

I

The Study of New Religious Movements

In reading the essays in this book you will learn that “cults” or new religious movements can and should be studied like any other social, cultural, and historical phenomena. Scholars have been accumulating reliable data and developing theories to explain the new religions in our midst and their activities for more than forty years (see Dawson 1998). Many mysteries remain and there is much left to study, but the gaps in our knowledge are the product of limited time, resources, and opportunities. There is nothing intrinsically beyond the pale of comprehension or threatening about “cults” as a subject of inquiry. To the contrary, as stressed by James Beckford in chapter 2, we must learn to accept that most NRMs differ very little in their nature and operation, and in their moral and social failings, from more conventional or mainstream religions (e.g., the Catholic Church or Methodists). Yet the controversy surrounding “cults” makes the study of NRMs unlike the study of these other conventional religions, and most other fields of social scientific research.

The study of NRMs was sparked in part by the emergence of “cults” as a social problem in the late twentieth-century societies of the modern West. Families were angered when their adult sons and daughters left them behind, and abandoned the conventional career paths they were pursuing, to join intense religious groups of unfamiliar origins

and orientations. As families and other concerned people began to press the authorities to take action against the new religions – to restrict their activities or suppress them altogether – many scholars of religion saw the need to replace public prejudice or simply fear with a more reliable understanding of these groups and their members. Why were people converting to these new and often strange religions? What were these groups trying to accomplish? What was life in them like? Were they potentially dangerous to society or the individuals in them? In seeking to answer these and many other related questions the sociologists, psychologists, and religious studies scholars who dared to study these groups found themselves embroiled in often heated disputes with other claimants to “the truth.” They also found themselves struggling to overcome the stigma associated with studying such reviled groups, amongst their colleagues and the public.

Our first reading, Eileen Barker’s “The Scientific Study of Religion? You Must Be Joking!” clarifies the field of contention in which scholars of NRMs must operate. Cults often find their way into the news, and when they do there are commonly several different parties seeking to influence the reaction of the public. Barker, a leading sociologist of religion from England, compares and contrasts the assumptions, objectives, and biases of the different groups trying to shape our understand-

ing of “cults”: the NRMs themselves, sociologists of religion, the organized representatives of the anti-cult movement, the media, therapists, and representatives of the legal system (the police, lawyers, and judges). Sometimes the interests of some of these groups converge (e.g., when journalists turn to the anti-cult movement for sensationalistic comments on an NRM), more often they clash (e.g., when the courts want clear and simple answers to complex questions from sociologists acting as witnesses in legal disputes). Any scholar seeking to succeed in the field must be prepared to cope with the frustration and hostility stemming from this clash of interests and information. While the organized opposition to “cults” will seek to undermine the credibility of the scholar because of any positive pronouncements made about NRMs, the cults will be trying to co-opt the scholar and use the same pronouncements as propaganda for their cause. To maintain even the appearance of objectivity in such circumstances requires a fine balancing act.

Likewise any student seeking to understand NRMs must recognize that the views expressed about “cults” will tend to vary systematically according to the personal, and even more the professional or vocational, interests of the persons providing the information. As almost all of the players in the field of contention employ information selectively to suit their purposes, special caution must be exercised to sort the wheat of reliable data and insights from the all-too abundant chaff of hearsay, innuendo, and ridicule.

As indicated in Philip Jenkins’s fine discussion of the controversies surrounding NRMs in nineteenth-century America, in chapter 5 of this book, the clash of views over the legitimacy of new religions is not new. Throughout the ages the defenders of the status quo have feared and attacked the proponents of religious innovation. In our second reading, “The Continuum Between ‘Cults’ and ‘Normal’ Religion,” another leading British sociologist

of religion, James Beckford, argues that the peculiar intensity and scope of today’s cult controversy stems in part from several characteristics of life in advanced industrial societies. The extremity of religious commitment displayed by members of contemporary NRMs is perceived as an affront to the sensibilities of modern, rationalized, commodified, and secularized societies. And the clash of sensibilities is accentuated by the sweeping changes in modern means of communication that place the NRMs under an unprecedented measure of scrutiny. In support of the argument Beckford suggests that the intolerance directed at NRMs is largely the result of “skirmishes along a shifting frontier” of points of conflict between the new religions and “various non-religious conditions imposed by state authorities.” In other words, the difference between a “normal” and “abnormal” religion often has little to do with any intrinsically religious differences. NRMs must be understood, then, in terms of the broader changes affecting their social context. They are products of, and responses to, the new social pressures to which we are all exposed in late modernity, as well as the age-old spiritual aspirations of humanity (see Dawson 2001).

Students learning about NRMs need to keep both social contexts of contention in mind when reading and studying the literature in the field: consider who is providing the information and why, and recognize that the controversy surrounding NRMs is not so much a clash of strange versus familiar ideas, as a clash of visions of how we should live, and how our societies should be structured.

References

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CHAPTER ONE

The Scientific Study of Religion? You Must Be Joking!

