedom published exceedingly critical attacks against CAN, which had an impact on one very prominent sociologist, Dr. Anson Shupe, Jr.

Shupe deservedly is one of the most respected sociologists of religion today, having published widely cited articles on the Unification Church, new religions, Mormon business activities, family violence, and religious malfeasance. In 1980, Shupe was the co-author of a study of the "counter-cult" movement, referring to the people in it as *The New Vigilantes* (Shupe and Bromley, 1980). He was cognizant of APRL's ties with Scientology, stating in a 1984 publication that "[b]oth Scientology and the Unification Church were extremely active" in the organization (Shupe, Bromley, and Oliver, 1984, 142). Moreover, both Shupe and Lewis were to publish articles against CAN (Shupe, [1994/1995?]; Lewis, [1994/1995?]) in Scientology's *Freedom* magazine (Church of Scientology International, [1994/1995?] 1994a; 1995b).

In 1995, as a Scientology lawyer approached the most important court case thus far in his organization's relentless war against CAN (Goodstein, 1996), he acquired Shupe as his expert academic witness. The case was an unusual one, arising from the failed deprogramming of a young man from a Christian Pentecostal group, the Life Tabernacle Church (LTC), in Washington state. A relative of the young man's mother called a local crisis line in late 1990, seeking advice about the mother's desire to remove her two underage children from the group because "she believed a church pastor ha[d] acted inappropriately toward one of her younger sons" (Bjorhus, 1995, A6; Goldsmith, 1995, A6; Cult Awareness Network, 1995, 2). The crisis line gave her the name and telephone number of Shirley Landa, who had been a CAN board member in the early 1980s but who (as best as we can determine) was *not* identified as a CAN contact person in the crisis line's listing. When the mother called, Landa gave her the names of two people whom she felt might be able to help her—one was deprogrammer and exit counselor Rick Ross. Ross was one of a handful of people in the United States who still did forcible removals and confinements. The mother contacted Ross, and he agreed to attempt deprogrammings with the two minors. In the autumn of 1990 he successfully removed them from the LTC.

Ross's luck changed, however, when he next attempted to deprogram the mother's eldest son, Jason Scott. On January 18, 1991, Ross and two associates forcibly removed Scott from his mother's Bellevue, Washington home and took him to a dwelling in Ocean Shores. While there, Scott "was forced to watch hours of video tapes on cults...was constantly intimidated and was told his church was the same as the cults. He said he was kept under watch 24 hours a day" (Jarvis, 1991, A10). Late on the fourth day, Scott pretended to renounce his association with LTC. The next day, Ross and his team arranged for Scott to meet with his family for a celebration dinner at a public restaurant prior to their scheduled trip to

Wellspring, a non-profit counseling center in Ohio. Scott apparently left the restaurant and called police from a public phone across the street. Subsequently, the county prosecutor brought criminal kidnap charges against Ross, for which he was acquitted in a jury trial. After this jury decision, Scientology representatives contacted Scott and offered to launch a civil case against Ross on a contingency basis (Brune, 1995, 11; Iosso, 1993, 1).

In the 1995 deposition, Shupe was scathing in his condemnation of CAN. He stated that CAN's (asserted) deprogramming involved "an unmistakable profit motive" (*Scott v. Ross, et al.*, 1995a, 92). Shupe also claimed that he personally considered the organization to be "a hate group" (*Scott v. Ross, et al.*, 1995a, 127). He repeated this determination several times throughout his pre-trial deposition, likening CAN to the Ku Klux Klan, anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic groups, and, on a small scale, the Branch Davidians (*Scott v. Ross, et al.*, 1995a, 127-132). He did not, however, repeat these statements during trial testimony (*Scott v. Ross, et al.*, 1995b, 18-79). Interestingly, like Shupe, a Scientology-produced *Freedom* magazine entitled "The Cult Awareness Network: Anatomy of a Hate Group" also states that "[l]ike the Ku Klux Klan, the Cult Awareness Network generates violence and hatred against religious and other organizations, creating a climate in which even murder is possible" (Church of Scientology International, [1994/1995?], 10).

When asked about how he gathered his evidence against CAN, Shupe admitted that he had never attended a CAN meeting, did not know the names of its officers, had not conducted formal research on the organization since 1987, and had not formally interviewed anyone in the "countercult" movement since 1979. Moreover, he had never subscribed to CAN's newsletter, although he "was able to obtain copies now and then from various people around the country" (*Scott v. Ross, et al.*, 1995a, 83-87).

