

The Family Survival Trust, *Coercive Control in Cultic Groups in the United Kingdom*. London: The Family Survival Trust, 2022. 82p. No ISBN. Available for download at <https://bit.ly/3AFgFBK>.

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A “report” on *Coercive Control in Cultic Groups in the United Kingdom*, by a British organization called The Family Survival Trust, has been published in July 2022, and widely publicized through British media. The aim of the “report” is to support, by presenting the results of an ad hoc survey, the Trust’s lobbying efforts to extend to “cults” existing UK legislation against coercive behavior in family and interpersonal relationships, defined as the use of “assault, threats, humiliation, and intimidation, and other abuse.”

What is The Family Survival Trust? It was once called FAIR (Family Action Information Rescue)—but “Rescue” was changed into “Resource” in 1994, after the group had been involved in controversies about “cultists” “rescued” through deprogramming. It is a historical British anti-cult organization and the local affiliate of FECRIS, the European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Cults and Sects. Wisely, the “report” never mentions the affiliation with FECRIS, an organization that is experiencing a crisis after the Russian war in Ukraine. FECRIS’ problems come from the staunch support its Russian affiliate organizations, whose names no longer appear in its website, and its current board member and Vice President until 2021 Alexander Dvorkin, offer to the Russian aggression, claiming that “cults” are behind the Ukrainian resistance (Berzano et al. 2022).

How was the survey conducted? A simple answer is that we do not know. The report tells us that “105 people were surveyed about their experiences of being in cults in the UK or cults based in the UK” (2). We have experience of surveys, and

we know that a survey is only as good as its sample. How was the sample selected? Again, we do not know but a clue is that 74% stated that “cult education” of the type provided by the Trust is a key element in “recovery” from the “cults” (11). This suggests that the majority of, if not all, the 105 respondents were “apostates,” i.e., former members of groups labeled as “cults” who have been socialized by the Trust or by others into an anti-cult subculture, and have turned into active opponents of the movements they have left.

“Apostate” is not an insult, nor is it a synonym of “ex-member.” Scholars of religion have demonstrated that only a minority of those who leave a religious group turn into active opponents of it, i.e., into “apostates.” Most just go on with their lives, and are not interested in joining crusades against the movements they have left. “Apostates,” however, are the only ex-members the anti-cult movements use as testimonials and introduce to the media (Introvigne 2022a).

Obviously, a survey conducted among apostates only does not tell us what movements labeled as “cults” are all about, although it may be interesting to understand the attitudes of the apostates. If somebody would conduct a survey among militant followers of Donald Trump about the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, the results would likely be that 100% of the respondents believe that the vote was stolen by the Democrats. The survey would not prove that this was the case (as we all know, courts of law have determined otherwise), it would just confirm to us that Trump supporters do believe in this false theory. Similarly, what the Trust’s survey tells us is that apostates hate “cults” and want them punished by the laws. We knew this already, but the question is how representative 105 hand-picked apostates are of the broader constituency of those who have left new religious movements, not to mention those who happily remain there.

Some answers are quite surrealistic. For instance we read that 66% of the respondents “experienced group-directed celibacy” (50). Had the Trust interviewed Roman Catholic priests, the percentage would have been 100% (although perhaps not all respected the “directions” about celibacy in practice), but what this proves about “coercive control” is unclear. The source of some information is even less clear. We read that it is “estimated” that “1,500 to 2,000 cults currently operate in the UK.” (8). The number appears fantastic, and the source quoted is a BBC radio show advertising the Trust and its survey. There, we hear the estimate of 1,500 to 2,000 “cults” active in Britain from the voice of

anti-cultist and “exit counselor” Graham Baldwin, who does not explain how he calculated the figure (Stonehouse 2021). This is beyond bad scholarship, and verges on intellectual fraud.

Irrespective of discussions about “coercive control” in family or interpersonal settings, in the Trust’s report the cat comes out of the bag as early as page 2, where we read that “coercive control” is “also known as brainwashing” (2). We understand that what the Trust wants is legislation criminalizing brainwashing. There is only one problem with this. Brainwashing does not exist. Mainline scholars of new religious movements have debunked it as a pseudo-scientific theory already in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the authors (Introvigne) published this year a short book on the subject with Cambridge University Press (Introvigne 2022b), which also reviews the detailed studies of the other author (Richardson) on both “brainwashing” and methodological problems in the study of new religious movements (Richardson 1985, 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1993, 1996, 2014, 2015; Ginsburg and Richardson 1998; Kilbourne and Richardson 1984; Richardson, Balch and Melton 1993; Richardson and Introvigne 2001, 2007).

Our colleague Dick Anthony (1939–2022), who passed away in July this year, played a key role as an expert witness in the *Fishman* case of 1990, which remains a decisive American legal precedent establishing that brainwashing theories about new religious movements are not part of mainline science (United States District Court for the Northern District of California 1990).