EILEEN BARKER

Most of us who have been involved in the study of NRMs during the past quarter of a century or so have enjoyed learning much of interest for the study of religion in general. But several of us have also been bruised and confused, a few of us quite sorely, because of the threat that we have presented to others by our claims to have a more “scientific” – or at least a more balanced, objective, and accurate – or, at very least, a less biased, subjective, and wrong – understanding of the movements than they have.

This has led to a certain amount of navel contemplation about how we might justify our research. *Are* we “doing” a scientific study of religion? What *is* a scientific study of religion? To what extent and why might we claim that we “know better” than some others, including even those who provide the raw data of our research? And, just as importantly, on what matters must we be wary to acknowledge “that whereof we may not speak” – not, that is, as persons claiming to speak as social scientists? . . .

Coming as I do from the London School of Economics, it is not surprising that I have been profoundly influenced by the work of Karl Popper, and if I were forced to select a single criterion that distinguishes a scientific from a pseudo-scientific enterprise, I would chose *to start* with empirical refutability (Popper 1963: 37; 1972: ch 1). But, that said, one needs to continue (as, indeed, Popper

did) by adding a great number of qualifications, especially where the study of society is concerned. Differences between the natural and social sciences that are of relevance in this paper are (a) ontological – concerned with the nature of social reality; (b) epistemological – concerned with how we gain our knowledge of social reality; and (c) ethical and political – how we evaluate our own and others’ construction of reality – and what we do about it.

Primary and Secondary Constructions of Social Reality

For the sake of the argument, an analytical distinction needs to be made between primary and secondary constructions of reality. The former comprise the basic data of social science; the latter are accounts of the former. The primary construction of an NRM is the product of direct and indirect interactions between the members of the movement and, to some extent, between members and the rest of society.

Secondary constructions are depictions of the movement that are offered in the public arena by sociologists and others, including the movement itself, *about* the movement. Secondary constructions are, thus, more conscious than primary constructions, although part of the process of the latter may be quite conscious, and the former are by no means

always consciously thought through. It should, however, be recognized that the distinction between primary and secondary constructions becomes blurred when one is taking a wider reality into account. Thus, if (as in this paper) we are concerned with “the cult scene,” secondary constructions, including those of the sociologist, make a difference and must be considered as part of the primary constructions of *that* social reality.

The concept of social reality is fraught with tensions and paradox. It appeals to both realism and idealism insofar as it is an objective reality, the existence of which no individual members of a social group can wish away any more than they can wish away the existence of a brick wall. At the same time, social reality exists only as ideas in people’s heads; if *no one* took it into account (positively or negatively, consciously or unconsciously), it would not exist (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Put another way, although social reality exists independently of the volition of any particular individual, it can exist only insofar as individual human minds are continually recognizing it and acting as the media through which are processed the cultural ideas and meanings, and the roles and expectations that arise from and result in its existence.

This means that, *pace* Wuthnow (1987), if as social scientists we want to understand what is going on, we have no option but to use ourselves as “a medium.” A robot cannot do social science; it is not capable of *Verstehen*. It cannot further our understanding beyond the very important ways that logic can further our understanding of what we already know. We need to have some knowledge about the meanings that situations have for individuals. We need to be able to understand how a situation can be perceived.

Of course, others will not perceive it in the same way as we do – *no two* people will perceive a situation in exactly the same way – none of us *ever* has the exact same understanding or perception as anyone else. But – and this is just as important – our perceptions are more or less shared. If they were not shared at all, we would have no society (and no possibility of a social science); and if

they were totally shared, again we would have no society, for there would be no dynamic – no force for change, negotiation, or adjustment to external circumstances.

But these differences between individual perceptions of social reality are not random. The variation will depend upon such factors as people’s innate characteristics, their past experiences, hopes, fears, interests, assumptions, values, and expectations and the social position from which they view the reality that confronts them. A new convert will view the NRM from one perspective, seasoned leaders from a different perspective; member’s perceptions will differ from nonmembers’; and different groups of nonmembers will perceive the NRM in the light of their own particular interests.

Not only will people *perceive* the movement from different perspectives, they will also *describe* and, perhaps, explain the movement in different ways. Consciously or unconsciously, they will *select* from among the features presented to them. Again, what is included and what excluded in the process of creating their secondary constructions will not be random, but significantly influenced according to their interests.

The interests of some personally or professionally motivated secondary constructors may lead them to take matters further than a passive reception of their perception. Some, wanting to reinforce an image that has already been delineated, will place themselves in a position that will protect it from disconfirmation and/or supply confirming evidences. Others, wanting to test their secondary construction according to the Popperian criterion, will systematically try to refute their hypotheses. To do this they may actively engage in research which involves as close a scrutiny as possible of the primary construction.

Making a Difference

When I was a student, it was part of the conventional wisdom of the methodology which we were taught that social scientists should be clinically detached observers who noted what

was going on but did not allow their observations to affect the data. Such a position is to some extent possible when the scientist is observing through a one-way glass, watching a covertly shot film, or reading diaries or other written materials. But for a number of reasons discussed elsewhere (Barker 1987), I and others have come to believe that such an approach is not only difficult but methodologically inappropriate for the kind of research that is needed for an acceptable secondary construction of NRMs. There is some information that one can acquire only by becoming part of the data and, thus, playing a role in the ongoing social construction of reality. I would even go so far as to say that to remain physically distanced from the data can be methodologically reprehensible – an abrogation of one’s responsibility as a social scientist.