Shupe claimed, however, that he had kept informed about CAN's activities—through contact with his colleagues, one of whom was J. Gordon Melton, through mailings that he received from Robertson's Friends of Freedom and publications from the "countercult" organization called American Family Foundation. He also claimed that he kept informed about CAN through "miscella-

neous newspaper articles." Shupe also mentioned that he had belonged for a period to the Friends of Freedom and currently was on AWARE's board of directors. In deposition he stated that he thought Friends of Freedom "was a good source of information," but in trial testimony indicated that he had "a certain amount of skepticism" about its material because he realized that its director, George Robertson, "was not what I would call a neutral party in all this." CAN portrayed the sources upon which Shupe relied as

"inadmissible hearsay" evidence, and challenged unsuccessfully his admissibility as a CAN expert by stating that "Dr. Shupe has admitted that he has no personal knowledge that would allow him to testify factually one way or the other" on the allegation that CAN was involved in violent deprogramming (passim, *Scott v. Ross, et al.*, 1995a, 85-88, 103; 1995b, 56-57; 1995c, 2-3).

Although Shupe's testimony may have provided information beyond the general knowledge of jurors, Shupe did not read the full statements of the plaintiffs and defendants when formulating his opinions for deposition about the events in the case. Instead, he read excerpts from them supplied by the prosecuting lawyer, Kendrick Moxon. When asked if he had considered whether the depositions

"may have been taken out of contexts" Shupe answered that he "trusted Mr. Moxon" to provide a "pretty good sample of the depositions" (*Scott v. Ross, et al.*, 1995a, 109).

As a result of the trial, the court ruled that Ross and CAN had violated Scott's civil rights, and CAN, Ross, and Ross's hired accomplices owed Scott in excess of \$4 million in damages. CAN went into bankruptcy. Scientologist Steven Hayes purchased the rights to use CAN's name, logo, and phone number, and soon Scientologists were answering CAN phone calls (Goodstein, 1996, A22). Former CAN critic George Robertson became the new CAN's Chairman (The Board and Officers, 1997). The Jason Scott trial was a vehicle for Scientology to attack its avowed enemy (Bjorhus, 1995, A6), even though the national CAN office had not been involved in any of the conversations between Ross and the mother who hired him.

Shupe's trust in Moxon's judgement, however, about providing a "pretty good sample" of depositions about CAN may have been misplaced. Years earlier, while acting in a legal capacity for Scientology, Moxon was a member of Scientology's Guardian Office, "working in the very office where massive covert operations against the

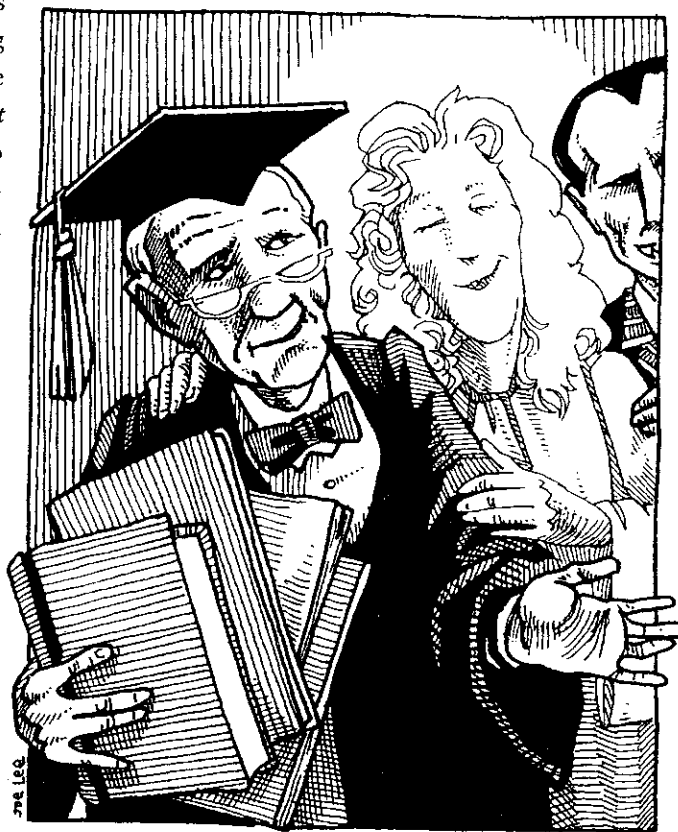


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government were being run at the time" (Horne, 1992, 79). In 1992, Moxon misrepresented his actions on behalf of his organization during the U.S. government's criminal investigation of the Scientologists' burglaries into U.S. government offices, denying (to *The American Lawyer*) "knowledge of the criminal operations being run out of the office" (Horne, 1992, 80). Five years later, the same publication erred when it reported that federal prosecutors never "named him as a party in their case" (Hansen, 1997, 65). Yet the grand jury for the case *had* named him an "unindicted co-conspirator" ([USA] v. *Mary Sue Hubbard, et al.*, 1979a, 7). Both sides agreed in the "Stipulation of Evidence" that in response to an October 14, 1976, "Grand Jury subpoena for all original known handwriting exemplars of Michael Meisner and the employment application and personnel records of Mr. Meisner in the possession of the Church of Scientology," Moxon had:

submitted an affidavit with nine pages of handwritten material. In the affidavit, he stated that he was unable to locate a personnel file for Mr. Meisner, and that the nine pages of appended handwriting were those of Mr. Meisner. However, as the defendant [Cindy] Raymond stated to Mr. Meisner in a meeting in late September 1976, Mr. Moxon had been directed to supply the government with fake handwriting samples in lieu of Mr. Meisner's true handwriting exemplars ([USA] v. *Mary Sue Hubbard, et al.*, 1979b, 212-214).

