

Review Essay:

CULT-BUSTERS IN CANBERRA? REFLECTIONS ON TWO RECENT GOVERNMENT REPORTS

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Commonwealth of Australia, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
Article 18: Freedom of Religion and Belief, July 1998 (CA98)

Commonwealth of Australia, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Defence and Trade, **Conviction With Compassion: A Report into Freedom of
Religion and Belief**, November 2000 (CA00)

In common with a number of Western countries Australian governments at both federal and state level have periodically had encounters with New Religious Movements (NRMs). In an early and highly significant encounter, the Victorian state government set up a Board of Inquiry into Scientology, the report of which in 1965 led to an 'international moral panic' (Wallis, 1976:215). In 1992 the police and Human Services Departments in New South Wales and Victoria moved against The Family of Love (formerly Children of God), removing more than 120 children from Family properties based on child abuse allegations which subsequently collapsed in court. During the 1990s various elements of the 'satanism scare' imported from the United States preoccupied the Australian authorities, culminating in the gothic revelations of Franca Arena – involving baths full of body parts and lurid allegations of sexual abuse - before the Privilege Committee of the Upper House of the New South Wales Parliament in 1998 (Hill, 1998).

In the light of the potential for conflict between the state and NRMs which has been evidenced both in the United States and Europe, it is important to examine the discourse deployed in such encounters, the sources of information and expertise on which reliance is placed, and the ensuing policies which are developed. In the case of the Australian federal government there are two reports, one of them very recent, which offer insights into these processes. In the discussion that follows rather brief attention will be paid to the first report (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998), partly

because it pays only marginal attention to NRMs and partly because reference has already been made to it in the work of other scholars (e.g. Bouma, 1999). The report published in November 2000, however, gives considerably more attention to issues surrounding NRMs and merits close scrutiny by those whose research is focussed on this area of contemporary religion and spirituality.

The first report (CA98) was commissioned in the aftermath of Pauline Hanson's election to the Australian senate. Responding to fears that her policy against immigration and in particular against Asians might be tapping deeper public sentiments the report investigated discrimination on grounds of religious belief. Most of its content is focussed on issues of freedom of religious belief and expression with an ethnic and cultural dimension, but two sections of the report, on Paganism and New religious movements are of particular interest in the present context. The report notes a large number of submissions from Pagans and Wiccans and points to the existence in Queensland criminal law of the offence of 'pretending to exercise witchcraft or tell fortunes' which had been used to stigmatise and discriminate against Wiccans. On this issue the report recommends repeal of such legislation, arguing that questions of fraud arising from such practices are better dealt with under the general criminal law. Members of the Wiccan and Pagan communities have the right to express their religions or beliefs, it argues. While quoting the definition of Wicca given by the Pagan Alliance as 'a modern revival of the ancient folkloric and magical practices of Europe' (CA98:62) perhaps the recently published research of Ronald Hutton (2000) offers an important insight. Hutton concludes that most of the practices now associated with Wicca can be traced to England in the early 1950s.

The section on NRMs is characterised by a certain ambivalence. On the one hand the report clearly recognises the difficulty presented by the term 'cult' – namely, that it renders the purportedly religious nature of groups so labelled problematic – and thus it consistently uses the term within inverted commas. On the other hand it uses the term interchangeably with new religious movement and has difficulty in arbitrating on definitions. Citing the Concise Oxford Dictionary's reference to 'cult' as a 'system of religious worship esp. as expressed in ceremonies; devotion or homage to person or thing (esp. derog. of transient fad)...' it acknowledges that the word has become 'a negatively value-laden term' applied to group which are 'believed to be somehow deviant according to popular opinion' (CA98:68). It then cites at length a set of characteristics listed by CultAware, which it acknowledges as an anti-cult lobbying group, which includes such features as a divinely regarded leader commanding unquestioning obedience; a process of ego-destruction; separation from parents; suggestibility caused by lack of sleep; and exploitation and deception of members. Two of the more striking features of the characterisation of 'cults' by the anti-cult movement are the crudity with which they are depicted and the outdated literature on which they are based: thus they rarely progress beyond the work of psychiatrists such as John Clark and Margaret Singer (see for example West and Singer, 1980). In line with this approach, what is notably missing from the report is

any attempt to examine the range and variability of the types of group included under this general category: nevertheless, acknowledgment is given to the difficulty of demarcating the practices of NRMs from those of more mainstream religious organisations. As will be shown later, the question of terminology becomes more seriously questionable in the second report (CA00).