But as we step outside the Ivory Tower of academia and become part of the process that we are researching, we are, of course, placing our pristine purity in jeopardy. Most social scientists who have worked “in the field” are aware of the impact that they might have and take this into account when they come to analyze their data. To what extent does the involvement enhance or diminish our “scientific” study of religion? Before addressing this question, let me give some examples to illustrate the variety of ways in which I personally have become conscious that my research was “making a difference.”

First of all, just being there can make a difference. When I began studying the Unification Church in the early 1970s, it was a relatively closed community with strong boundaries distinguishing “them” from “us.” To have someone living in the community who was not part of “us” threatened and weakened the boundary and, thus, the beliefs and actions associated with a strong-group situation (Douglas 1970). The very fact that a normally impermeable boundary *can* be permeated by an outsider affects the group and its members in a number of concrete ways. For example, one girl left, not because I advised her to do so but, she said, because my anomalous existence as someone who could live

both within and without led her to realize that she did not have to make the stark choice between *either* a godly *or* a satanic lifestyle; there could be a middle way which would allow her to pursue an alternative way of serving God without having to deny all that was good about her Unification experience.

At the same time, it is possible that others stayed in the movement, at least for slightly longer than they might otherwise have done, because of the existence of a “professional stranger” (Barker 1987). My presence meant there was someone who would neither report back to the leadership, nor go to the media, but on whom they could off-load their anxieties and frustrations.

Asking questions (in formal interviews, general discussions, or through questionnaire) that no one else has previously asked can lead to an unexpected “raising of consciousness.” In the words of one respondent, “It made me take out and look at some of the things I’d been keeping in the pending tray.” Sometimes, I was told, the result was a deeper understanding of the theology, but on other occasions the consequence was a growing irritation or suspicion of the leadership. Occasionally a change would be brought about as the result of a group interview offering members the opportunity to discuss openly matters about which they normally kept silent. I gather that a number of fairly radical changes were introduced to an American ISKCON Temple following a day I had spent with a group of female devotees who had not previously shared their feelings of how they were treated by the male hierarchy.

As my research into NRMs progressed, I found myself affecting the situation more consciously. First, I was being asked to mediate between members of movements and their parents, who also formed part of my data. The fact that I could explain the perspective of the movement to nonmembers (and that of nonmembers to members) meant that there was frequently an increased communication and, sometimes, accommodation to the others’ points of view as they each reached an increased understanding of how “the other side” saw things.

Then “making a difference” became not merely a result of face-to-face interaction with those individuals who formed part of my data. Publishing books and papers, appearing as a witness in court cases, and making statements in various media about my conception of the NRMs meant that my findings were being presented to a wider audience. Like other scholars, I was offering an alternative perspective that questioned many of the existing secondary constructions and their taken-for-granted assumptions. I was affecting the data not only as part of a methodological procedure, but also as part of a political action.

Once the results of my research became public it became increasingly obvious that they were not to go unchallenged. I had initially contacted the anti-cult movement (ACM) with the somewhat naive belief that, as we were both interested in finding out about NRMs, we might exchange information that could be helpful to us both. My overtures were not merely rejected, the anti-cultists started to launch a full-scale *ad hominem* attack on anything I said or wrote in public; having gone to the NRMs for a significant, though by no means complete part of my research, I was clearly “on the other side.” To the astonishment and/or amusement of anyone who knew me, I found myself being labeled a Moonie, a Scientologist, a fundamentalist Christian, or a cult lover – or, by the more benign, an innocent who was being deceived by the movements. *What* I said was rarely questioned – except, curiously enough, for statements for which I had incontrovertible evidence. The first major bone of contention was the membership figures that I publicized, both to the annoyance of the Unification Church (who did not want either their members or the general public to be aware of the very high turnover rates) and to the fury of those members of the ACM who were (and in some cases still are) insistent that the movements use irresistible and irreversible mind control techniques – which would, of course, imply that Unification membership was in the hundreds of thousands if not in the millions, rather than the rather paltry hundreds that I was reporting.

The shift from a methodological to a more politico-ethical involvement in the “cult scene” became even more marked when I reached the conclusion that a considerable amount of unnecessary suffering and unhappiness might be avoided were social scientific constructions of NRMs to compete more robustly in the marketplace. My “Road to Damascus” was an ACM Family Support Group meeting at which an ex-member, whom I happened to know as a thoughtful and honest woman, had been invited to tell her story. It soon became evident that things were not going according to plan. She was resisting the pressure that was being put on her to say how she had suffered, how she had been deceived, and how she had been under the influence of mind control. It was suggested that she had not *really* left the movement and that she was determined to deceive the assembled company. Trying to pour oil on troubled waters, someone asked if she had anything to say that would help the assembled parents. A woman then stood up and shouted “We don’t want to hear this; it’s just deceit and lies. It’s not helpful at all. We don’t want to hear any more.” At that point I stopped taking notes. Something more, it seemed, needed to be done.