Moxon, therefore, knew about the Guardian Office's illegal activities because he acted on direct orders to participate in the cover-up. Indeed, a 1976 letter from the Guardian Office's District of Columbia Security Office had identified "Rick Moxon" and four others as "either hav[ing] full data or almost all of it" about the government break-ins, and indicated that they were under a "Covenant of Non-Disclosure; 'Doomsday Agreement'" preventing them from disclosing what they knew about such operations (under penalty of a \$50,000.00 fine per breach). The Guardian document instructed a Scientology official to inform Moxon and the others that "if they do talk, then they will be expelled forever, hounded by the GO [Guardian Office] until doomsday, and left to rot in the Physical Universe" (Security Off [ice] D.C., 1976, [3,1]).

Shupe, consequently, was unwise to have trusted Moxon to provide accurate information concerning CAN. When, for example, CBS's *60 Minutes* did a report on Scientology's takeover of CAN, reporter Lesley Stahl discovered that two affidavits Moxon relied upon (one about Cynthia Kissner and the other about deprogrammer Mark Blocksom) were false (CBS, 1997, 18-20). Likewise, a private investigator whom Scientology had hired to investigate CAN "couldn't find any evidence" that CAN was involved in illegal deprogramming (CBS, 1997, 20). One must wonder, therefore, about the quality of information that attorney Moxon passed along to his academic expert—an academic expert predisposed to accept it because

of the filtered information that he had been receiving about CAN from Friends of Freedom, Melton, and probably Lewis. Consequently, when CAN's lawyer got him to read (on the witness stand) a 1988 CAN Board of Directors minute which stated that "[n]o officers, Board Members or paid staff of the Cult Awareness Network or its affiliates may participate in involuntary deprogramming," Shupe remained firm in his "sense" that CAN encouraged illegal deprogramming for interested parties (*Scott v. Ross, et al.*, 1995b, 49, 63; see Cult Awareness

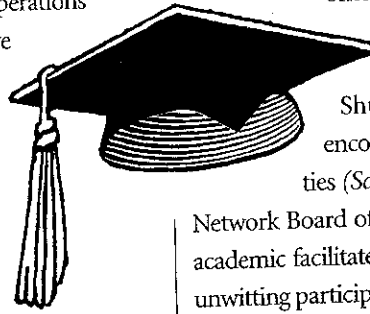
Network Board of Directors, 1988, 12). Unfortunately, a respected academic facilitated Scientology's attack on CAN by becoming an unwitting participant in an information loop, in which he probably received "facts" of dubious quality about the countercult organization from biased sources.

In the Scott case the evidence against CAN actually was very weak, since all discussion about *illegal* deprogramming took place outside of the knowledge of CAN members or volunteers. Indeed, it seems highly unlikely that community resource person Landa was acting as a CAN contact person when she passed along Ross's telephone number to Scott's mother. Yet in 1998, a U.S. Court of Appeals supported a lower court's decision to assign vicarious liability on CAN for the actions of Landa because she had acted as its agent. The dissenting judge, however, argued that no trial evidence established that Landa, in referring the mother to deprogrammer Ross, acted as CAN's agent "in respect to the particular transaction out of which the injury arises" (*Scott v. Ross, et al.*, 1998, 15, 19).

Many scholars of religion were not sorry to see CAN close its doors. The organization almost never referred to scientific findings about controversial groups, except perhaps to some psychological findings that most sociologists ignored or rejected (Dawson, 1996, 141-143; Shupe, [1994/1995?], 64-65). CAN also emphasized the manipulative or abusive aspects of many controversial ideologies that received little attention in social scientific circles.

ACADEMICS AND DOCTRINAL 'SECRETS'

In what may be the most remarkable example of academics forming alliances with religions in a manner that hinders basic social scientific research, J. Gordon Melton organized three sociologists and seven religious studies scholars and/or theologians in a November, 1994, *amicus curiae* submission supporting Scientology's efforts to keep secret its upper level teachings (*Church of Scientology International v. Steven Fishman and Uwe Geertz*, 1994). Defendants had submitted these teachings as evidence in a Scientology-initiated court case. These teachings were Scientology's "OT" (Operating Thetan) levels, which Scientologists read only after years of doctrinal study, behavioral conformity, and (at least) tens of thousands of dollars (Behar, 1991, 52-53). In attempts to justify Scientology's efforts to control the dissemination of these teachings, these scholars cited



examples of secrecy within numerous religious and secular traditions—early Christianity, Gnosticism, Mormonism, Kabbalistic Judaism, Tantrism, industry, government and the military, etc. None of them, however, acknowledged the critical issue about the propriety of academics involved in efforts to restrict information.

