Academic disputes and dialogue collection: Preface

This paper briefly reviews the history of academic disputes and attempts at dialogue in the cultic studies field. The paper also serves as an introduction to a collection of articles on this subject on the Web site of International Cultic Studies Association: www.culticstudies.org.

Over the years ICSA has published a number of articles addressing academic disputes and dialogue regarding cults and brainwashing (frequently called thought reform, coercive persuasion, or mind control). In order to illuminate the history of these disputes and the issues they have addressed, we have put together an online collection, Academic Disputes and Dialogue.

The disputes became conspicuous in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the Jonestown tragedy of 1978 made cults front-page news and when parents of some cult-involved youth were resorting to deprogramming their children in order to persuade them to leave the controversial groups. Some parents were also lobbying legislators to pass conservatorship legislation that would facilitate parents' attempts to get their children out of cultic groups. Some academicians, mostly sociologists and religious scholars, were highly critical of these activists, while some professionals and academicians, mostly psychologists and psychiatrists, were sympathetic to the parents to varying degrees. This paper focuses on the disputes and dialogue among academicians and professionals. However, it should be noted that lay activists have played important roles in various disputes.

The academic disputants were often referred to as pro-cultists and anti-cultists. However, I prefer the terms cult critics and cult sympathizers in order to indicate that the disagreement is more a question of how much critical emphasis a scholar deems appropriate, rather than whether or not he or she is for or against cults.

Whatever terms one prefers, it is clear that by the early 1980s there were indeed two camps within the cultic studies field.

Two early and influential books expressing the sympathizers' position were those of Bromley & Shupe (1981) and Robbins & Anthony (1981). Clark, Langone, Schecter, & Daly (1981) and Keiser & Keiser (1987) provided two of the more balanced critical perspectives on the cult issue during these early years. I have previously summarized the issues fueling the debate between the two camps:

Sympathizers viewed cultists as seekers who freely and rationally chose to join their groups. Critics viewed cult joining as a process dependent upon deception and manipulation, that is, as an illusory or an uninform ed choice, as a more intense and enduring form of the psychosocial influence studied by social psychologists. Sympathizers, nevertheless, often misrepresented the critics' position by portraying them as advocates of a robotization theory of cult conversion based on The Manchurian Candidate. Sympathizers saw cultists as threatened by cults and desirous of gaining control over their cultist children. Critics saw families as worried and anxious to save their loved ones from cult harm. Sympathizers considered cults to be innovative and cult leaders to be entrepreneurial. Critics viewed cults as destructive and their leaders as deceitful and hypocritical. Sympathizers tended to accept at face value cultists' reports while doubting the accuracy of ex-cultists and their reports, sometimes pejoratively referring to them as apostates or apostate tales (Lewis, 1989; Shupe & Bromley, 1981) and sacrificing tales (Bromley, Shupe, & Ventimiglia, 1979), respectively.

Critics tended to doubt the accuracy of the reports of cultists, whom they considered to be deceived and manipulated, and looked favorably on ex-cultists' reports. Lastly, sympathizers condemned deprogramming and guardianship proposals, sometimes with a level of passion inconsistent with their official persona of entrepreneurial. Critics, although not usually in favor of deprogramming, tended to sympathize with parents who attempted to deprogram their loved one and to be at least open to considering guardianship proposals.
Early in my eight hours on the Robin George witness stand, I learned to adjust my standards of research reporting to allow me to give yes and no answers much of the time, and to ask questions in return when I needed time to explain an answer. Since our academic profession is grounded in the fundamental premise of accuracy in doing research and honesty in reporting what we find, the ethical crises caused by having to distort my answers to simplistic truisms or obfuscate my complex findings was more than a little disturbing.

Perhaps a more subtle and insidious effect of such experiences was that before long I found myself believing the simplistic pictures I was forced to paint in the courtroom and in the media. These left me less inclined to inject the negative information I had unearthed in my interviews and observations into my own analysis and conclusions. Fortunately, early on in my research I met a fellow Krishna research nearly as biased in the negative direction as I was in the positive one. Subsequently, in my debates with this colleague I realized that the most balanced analysis of the information we shared likely lay between our divergent analyses. This encounter also enabled me to constantly question the relatively simplistic analysis I was forced to give in the courtroom and in the media and to allow my own negative critical judgments to come forward along with more positive interpretations of the faith and practice of the Hare Krishnas. Nonetheless, the courtroom and, to a lesser extent, the public media, in their insistence upon simplicity and absoluteness with respect to truth, challenge any scholar's ability to call a truce or reconcile the irreconcilable.