With the support of the British government and mainstream churches, I set up a charity called INFORM (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements) with the aim of providing information that was as objective, balanced, and up to date as possible. In the seven years that have ensued, thousands of relatives and friends of NRM members, ex-members, the media, local and national government, police, social welfare workers, prison chaplains, schools, universities and colleges, traditional religions, and NRMs themselves have contacted the office (located at the London School of Economics) for information and help (Barker 1989a).

I did not consider the founding of INFORM to be part of my research, although it has certainly resulted in my learning a great deal more about the “cult scene.” Rather, the aim was to *use* professional knowledge to challenge alternative secondary constructions.

It was not to fight for The Truth in any ideological sense but, minimally, to contest *untrue* statements about NRMs (whether they originate from an NRM or anyone else) . . .

Although INFORM does not see itself as an advice center, it points out the likely consequences of a variety of actions, ranging from joining a new religion to trying to abduct someone from one; it has also been instrumental in mediating between members and their families, and while it certainly does not have a magic wand with which it can solve all problems, the reliability of INFORM's information and its knowledge of the social processes involved in their relationships with the outside world has meant that it has been able to relate to the NRMs in such a way that many of them are willing to cooperate in such matters as putting parents back in touch with their children, or refunding money obtained under duress . . .

It would have been ingenuous to assume that there would not be opposition to an organization such as INFORM. What was unexpected, however, was the virulence with which it has been attacked by a few NRMs, the ACM, some sections of the media, and a small number of individuals with opposing interests. By the late 1980s, it appeared that British anti-cultists were directing more of their resources to trying to discredit us rather than the new religions . . .

The battles continue of course, and while we are making a difference, other people's secondary constructions are also making a difference to "the cult scene" *and* to us. But before giving further consideration to the methodological, ethical, and political implications of such involvement, let us turn to the marketplace and compare the secondary constructs of social science with the competition.

Table 1.1 summarizes some basic differences between six ideal types of secondary constructors: sociologists and others involved in the scientific study of religion, members of the new religions themselves, the anti-cult movement, the media, the legal profession, and therapists (the first four constructors are analyzed in greater detail in Barker 1993a). The types were chosen on the grounds that it

is they who feature most prominently in the competition with social scientists, but the table could be extended to include the police, the social services, clergy, theologians, educationalists, and any number of other categories of constructors . . .

The sociology of religion

Obviously the particular aims of those concerned with the scientific study of religion will differ from person to person, but most would agree that they wish to present as accurate, objective, and unbiased an account as possible. They will want to describe, understand, and explain social groupings and such phenomena as the power structures, communication networks, and belief systems that enable members to do (or prevent them from doing) things that they could not (or could) do in other social situations. Social scientists will also want to explore and account for the range of different perceptions held by individual actors and to assess the consequences of such differences. The nature of social reality means that the regularities of social science are relative to social space and time in a way that the laws of nature seldom are. Nonetheless, sociological constructions do contain empirically refutable statements, and it is part of the logic of science that the methods and results of its research should be available for public scrutiny: "Our great instrument for progress is criticism" (Popper 1973: 34).

There are those who believe that the task of science is to find out the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I disagree. *No one* ever tells the whole truth; no one ever *could*. All secondary constructions consist of both more and less than the primary construction. Although looking for nothing but the truth in the sense that we are committed to accuracy and eliminating falsehoods from both our own and others' constructions, social scientists *select* what will go into our constructions, excluding some aspects that others include, and including further aspects that others exclude.

Not only do social scientists include and exclude for methodological reasons, but also,

Table 1.1 Competing logics in secondary constructions of reality

<i>Secondary constructors</i>	<i>Interest and/or aim</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Data selected for inclusion</i>	<i>Data systematically excluded</i>	<i>Mode of communication</i>	<i>Relationship with SoR</i>
Sociology of Religion	Unbiased and objective sociological description, understanding and explanation	Comparison; methodological agnosticism; interview; questionnaire; observation	Individual and social levels; control groups; wider context	Non-empirical evaluation; transcendent variables; definitional essentialism	Scholarly publications; through other secondary constructs	Effect of methods of research; effect of use made of research
NRMs	Primary construction; good PR, promote beliefs	Selective reflection on primary construction	Good behavior; supernatural claims	Bad skeletons; esoteric gnoses	Literature; witnessing	Control of access; use positive evidence
ACM	Warn; expose; control; destroy	Ex-members; parents; media (may be circular)	Atrocity tales	Good behavior; changes for the better	Lobbying; newsletters; media	Use negative data; attack when positive data
Media	Good story; get/keep readers, viewers,	Interview where easy access and/or subject	Topical; relevant; sensational	Everyday; "normal"; unexceptionable	Newspapers, magazines, TV, radio; large public;	Preferred use of ACM where complementary