Researchers investigating social control within organizations, for example, require access to material that groups wish to restrict, simply because this material provides glimpses into behind-the-scenes activities that often escape the public eye. Nevertheless, the respected sociologist of religion, Bryan R. Wilson, argued for Scientology's right to restrict its upper level material. Over a decade earlier, however, Horowitz—in debate with Wilson and others—presented the position that "[s]ocial research [must] open up to public scrutiny and criticism the innermost secrets of religious organization. This is the inevitable ground upon which sociological and religious analysis must differ" (Horowitz, 1983, 181). Indeed, in arguing for Scientology's right to restrict access to doctrinal material, Wilson and his sociological colleagues seemed to have forgotten comments that a founding figure of their discipline offered nearly nine decades earlier. Georg Simmel spoke insightfully in his 1908 essay when he observed that "the secret is often ethically negative..." (Simmel, 1908, 331). Sociologists such as Wilson must realize that groups can use secrets to control, manipulate, and harm, which means that they and other researchers should be opposing rather than defending efforts to restrict access to information that becomes available in legal and ethically defensible circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Linkages between some social scientists and the controversial groups they study have interfered with or influenced fundamental aspects of the social scientific enterprise. Interference or influence has occurred with the publication process, the selection of research topics, the acquisition of research information, and the use of that information in contentious social disputes. In the process, social science has suffered, and the reputation of the social science of religion has been placed at risk (*Esquire*, 1997; *Radio 4*, 1989; *Straits Times*, 1997). Peer reviewed research has been blocked, published accounts seem tainted with bias, former members' information has been ignored or summarily dismissed, and both political and public relations agendas have been interwoven with the social scientific study of religion. Some of the most respected scholars involved in the academic study of religion have let down their guards, and groups with agendas have only been too willing to draw them in. A consequence of this is that these scholars provide support for ideologies whose rigidity and intellectual narrowness threaten the necessary climate of openness and exchange in which scholarship thrives.

There are straightforward corrective responses to this regrettable situation. Academics should be exceedingly careful about aligning themselves with researchers who operate outside the boundaries of

the academy. The academy, with its ethics reviews of research with human subjects, scrutiny of research funding, rewards for peer review publications, and collegial system to which aggrieved parties can appeal, provides an infrastructure for research that may help curb some of the excesses that have developed among scholars in recent years. Reviewers at all levels of the publication process should insist upon explicit statements about the funding that fueled the research. (For the record, neither author received external funding to carry out this study.) While the complete elimination of biased research may be impossible, its exposure remains a desirable goal.

Finally, social scientists of religion have a special responsibility to raise the stature of their studies among their colleagues. We concur with the conclusion that Buddhist scholar Michael Pye reached, which was that "there are numerous religions all over the world which cannot be studied in detail because of inadequate research funding" (1996, 270). Despite the salience of religion within popular culture, in academic culture few jobs in the social sciences and humanities advertise for applicants with expertise in contemporary religions. Consequently, too few students take up the task of researching what surely must be among society's most interesting fields of study. With few students who have examined various groups and topics moving into academic life, only a handful of established scholars maintain the image of expertise. In reality, they are stretched thin, with too much information to process about too many organizations and their personnel.

Whatever the larger research community of researchers does (individually and collectively) about the issues of academic compromise and co-optation within the sociology of religion, we *must do something*, because the credibility of an entire social scientific subdiscipline is at risk. Researchers have not heeded the warning that sociologist of religion Thomas Robbins issued in the early 1980s, which was that "the concern over sympathy for cults in the sociology of religion cannot but ramify into a broader concern with the precariousness of objectivity in the study of religion" (1983, 211). Toward the end of increasing researcher objectivity, Religious Studies professor Catherine Wessinger organized a meeting of scholars prior to the American Academy of Religion meeting in 1994. The meeting provided a forum for the objective discussion of critical issues regarding methodologies and ethics in the study of religious movements. It was so successful that she has continued to organize them in successive years. These forums provide one important opportunity for researchers who *are* conducting objective and responsible research to speak critically about ethical practices and appropriate methodologies.

Historians and sociologists of knowledge will look back upon this era and use examples of our excesses to illustrate the constricted nature of the supposedly objective dimension of social research. Surely those of us now doing research wish to leave as our legacy something other than examples that future generations will judge to be seriously flawed and compromised. □

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