Where the report is much less open-minded is in its discussion of coercion into 'cults' because it gives detailed consideration to claims of 'brainwashing', reporting the allegations of CultAware and the claims of former members and relatives. Not only are these claims given without any specific reference to the alleged 'cult' involved – much like the popular magazine format of the 'I lost my daughter to a cult' kind – but the report fails to address the more substantive issue of the validity of the 'brainwashing' scenario (see for instance Anthony, 1999). There is now a substantial body of research, which includes Barker's classic study of recruitment to the Unification Church (1984), to show that membership in a group requiring high levels of commitment is much too transitory to justify the coercion model. Nevertheless, the report recommends that the federal Attorney-General's department should convene an inter-faith dialogue '1. To examine the question of methods of coercion in religious belief and practice and how they should be dealt with; 2. To consider whether legal limitations should be imposed on religious groups regarding coercive tactics; 3. To formulate an agreed list of minimum standards for the practice of religious groups' (CA98:82).

The principal recommendation of the overall report was the enactment of a federal Religious Freedom Act, the intention of which would be to provide a civil remedy for discrimination or intolerance on the basis of religion and belief. The Attorney-General's response is reported in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's Annual Report for 1998-99: 'The Attorney-General has advised the Parliament that the Government has decided not to implement this recommendation because there are not wide-ranging problems associated with freedom of religion and belief requiring a legislative response' (CA99:101). Such a response is very much in tune with Bouma's depiction of Australian religious culture as a "low-temperature" matter (Bouma, 1999:288).

By contrast, the second report (CA00) represents a distinct rise in temperature in its approach to NRMs. The report was commissioned in April 1999 by the Minister for Foreign Affairs who asked the Joint Standing Committee on foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade to inquire into Australia's efforts to promote and protect freedom of religion and belief. In particular the committee was asked to look at the extent and probable causes of violations of religious freedom around the world; implications for human rights arising from a lack of religious freedom and religious differences; and the most effective means by which the Australian government and non government organisations could promote religious freedom throughout the region and around the world. The report begins with a discussion of concepts, citing among other sources Ninian Smart's six 'dimensions' of religious experience as a way of handling the

complexity of the area. The role of the United Nations in human rights issues is discussed at length and is followed by a wide-ranging historical and global review of the development of religious freedom from classical times until the present. A chapter on freedom of religion and belief in Australia reviews a variety of state and federal measures and follows this with a discussion of the powers and role of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, including reference to the earlier report. The survey of religious intolerance includes examples of violations of religion and belief both in Australia and throughout the world, with special reference to Asia and the Middle East. There is also discussion of various proposals to promote religious freedom and a chapter on indigenous religious traditions in Australia.

This highly compressed synopsis is intended to draw attention both to the wide-ranging scope of the report and also to the markedly different approach taken in chapter 10, which is headed *Cults*. In the first paragraph the complexities and sensitivities of definition shown in other sections of the report are quickly disposed of:

In examining the issue of 'cults', there can be problems of characteristics and definitions. The Committee does not wish to judge, or to give offence, but it is necessary to try to be clear about what some have perceived to be, or not to be, cults. These can also be called 'sects' or 'new religious movements'. (CA00:175)

In an accompanying footnote it acknowledges that the earlier report used the latter term because it was the most neutral for purposes of discussion. However, a submission by Dr Max Wallace claimed that use of this term was 'coy' and 'In this Report, with all its potential difficulties in mind, the term 'cult' will be used' (CA00:175) Thereafter the term sheds its inverted commas (and, as will shortly be demonstrated, its neutrality).

Having disposed of the question of terminology the report immediately sets the tone for the rest of the chapter:

Many of the confidential submissions received by the Committee dealt with cults and their impacts on the lives of parents, siblings, children, relations and friends. Cults have clearly generated very great sadness, pain and, above all, a sense of loss for many people. (CA00:175)

The report acknowledges that some adherents may find 'joy and satisfaction' in such groups and that this needs to be weighed against 'what seem to be more sinister features of cults'. Without having yet attempted a definition of what constitutes a cult, the report goes on to distinguish between cults and 'small but nevertheless mainstream religions that are not well understood or that some people think are 'strange'' (CA00:175). The list of these is itself decidedly strange since not only would it contain several groups who - in popular imagery - might well be labelled 'cults' but it manages to conflate two very different bodies: 'Ananda Marga, Hare Krishna, the Exclusive Plymouth Brethren (sic), the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day

Saints (also known as Mormons or *Seventh Day Adventists*) or Jehovah's Witnesses' (CA00:175-176, emphasis added). And again, without having defined its terminology, the report turns to the issue of coercion, arguing that while 'membership of religious bodies and of cults' (implicitly cults are not seen as 'religious bodies') is a private matter, society has a right to impose limits when people are pressured or forced into actions that may harm them in some way: 'This is sometimes the situation with bodies called cults' (CA00:176). The report illustrates this by citing Dr Max Wallace's contention that it was unacceptable to encourage others to commit suicide - thus highlighting a more extreme form of alleged coercion.