Law	and/or listeners	willing to talk; investigative journalism; press releases	Evidence presented by the two opposing sides; expert witnesses; legal precedent	Middle ground, not making positive or negative point; what deemed irrelevant to the case; inadmissible evidence	short shelf-life; difficult to check or question	interests; SoR used more if new, pithy, sexy and/or sensational
Law	“Justice” according to the law of the land; winning case for individual	Adversarial; confrontational; positive vs negative	Evidence presented by the two opposing sides; expert witnesses; legal precedent	Middle ground, not making positive or negative point; what deemed irrelevant to the case; inadmissible evidence	Legal judgments common law; media reports	Impartial expert or whose witness?
Therapy	Help client to get better and to cope with “reality”	Listen, accept, and/or construct client’s version of reality	Individual’s perception; pragmatic constructs	Other versions of reality	Direct to client; courts; media; professional carers	Competition over importance of “whole” and professional expertise

perhaps paradoxically, because it is only by doing this that an understanding of the primary construction may be transmitted to others. An example I sometimes use to illustrate the importance of *not* replicating the original too precisely is that of an actor playing a bore. The actor is successful in communicating something of the essence of being a bore only insofar as he is not boring. Similarly, in order to communicate something of the essence of an NRM, social scientists have to “interpret” or “translate” the primary constructions so that their audience can understand what may have been incomprehensible when they were looking at the movement itself. Raëlians can tell their parents what it means to them to be a Raëlian, but the parents may be incapable of hearing what is being said. There would be absolutely on point in the sociologist’s merely reproducing what the Raëlian says and does – this has to be put in a wider context; both more and less has to be offered to the parent – less, in that we do not tell the parent things that seem irrelevant (that they clean their teeth every morning) – more, in that we add information that relates what they believe and do to the understanding of the parent. For this we need to know not only what Raëlians believe and do, but also what the parent can understand. We are not being selective in the sense that we are being untruthful or keeping back truths; we are representing rather than presenting.

Thus, the constructs of social science *exclude details that do not seem to be of particular interest*. Part of what we decide *is* of interest will depend upon what we and our potential audience consider useful knowledge – either because we believe it will further our general understanding of social behavior, or because we believe that it could be of practical use in implementing our own or society’s interests.

Next, the constructs of social science *exclude theological judgments*. The sociology of religion is concerned with who believes what under what circumstances, how beliefs become part of the cultural milieu and are used to interpret people’s experiences, and what the consequences of holding particular

beliefs may be; but it can neither deny nor confirm ideological beliefs. Social scientists *qua* social scientists have to remain *methodologically agnostic*. The epistemology of an empirical science has no way of knowing whether God, gods, the Devil, angels, evil spirits, or the Holy Spirit have been acting as independent variables; and miracles, by definition, are beyond the purview of science.

Then, social scientists *stipulate* what they mean by particular concepts or use ideal types (Weber 1947: 92) for the purposes of a particular study, but they cannot claim that these definitions are either true or false, merely that they are more or less useful. Of course, concepts are “given” (data) in the sense that they are part of primary constructions and our accounts will *report* what people mean by concepts such as “religion.” We also note that different groups use, negotiate, or manipulate definitions to further their own interests (Barker 1994; Douglas 1966) . . .

Most social scientists would agree that they ought to try to *exclude their own subjective evaluations* from the actual collection and analysis of data. . . . Of course, as any methodology book will testify, there are many ways in which our values *do* enter the research and skew the outcome: we cannot interpret the reality that we are studying except by using our own subjective perception; concepts can be value laden; we may be working with unexamined assumptions which have implication for our perception; and so on. But we do try to be aware of and counter such obstacles by various techniques so as to produce descriptions that are as objective as possible in the sense that they are concerned with the object of our study rather than our own or others’ subjective beliefs.

But social science not only excludes ideological, definitional, and evaluative concerns, it *includes* interests that extend beyond any NRM under study. Study of the primary construction through interview, questionnaire, participant observation, and the examination of written material needs to be supplemented with data from further sources, all of which may be necessary, but none sufficient for the kind of picture that the sociologist needs to construct

(Barker 1984: 124–33). We may want to check where individual members are “coming from” by speaking to people who have known them both before and after their conversion. Ex-members comprise an invaluable source of further information and for checking the veracity of what members are reporting. It does, however, have to be remembered that no single member (past or present) is likely to know everything that is going on in the movement. The sociological construction of an NRM requires, moreover, information about yet others who have no relationship whatsoever with the movement. This is because a fundamental component of science is the comparative method, which, by putting the NRM in a wider frame of reference, brings *balance* into the equation. In order to be able to understand and test “what variable varies with what,” the primary construction has to be compared with other primary constructions, using control groups (although this has become distressingly rare in monographs) and techniques such as the statistical manipulation of data about the population as a whole to test for correlations. Such tools of the trade serve, minimally, to eliminate some mistakes that we might otherwise make.

The new religions

NRMs have an interest in gaining new members and, perhaps, political and financial or legal advantage by presenting a secondary construction of their own primary reality in the public domain. As with most organizations, one would expect the movement to select those aspects that show it in a favorable light and be less forthcoming about skeletons in the cupboard. Unlike the social scientist, the NRM will draw on nonempirical revelations to describe and explain at least part of its construction of reality (that, for example, God is responsible for revelations and conversions, and/or that evil forces are responsible for things that go wrong); and it will, of course, be anxious to proclaim the truth of its theological teachings – unless there are esoteric gnosés, in which case these will be kept secret.