What Shinn perhaps did not realize is that some cult critics felt the same kinds of conflicts. My late colleague, Dr. John Clark, for example, had made very similar statements in private conversations. He essentially said: "Those are the rules of the game. If you don't play by those rules, you won't be effective." These legal battles, and the academic distortions they tended to encourage, increased the polarization of the two sides. Also contributing significantly to the increased polarization was the Frye standard, which governed admissibility of expert testimony at that time. Frye required that a scientific theory be generally accepted by the scientific community. Thus, a few years short after the "divergent perspectives" volume was published (Kilbourne, 1985), various documents, conferences, articles, and books (see http://www.cesnur.org/testi/se_brainwash.htm) for a collection of articles on this subject by sympathetic critics were published. The encyclopedia of sociology (West & Schoenbrod, 1986), and the Compendium of psychiatry (West & Singer, 1980) seemed to have no effect on the droning chant, "the scientific community has rejected brainwashing." The phenomenon bore an eerie resemblance to a political campaign managed by public relations consultants and implemented by "spin doctors." The so-called "Hadden memo" (Hadden, 1989, December 20) was leaked to the public, caused quite a stir within the critical community, for it reinforced the notion that I (Hadden) was indeed scheming on behalf of cults. But the memo also generated controversy and concern among sympathizers as it came to the fore in the legal arena and policy makers. It seems to us fairly clear that this does not happen. But, Singer's testimony weaves back and forth between this proposition and "normal" social influence theory.

After the issue of the value of research and litigation, our legal consultant (Lieberman) was not particularly sanguine about the prospects of social scientists coming up with findings that would be of great value. In so many words, he told us that the most important think [sic] we could do is prepare a statement that refutes the claim that social science can be helpful. I interpreted this as the agnostic statement we discussed in Salt Lake. . .

AGENDA ITEM #3 - Preparation of the "agnostic" resolution and development of a strategy for encouraging the governing bodies of ASA.
In my opinion, much of Hadden’s concern resulted from sensationalized media reports and recognition that $\frac{1}{2}$ is much more diverse than these reports (and some of the early professional articles) implied. He feared, as did I during the late 1970s and early 1980s, that an undisclosed view of the central phenomenon would result in abuses. That is why I opposed conservatorship laws. Hadden (and some of his colleagues), exaggerated the threat that legal cases posed to freedom of religion (see Rosedale, 1995). As a result, they attributed the caricature of brainwashing theory ($\frac{1}{2}$ irreversibility, irreversibility) that might have appeared from time to time in courtrooms (recall the Shinn quotation above) to all so-called $\frac{1}{2}$-brainwashing, $\frac{1}{2}$ further exacerbating the divide between the two camps. These caricature-based attacks against brainwashing theory, I believe, have been decisively refuted (see Amtrani & Di Marzio, 2000a, 2000b; Bardin; 1994; Martin, Pile, Burke, & Martin, 1998; Rosedale, 1993; Zimbardo, 1992, 2002) and the biases against brainwashing theory are less intensive among sociologists of the early community exposed (Bachel & Langdon, 1998; Bez-Hallah, 2001 (alternate version of this paper available at www.apologeticsindex.org); Kent & Krebs, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c). 

Moreover, the sympathizers appear to presume that the relevant scientific community consists of sociologists of religion and religious studies scholars. However, if a court is investigating whether or not a particular group harmed a particular person (see Aronoff-Mckibben, Lynn, & Malinowski, 2000), one might conclude that psychology is at least as relevant a scientific discipline as sociology. There has been a general understanding within the mental health field that groups can gain high levels of influence over people. A recent survey of 700 psychologists (Lottick, 2000), for example, found that over 50% strongly support a law against $\frac{1}{2}$-brainwashing, $\frac{1}{2}$ (therefore, they must believe that $\frac{1}{2}$ brainwashing, $\frac{1}{2}$ exists!), a figure that somehow is arguably higher than what one would find among psychologists who are cult critics, perhaps because the latter might be more sensitive to how such a law could be abused. Thus, if one expands the $\frac{1}{2}$-scientific community, $\frac{1}{2}$ beyond the rather small group of sociologists and religious studies scholars specializing in new religious movements, the notion that the $\frac{1}{2}$-scientific community, $\frac{1}{2}$ brainwashing theory $\frac{1}{2}$ becomes more difficult to defend.