At this point in the report Dr Wallace assumes the proportions of an expert since he is quoted as estimating that two or three percent of the Australian population (about 500,000 people) are involved in cults 'in one way or another', under which is included parents, friends and associates - hardly a robust way of measuring 'involvement'. However, the report notes, this is a relatively small number by comparison with the situation in Japan and Korea. Since there is no further analysis of the 'rush hour of the gods' one can only assume that this allusion is meant to reassure. Still without defining the term, the report lists a number of organisations that have been characterised as cults: the Magnificat Meal Movement in Queensland; the Family (Children of God); the Vibrational Individuation Program; 'organisations offering 'Personal Development' programs and claiming to be religious organisations (CA00:177) - presumably a huge and amorphous category; the Solar Temple in Canada and Switzerland; the Branch Davidians; Heaven's Gate. While these groups may well have been referred to in material the Committee received they constitute an undifferentiated smorgasbord whose significance is never made clear. The report refers to material produced by CultAware - which ceased to operate in 1999 - listing other organisations which may be characterised as cults.

At this point the report's neutrality lapses in a glaring turn of phrase. The passage is worth quoting in full:

Bodies such as the Church of Scientology and the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, sometimes known as 'the Moonies' after their founder the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, have also *been accused of being cults*. (CA00:177, emphasis added)

So cult is not to be understood as a neutral label which is adopted to avoid the 'coyness' of the term new religious movement: it denotes a deviant form of religion which is negatively stigmatised, as a moment's reflection will reveal. By contrast, Anglicans would not be *accused of* being a church, and as far as I am aware the organisation for which I work has never been *accused of* being a university. In the absence of a working definition of the terminology used in the report the negative connotations of the term cult are inescapable. But perhaps one reason for the persistent avoidance of the definitional problem is a consensual 'we know what we mean by cult' - and that this derives from a popular stereotype.

Belatedly the report offers two typologies of cults, the first of which derives not from Roy Wallis but from Max Wallace. It is suggested that cults could fall into the following categories: religious; cosmological; personal development; healing; and political. This is a completely unfamiliar typology and bears no relation to any of the more established versions (see for example York, 1995:chap 7). The research on which it is based and published discussions of its utility are not stated, though it could be suggested that the distinction between 'religious' and 'cosmological', as well as that between 'personal development' and 'healing' might be difficult to sustain. A second typology based on a breakdown of inquiries made to CultAware indicates that cults could be broken down into religious; therapeutic/personal development (note the collapsing of two separate categories in the previous typology); new age; Eastern meditation; commercial; and occult/satanic. Again, the utility of this typology is not explored, nor are the implications of each category for recruitment and basis of membership as is the case in more established typologies. It appears that while there is an attempt at a more solidly based analysis in the report's definition of such terms as 'religion', in the case of cults it is content to settle for choreographed hearsay.

An example of this approach follows the typological section:

Dr Wallace suggested that there are differences between religions and cults. Religions are more outward looking and more public in their affairs than cults, which tend to be more inward looking, committed to their own affairs and totally ensconced in the activities of members inside the organisations. While mainstream religions are *not so concerned as once they were*, recruitment is the reason for the existence of cults and he said that they spend a great deal of time at this work.

It is also possible for cult-like activity to occur within mainstream religions. Regimented practices can develop and individuals seek to control the behaviour and the thought processes of individuals within a group, thus giving it a cult-like appearance. (CA00:178, emphasis added)

Leaving aside the question of what this actually means - what is it, for instance, that mainstream religions are supposed to be not so concerned about? - the suggestion that all groups in this category pursue recruitment as their principal *raison d'être* flies in the face of the many pieces of research which see the issue of recruitment as a key means of distinguishing *between* different categories of new religious movement. And what are the 'regimented practices' that can develop within mainstream groups? - rituals, perhaps? Given the report's propensity to accept negative evaluations uncritically, it gives short shrift to observations of a less alarmist kind, as their next comment reveals:

Prof Gary Bouma stated that most cults 'are not worth watching' because they are simply minor variations on some other religious beliefs. In particular, he noted that it is hard to differentiate some cults from intense Protestant groups.