Clearly, there is a sense in which an NRM has privileged access to its own reality – but it is also possible to argue that the very fact of their involvement means that members are unable or unwilling to see what is going on with the same detachment as some outsiders (Wilson 1970: ix–xiii). There are, however, members of NRMs such as Mickler (1980, 1992) and Jules-Rosette (1975) who, *as social scientists*, have done excellent work on their own NRMs.

The Anti-cult Movement (ACM)

The ACM includes a wide variety of organizations with members as diverse as anxious parents, ex-members, professional deprogrammers, and “exit counselors.” In some ways, the ACM can be seen as a mirror image of the NRM. Both tend to want a clear, unambiguous division between “us” and “them”; but while the NRM will select only good aspects, the ACM selects only bad aspects. Most ACM pronouncements tend to be about “destructive cults,” lumping all NRMs together as though they were a single entity, the sins of one being visited on all. Any evidence or argument that could complicate or disprove their negative construction (or reform that may be introduced) is more likely to be ignored or dismissed than denied.

As lobbyists, anti-cultists have to be proactive not only in promoting their constructions but also in denying or dismissing other constructions and denigrating the constructors. Sociological secondary constructions may appear more threatening to the ACM than those of the NRMs, the latter being more likely to agree with the ACM where there are clear boundaries; they can, furthermore, be goaded into reinforcing the anti-cult position by responding to it in an unambiguously negative fashion, exacerbating the process of “deviance amplification” and, thereby, justifying further accusations by the ACM.

Social scientists, members of the media, the legal profession, and therapists have a professional interest in their secondary constructions’ achieving their relevant aims, but they do not usually expect to gain much more from

their work in the area of NRMs than they would by doing their work well in any other area. When we turn to the ACM and NRMs, however, we find that most of the rank and file membership do their work either on a purely voluntary basis or with little more than living expenses because they believe, sometimes quite passionately, that what they are doing is right – they have a mission to fight evil.

There are, however, also “charismatic leaders” in the NRMs and “leading experts” in the ACM, both of whom may reap enormous financial benefits from having their constructions of reality accepted. Stories about the wealth controlled by Sun Myung Moon, L. Ron Hubbard, or Bhagwan Rajneesh (with his 97 Rolls Royces and collection of Rolex watches) are common enough. What is less well known is the vast amount of money at stake in the fostering of the brainwashing or mind control thesis in ACM secondary constructions. On the one hand, “deprogrammers” and, to a somewhat lesser extent, “exit counselors” can charge tens of thousands of dollars for their services; on the other hand, “expert witnesses” have charged enormous fees for giving evidence about brainwashing in court cases . . .

The sharp “them/us” perspective of the ACM is reflected in the fact that it frequently operates under a cloak of secrecy. Not only the NRMs, but also social scientists may be denied access to allegedly open meetings and refused requests for information or evidence that could corroborate assertions made in ACM constructions of reality. One anti-cultist who repeatedly claims that NRMs use hypnosis to recruit members refuses to tell me which movements he is talking about on the grounds that he does not trust me because I am “on the other side.” Other information that is presumably nonconfidential and which one might have thought the ACM would want widely disseminated is jealously guarded. The secrecy is, of course, perfectly understandable when it concerns the planning of an illegal kidnapping and deprogramming.

Given its aims, the ACM does not lay stress on either objectivity or balance in its secondary constructions of reality – in fact,

members will frequently admit quite openly that they consider a balanced presentation of the facts counterproductive . . .

As a matter of principle, anti-cultists are likely to refuse to have direct contact with the primary construction itself as a source of information. This is justified by the premise that cults are, almost by definition, bound to practice deception and are probably dangerous. Data for ACM stories tend, therefore, to be collected from anxious parents, disillusioned exmembers, and negative media reports. Often there is a circularity involved in that the anxious parents have been alerted to the negative aspects of their child’s movement by anti-cult “atrocious tales” (Shupe and Bromley 1980); the ex-members have been taught by deprogrammers or exit counselors to believe that they were brainwashed and that their whole experience is to be interpreted in negative terms (Lewis 1986; Solomon 1981; Wright 1987); and the media frequently get their stories from the ACM which then uses the fact that the story has appeared in print as proof that it has been independently verified. There have been cases where the media have included rebuttals to a story supplied to them by the ACM, which has then innocently asked why the question was raised in the first place, suggesting that there is no smoke without a fire – even when they themselves had kindled the fire . . .

The media

The overriding interest of the mass media is to get a good story that will keep the loyalty of readers, viewers, and/or listeners and, if possible, to gain new audiences. They are unlikely to be interested in presenting an everyday story of how “ordinary” life in an NRM can be, or even of the rewards that it offers contented members – unless it can expose these as fraudulent, fantastic, or sensational. The media are nearly always working to a tight deadline – very tight compared to the months or years that scholars may spend on their research. They are also limited in the amount of time or space that they have to present their story. Only rarely will the electronic media

concentrate on a single topic for more than thirty minutes and only rarely do the printed media allocate more than a few hundred words.