The general acceptability of Frye became less important in 1993, when Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc. altered the criteria for admissibility of scientific expert testimony. 

Daubert overturned the seventy-year-old threshold federal standard for admitting scientific evidence which was established in Frye. At the same time, the state court standard was left in limbo as many state courts reexamine their rules in light of Daubert. As Justice Blackmun’s opinion in Daubert explains, until 1993 most courts, federal and state, followed the Frye standard. Psychiatric, psychological, or other scientific evidence could be offered in the courtroom only upon the showing that the type of evidence was generally accepted. That general principle has been called into question with the determination that, at least in federal courts, the Federal Rule 702 supersedes Frye and does away with the $\frac{1}{2}$-general acceptance requirement. Instead, the new standard for federal courts is whether $\frac{1}{2}$-scientific, technical, or other specialized knowledge will assist the trier of fact to understand the evidence to determine a fact in issue. $\frac{1}{2}$ (Hornik, 1995, p. 43 $\frac{1}{2}$-also available at www.apologeticsindex.org). 

Not surprisingly, since Daubert the emphasis among sympathizers in the courtroom has shifted to the alleged methodological deficiencies of various theories of extreme influence that have been lumped together under the term $\frac{1}{2}$-brainwashing, $\frac{1}{2}$ . In particular, psychologist Dick Anthony has argued that $\frac{1}{2}$-brainwashing, $\frac{1}{2}$-scientific (Anthony, 1996, 2001). Anthony contends that so-called brainwashing testimony should not even be allowed in the courtroom. However, since some victories for those who argue this point, judges in numerous cases have allowed, and continue to allow, testimony concerning the use of powerful influence techniques (i.e., $\frac{1}{2}$-brainwashing, $\frac{1}{2}$) in group situations, nonreligious as well as religious.

Before he died Herb Rosedale, lCSA $\frac{1}{2}$-late president, had been working on a paper on scholarship and advocacy, in which he analyzed how expert testimony in highly charged ideological areas, such as cults, affected the scholarship of academics and professionals (Rosedale, unpublished). Footnote 86 of his draft paper rebuts arguments to disallow brainwashing testimony:

A brief comment directed to the erosion of responsibility on the part of experts and others in describing the state of the law in the U.S. courts with respect to the admission of brainwashing, mind control and coercive persuasion testimony is also appropriate. In numerous papers and submissions for new religions state unequivocally that American courts do not admit testimony of brainwashing or mind control. Factually, that is false. Many statements have been made by those seeking to block admission of expert testimony as to mind control, brainwashing, or any form of extreme influence that have been lumped together under the term $\frac{1}{2}$-brainwashing, $\frac{1}{2}$ . For example, Rosedale in The California Supreme Court in Molko v. Holy Spirit Association, 762, P2d, 46, California (1988), and other cases in which evidence of non-physical coercion led to admission of evidence of coercive persuasion (p. 13) and cases cited at Footnote 3). In a further opinion in which the defendants attacked the admissibility of not only the testimony of Dr. Paul Martin but the testimony of a psychiatrist, Dr. John Hochman, the attack also failed (See opinion on various of plaintiffs’ motions in Limine dated February 25, 2000). Reference to defendant’s motion 4 involves Dr. Martin’s testimony, 6 Dr. Hochman’s testimony and also 7 Fishman testimony of a psychiatrist, in evidence because it did not meet a falsifiability test under Daubert. The court stated that there are many soft sciences (such as psychiatry) which are both reliable and not falsifiable and testimony of so-called “blacklisting” is supported by peer review. (Id.; Pile, supra. Opinion on motion seeking to preclude evidence, p. 11 [Smith].) The opinion went on to state that the theory is supported in a number of scholarly books and journals which have been peer reviewed and is also supported by the personal experience of experts in the field. The court pointed out that the California case was diagnostic and was, in fact, inconsistent with the decision of the California Supreme Court in Molko v. Holy Spirit Association, 762, P2d, 46, California (1988), and other cases in which evidence of non-physical coercion led to admission of evidence of coercive persuasion (p. 13) and cases cited at Footnote 3). In a further opinion in which the defendants attacked the admissibility of not only the testimony of Dr. Paul Martin but the testimony of a psychiatrist, Dr. John Hochman, the attack also failed (See opinion on various of plaintiffs’ motions in Limine dated February 25, 2000). Reference to defendant’s motion 4 involves Dr. Martin’s testimony, 6 Dr. Hochman’s testimony and also 7 Dr. Hochman’s testimony, 9 deals with exclusion of testimony relating to religious beliefs, at pp 8-12, 13-20, 20-33. While both Fishman and Hejl are decisions of lower courts, I have never seen Hejl cited in any submissions made or papers offered by the supporters of new religions movements on the issues of mind control, brainwashing or coercive persuasion, although it is the most relevant recent case analysis of the issues. Annexed hereto as Exhibit A are the relevant pages from the decision of that court. (Rosedale, unpublished paper, footnote 86)