(CA00:179)

The report refers to the 1998 report and cites in detail the material from CultAware which revisits the psychiatric criteria of Singer and Clark before returning to the observations of Dr Wallace and his distinction between 'harmless' and 'harmful' cults, the latter including groups who are 'hostile to their own members' (CA00:180). His material is supplemented by that of Cult Information and Family Support Inc (CIFS), which suggested that a register of all cults in Australia should be maintained in which information similar to that required under Company law could be disclosed. Furthermore, 'recruiters should have to wear identification badges, showing their name and the name of the organisation and, as appropriate, the name of any parent organisation. Prospective members should also be informed of any special dietary restrictions. Finally, information should be available about the daily routine of any group, such as the repetitive chanting that can lead to hypnotism and mind control' (CA00:181). Failure to observe any of these regulations could lead to prosecution by a statutory authority. While it might be facetious to point out that the Mormons have solved the identity tag problem and that the Rule of St Benedict is a model document on the subjects of dietary restriction and daily routine, not to mention chanting, the reference by CIFS to hypnosis and mind control once again rehearses the 1970s psychiatric opinions of anti-cultists such as Singer, and is furthermore contradicted both by scientific research and by legal decisions in countries such as the USA. As Anthony points out:

...it is well established in the relevant scientific communities (i.e., psychology and psychiatry) that hypnosis is not an effective technique for causing people to engage involuntarily in conduct that is immoral, illegal, or against their own self-interest. (Anthony, 1999:444)

Without comment, the report then cites a *Canberra Times* article on the activities of the Anti-Cult Movement, described as 'a reactionary movement of inquisitors' (CA00:182). Ironically, it is precisely such views that the report so uncritically retails.

Finally, the report arrives at its conclusions and recommendation, in which the deeply negative tone is reiterated. The existence of cults and the practices in which they engage 'raises serious issues about the right of the State, or the international community via its legal instruments, to be involved in such issues as the individual's right to join a *legal* organisation, or parents' rights to raise their children in accordance with their beliefs' (CA00:183, emphasis added). The possibility of formulating 'guidelines for the practices of cults' is mooted. Once again the issue of coercion is introduced by reference to 'cases where influence is used to force a continuation of membership, or where other rights and freedoms are actually *or potentially* threatened (CA00:183, emphasis added). Given the report's amorphous and ill-defined concept of 'cult' and the scientifically unsupported opinions about coercion on which it relies, the legal intervention envisaged is extremely difficult to justify. And the report itself

tacitly acknowledges this when it notes that many of the recommendations made by CIFS (name tags, diets and timetables) 'would, unfortunately, not be practical to implement' (CA00:184) because 'There would be a considerable problem in defining the groups that would be subjected to the regime suggested' (CA00:184). Precisely so.

The report notes that the earlier report (CA98) had recommended that the Attorney-General should convene an inter-faith dialogue to examine coercion in cults and to formulate minimum standards for the practices of religious groups (though, as noted earlier, it is not clear that the report regards 'cults' as religious groups). Stating that the Attorney-General had given no response to any of the recommendations of the earlier report - though he had in fact recorded his decision not to implement the main recommendation to provide a Religious Freedom Act (Bouma, 1999:292) - the most recent report ends rather lamely:

It may not be possible to arrive at a set of guidelines or minimum standards for the practices of cults. It is far from clear how practical and enforceable any set of guidelines would be. For all those who are connected with cults, however, there would be value in undertaking such a dialogue, as it would provide valuable information on how cults actually operate. (CA00:184)

The single recommendation is that the Attorney-General should 'give consideration to the convening of an inter-faith dialogue to formulate a set of minimum standards for the practices of cults.' (CA00:184)

As a final reflection on these two reports, it is clear that the discourse deployed was substantially flawed by the assumption that an identifiable category of 'cult' (or in parts of the first report, 'new religious movement') could be isolated in terms of which certain conclusions might be drawn and recommendations made. But instead of adopting an approach which incorporated research-based typologies the reports relied instead on opinion which came disproportionately from antagonistic sources. Hence the reports lapse into popular stereotypes and what has been termed choreographed hearsay. Consequently they provide little in the way of empirical observation and their interpretations are crude and poorly informed. Evidence for this is unconsciously admitted in the conclusions of the second report with reference to the prospect of 'valuable information on how cults actually operate'. This information exists in such profusion that, in the words of one scholar, 'Might much of the research energy expended on the minority and marginal phenomenon of the NRM have been more profitably applied to the investigation of less exotic mainstream religious organizations?' (O'Toole, 2000:395) The problem with these reports is that they failed to recognise the appropriate expertise on which reliable conclusions might be based and sound policies developed; instead, they lent themselves to the agendas of interest groups. One has to conclude that in their attempts to investigate the nature of NRMs the reports are expensive but largely futile exercises.

Note

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