Pressure of space and time means that members of the media collect their data from sources selected for accessibility and the provision of good quotes. "The grieving mother" or "The man who risked prison to save a helpless victim from the clutches of a bizarre cult" are far more valuable informants than "The mother whose devotee son visits her on a regular basis," "The Moonie who passed his exams with good marks" – or, indeed, the academic who is full of long-winded qualifications. Many (though by no means all) of the media tend, moreover, to be remarkably reluctant to ask members of NRMs for their own versions of reality, and to dismiss press releases from the movements far more readily than they dismiss the information handed out by the ACM. This may seem somewhat surprising to anyone who has researched NRMs and learned what extraordinary statements they themselves are capable of producing; yet on numerous occasions when I have offered to give journalists a contact number for one of the movements, they have dismissed the offer, saying either that they would not get the truth or that their editors would expect them to use a more reliable source.

Unlike social scientists, the media are under no obligation to introduce comparisons to assess the relative rates of negative incidents. Thus, when reporting a tragedy or some kind of malpractice, they note in the headline that the victim or the perpetrator was a cultist, but are unlikely to mention it anywhere in the report if he or she were a Methodist. The result is that even if such tragedies and malpractices are relatively *infrequent* they would still be more visible and, thereby, become disproportionately associated with the NRMs in the public mind.

Not only does the logic of the aims and interests of the media result in their seldom being able to go into the kind of depth or ensure the kind of balance that social science would demand, their social position means that the secondary constructions that they

create are both powerful (due to their widespread circulation and interest-appeal) and extremely difficult to check or correct. Complaints and apologies can be made, but they rarely attract as much attention as the original story. Usually it is difficult to track down the story for a second look; a transient television report or a story in a newspaper or magazine long since thrown away leaves an impression but not something that can be scrutinized, and there are seldom references that can be followed up. Even with more balanced programs and articles, it is the more sensationalist images that are likely to stick in the mind. It is only those programs and stories selected by the ACM for quotation that are likely to be preserved for recycling.

The law

The primary interest of the law as represented by a judge and, sometimes, jury, is to ensure that justice is carried out according to the law of the land. No attempt is made to present a complete or balanced picture of a primary construction, but only to point to those aspects that could be of relevance to the case. Indeed, some information (such as previous convictions) that might be pertinent for a more general understanding are ruled out of court as inadmissible evidence. As far as the defense and the prosecution are concerned, their specific interest is to win the case for their clients. Each side will attempt to construct a picture of reality that is advantageous to its own position and disadvantageous to other side. Although it might be argued that, adjudicating between two opposing sides, the judge (or jury) would be able to reach a middle position, there is no guarantee that a middle position is a true position. To begin with, we may ask, middle of what? It is the court that has set the goal posts and the true position might or might not be somewhere (anywhere) between them.

The law does make use of "expert witnesses" who usually present their credentials as representatives of the scientific community, so one might, *prima facie*, expect the expert witness to produce a secondary construction

of reality that corresponds to that of the social scientist, but in fact this is not necessarily the case. One reason is that lawyers will invite those witnesses who are known to hold views that support their client's case, but a more fundamental reason is that it is the court that decides what questions will and will not be asked and, thus, answered.

In short, the adversarial procedure is to argue for and against opposing versions of reality, either or both of which may be grossly distorted versions of a primary construction. This might not matter if the procedure were used only for the purposes of the court. But there is plenty of evidence that decisions on one matter are frequently used by others to "prove" a version of reality that may have little relevance, even to what came up in the case (Barker 1989b: 197–201).

Therapists

Like defense lawyers, therapists and counselors have an interest in helping their client. But instead of needing to establish their client's version of reality to score a public victory over an opposing version, they may need to help the client to construct privately a new reality that he or she can live with and feel good about. Practices do, of course, vary enormously – many therapists will try to help the client to reach a clearer understanding of the primary construction in which the client is or was a participant – but it will be a practical construction that has the client at its center, rather than a balanced appraisal of the group as a whole. In fact, therapists who have been interested enough in NRMs to attend the INFORM counseling seminars will, when a particular client is referred to them, ask *not* to be given background information such as a detailed account of the movement in question. This is because they feel that it might interfere with their relationship with the client – it would be a kind of betrayal to hear a point of view other than that of the client.

Let me be quite clear, this is not a criticism of these therapists who play an effective role in their clients' recovery from difficult experiences. It is merely to point out that they have

a different aim from social scientists and will, therefore, use different methods and employ different kinds of knowledge; the secondary construction of the therapist can be different from but complementary to that of the social scientist. Conflicts between the two constructors emerge, however, when counselors and therapists claim to know what a particular movement – or NRMs in general – are like through their client-focused work. This is likely to arise when therapists give evidence as expert witnesses in court or present their stories to the media and/or at public meetings. Again, there would be no conflict if the stories were confined to descriptions of ways in which people might be helped rather than claims being made that these are proven accurate, balanced portrayals of the primary construction as they come from a "professional" source. They are, of course, from a professional source, but, as with the court, the profession is not one that aims primarily to construct an accurate and balanced account.