It seems to me that professionals on both sides of the debate will continue to have divergent opinions, which courts may or may not be interested in considering in specific cases, in conjunction with other evidence and opinions. It is presumptuous for expert witnesses to think that the future of religious freedom hangs on $\frac{1}{2}$-brainwashing, $\frac{1}{2}$ testimony. If a certain line of testimony is not persuasive, there is no harm in its being heard. If that same line of testimony is persuasive, then why, other than the practical desire to win, keep it out of the courtroom? Because one $\frac{1}{2}$-camp $\frac{1}{2}$ of experts has decided that the importance of religious freedom demands that we protect judges and juries from their own guiltiness? Is there a fear that judges and juries will be $\frac{1}{2}$-brainwashed, $\frac{1}{2}$ by $\frac{1}{2}$-brainwashing testimony $\frac{1}{2}$? I think this kind of blacklisting is silly. Ultimately, intelligent ideas will defeat stupid ones. And the republic will endure.

The courtroom debates will go on. These debates, however, should not prevent us from continuing to...
dialogue with those who might hold different opinions on issues in the cultic studies field (see Kropveld, 2003; Langone, 1995, 2000). A book entitled, Misunderstanding cults: Searching for objectivity in a controversial field (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001) is an especially noteworthy attempt to foster dialogue. This book tries to restore a moderate perspective to the social scientific study of cults (p. xiii). Zablocki (2001) presents his theory of brainwashing in a chapter entitled, 12½Towards a Demystified and Disinterested Scientific Theory of Brainwashing. 12½ In that same volume Dick Anthony was given an opportunity to critique brainwashing theories. Anthony’s chapter (2001), 12½True Brainwashing Formulations and Brainwashing Formulations: Science or Pseudo Science takes up 103 pages of this 515-page book and away the longest chapter in the book.

Zablocki felt that Anthony’s critique was so deficient that it demanded a long, detailed, point-by-point refutation. We have published Zablocki’s rejoinder to Anthony in order to continue ICSA’s historical documentation of the critic-sympathizer disputes and dialogue (Zablocki, 2005).

Although scholars will undoubtedly continue to debate these issues and outside the courtroom, I believe that the passions that once characterized this field have diminished considerably. Recent years have witnessed exchanges between critics and sympathizers. Our disagreements are more informed and respectful. And there is a growing recognition that we have more common ground than we once thought. I believe that this trend will continue and will do what I can to encourage it.

References


This paper relies on a slight modification of the Zablocki definition of a cult presented in Rosedale & Langone (1998): “an ideological organization held together by charismatic relationships and demanding a high level of commitment.”
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The Learning Dialogue™ started its life as The Learning Model of Negotiation, a method for facilitating learning in interest-based conflict resolution. When Max Kirk and I met, in 1987, as fellow students of a well-known Conflict Resolution Program, we were mature students with a common desire to help make communications better between people in our work and personal lives. Your ability to productively engage all stakeholders in a project or resolving a dispute will depend to a large degree on your understanding of how others manage the information they need in order to participate fully and creatively in the situation and outcome. TLD will be a tool for you to use in order to help facilitate better dialogue.