There is a tiny minority of scholars who accept the notion of “brainwashing,” including a co-author of the Trust’s report, Alexandra Stein. As W. Michael Ashcraft wrote in the standard textbook about the history of the academic study of new religious movements, these scholars seceded from the mainline field and created something called “cultic studies,” which lives in its own isolated bubble. “Cultic studies,” Ashcraft wrote, were never accepted as “mainstream scholarship.” They continued as “a project shared by a small cadre of committed scholars” but not endorsed by “the larger academic community, nationally and internationally” (Ashcraft 2018, 9).

The survey argues that brainwashing does exist in “cults” by citing responses from its (largely self-selected) sample about three different categories of behavior. The first includes serious crimes, such as coercing members to “prostitution” (38, 52), physical violence, rape, and sexual abuse. Obviously, we do not

condone any of these, and are aware that they may occur in some new religious movements just as they occur in traditional religions. Pedophile Catholic priests and terrorists who use or misuse the name of Islam are part of old rather than new religious traditions. When these crimes are committed, they should be reported to the police, whose investigations may lead to trials where courts of laws will determine whether the suspects are indeed guilty. To achieve this result, there is no need of new anti-cult laws. Terrorism, assault, rape, and sexual abuse are already punished by existing and regularly enforced statutes.

There are also laws against financial contributions and donations so extravagant that they come close to extortion or fraud, although they should be interpreted conservatively, to avoid discriminatory situations where donations to “normal” religions are tolerated while money given to unpopular groups is regarded by definition as obtained through fraud. The European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2011 and 2013 that France cannot use the argument that they are given to “cults” rather than bona fide religions to argue that gifts to the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other groups are not legitimate donations (European Court of Human Rights 2011, 2013a, 2013b).

The incidence of rape (50) and other crimes (10), of which those who participated in the survey stated they were either coerced participants or victims is high, but this is easily explained by the fact that it is more likely for those who were abused to contact anti-cult movements and become apostates.

The second category includes practices that, while disliked by some, have already been examined by courts of law and found not to be illegal. One is shunning (20–3), the teaching and practice by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other religions, that members in good standing of their religion limit or cease their contacts with disfellowshipped ex-members and those who have formally left the group, unless they are cohabiting relatives. We have both written about the issue (Introigne 2021, 2022c; Richardson 2021), and listed a large number of court decisions in several countries, which have concluded that the practice is not illegal.

It would also be difficult to legislate against shunning, as the Trust’s report requests. The law cannot compel anybody to associate with former friends one no longer trusts, and many divorced ex-spouses as well as their relatives and supporters shun divorced partners from whom they feel betrayed. The Trust can

answer that it only wants the teaching of shunning to be prohibited, but if the practice is not illegal, teaching it cannot be illegal either.

Another group mentioned by name is the Korean movement Shincheonji (18–9) and its practice of inviting perspective converts to Bible study courses without disclosing which religious group is organizing them (on which see Introvigne 2020). The issue may become moot, as even opponents have recognized that now Shincheonji does use its name (Tan 2022), but the Korean Supreme Court has recently ruled that, while “ethically reprehensible,” the practice per se is not illegal (Supreme Court of Korea 2022). Also, it has nothing to do with brainwashing. If brainwashing were effective, “cults” could freely disclose their name and still brainwash their “victims.”

The third category includes practices that are part of the normal exercise of religious liberty in a pluralistic society. For example, some groups are stigmatized because they forbid extramarital or premarital sex. This is not specific of “cults,” and, although differently interpreted by confessors, is still part of the official teaching of the Catholic Church in its *Catechism*, the normative statement of its faith (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992, no. 2353), and of several conservative Christian denominations. If preaching against sex outside of the marriage is part of brainwashing, thousands of priests and pastors of mainline churches are guilty of it.

As is typical of anti-cult approaches, it seems that the report does not accept that believers can freely decide to surrender a part of their liberty to join a religious organization or order. We are told that 83% of the sample did unpaid labor (36), many were prevented from watching TV or going to the movies (10), and a majority had to swear total obedience to the leaders. What we are not told is how many of these apostate respondents had been ordinary members and how many had joined ordained communities comparable to a Catholic or Buddhist religious order. Cloistered Catholic nuns do not watch TV or go to the movies either, nor are they paid for their work in the convents. Both Buddhist and Catholic members of religious orders should accept that their superiors regulate many aspects of their lives. This is also part and parcel of the disciple-guru relationship in India, where “guru” is certainly not an insult and refers to a millennia-old form of spirituality.

This is part of the freedom of believers to decide how they want to live. Some lifestyles may be part of what 16<sup>th</sup>-century French philosopher Étienne de la

Boétie (1530–1563), who did not like it, called “voluntary servitude” (Anonymous [Étienne de la Boétie] 1577: but for the problem of identifying the “real” first French edition of the *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* see Calemard 1947; Barmann 1989). It is a lifestyle somewhat difficult to understand in our individualistic world. Yet, declaring that all those who embrace it are “brainwashed” and that the law should declare their way of living illegal denies the very bases of religious liberty.

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