Two of the main situations in which counselors and therapists have crossed swords with sociologists are (a) over the so-called brainwashing or mind-control thesis (see above) and (b) over allegations of ritual satanic abuse. Studies in the latter area have revealed a considerable body of evidence showing that therapists may not only help clients to construct a secondary version of reality, but some construct a version of reality themselves, and then put considerable pressure on the client to accept it (Mulhern 1984; Richardson et al. 1991; but see also Houston 1993: 9).

Beyond the Ivory Tower

Although social science cannot claim to be as "scientific" as the natural sciences, it is unquestionably more scientific than its competitors. The *logic* of its approach is infinitely superior for producing balanced and accurate accounts of NRMs than is that of any of its competitors. Undifferentiated relativism, as espoused by some of the exponents of deconstructionism and postmodernism, seems to me to be just plain silly. The rules of science (even

loosely characterized as in this paper) are not merely a language game; they are an assurance of a minimal, albeit limited, epistemological status. We would be crazy to argue that *anything* goes – some things are patently false, and empirical observation can demonstrate this to anyone with their faculties in good working order. Assuredly, some statements (moral evaluations and claims about the supernatural) are not empirically testable and it would be equally crazy to believe that we could prove or disprove them to someone holding a different opinion. But such statements are not within the purview of social science. I am not suggesting that social science holds a monopoly on The Truth. Far from it. But I am suggesting that the methods of social science (its openness to criticism and empirical testing and, above all, its use of the comparative method) ought to ensure that it produces a more balanced and *more useful* account than that of its competitors for seeing the way things are and the way things might be – *not* for deciding how they ought to be, but for implementing decisions about how they ought to be.

Should social scientists get involved with the use to which their secondary constructions are put and, thereby, become part of the primary construction of the wider “cult scene” not merely for methodological reasons (as discussed earlier), but for ethical or political purposes? Is such involvement compatible with, inimical to, or a question of indifference for the scientific study of religion? What if, in the course of our research, we frequently come across misunderstandings, misinformation, and/or gross distortions that appear to cause unnecessary suffering and are related to a subject that we have been investigating by methods that we believe to be superior to those that have given rise to the errors? What if we find that there are people who, claiming a professional expertise, maintain that they have arrived at certain conclusion using the scientific method, yet they provide no testable evidence, and we suspect that the scientific method not only does not, but could not, produce such conclusions? Should we not . . . fight ignorance, exploitation, and prejudice or

at least correct inaccurate statements in our own field? Or do we just publish our misgivings . . . on the chance that someone else might read what we have written and use it to challenge the alternative versions?

I know of nothing in the scientific enterprise that suggests social scientists *ought* to champion their versions of reality in the marketplace. At the same time, I know of nothing intrinsic to science that would proscribe such involvement. Indeed, those of us who *have* felt drawn to use the secondary constructs of the social scientific study of religion are, rightly or wrongly, of the opinion that we have as much right as anyone (and more relevant knowledge than many) not only to promote the social scientific perspective, but also to question others’ secondary constructions when we consider them to be either inaccurate or biased.

But life is not that simple. As we step outside the relative protection of the Ivory Tower, we can find ourselves being affected by our competitors. I have already intimated that, while our presence is welcomed by some, it poses a threat to others. But it poses a threat to us too – not just the unpleasantness of the ways we are sometimes attacked, but a more insidious threat to the very meta-values and methods that can give us the edge over our competitors.

What I want to explore for the rest of this paper are some ways in which the very fact that we become actors in a competitive market means that we come under pressure to incorporate some of our competitors’ interests and methods into our own practices. We are in danger of letting our competitors define our agenda.

The means by which the different secondary constructors sell their wares is of crucial significance for their success or failure, and the first hurdle social scientists face is how to set up a stall in a good position in the marketplace. When social scientists have completed their research they are quite likely to publish the results in scholarly books or journals which may sit on dusty shelves with few save other social scientists being aware of their existence. . . . [These writings] might give rise to

internal debates, but if we are not heard by outsiders not only may we be missing some valuable feedback, we are also likely to be excluding ourselves from making any difference to “the cult scene.”

We may need to be more conscious than is our wont that what we present should come across as being of relevance for the audience we want to reach. I am not suggesting that we fudge our results so that they are acceptable. On the contrary, I am suggesting that, like the actor playing a bore, we need to present our results so that they are understandable and *heard*, whether or not they are welcomed – especially, perhaps, if we suspect that they are not going to be welcomed . . . to those who with no particular axe to grind, are interested in accurate and balanced accounts of NRMs. But how can we make our construction available without jeopardizing the integrity of our account?

Playing their game

The most obvious way to disseminate our version is to cooperate with the mass media, and there are plenty of producers and journalists who are willing, even eager, to use our information. But, as we have seen, their main objective is to have a gripping story. How do we collaborate? On their terms or ours? There is a limit to the number of “on the one hand . . . on the other hands”, ‘however’s’, or “nonetheless’s” that they can accommodate. How much of a price must we be prepared to pay? Do we hope, as with the abstract to an article, that the absence of qualification is made up for by the wide and clear dissemination of the main points?

What about our being misquoted? We learn through hard experience which are the more unreliable media – and it is nearly always those who are getting our story second or third hand; few (though some) members of the media deliberately misrepresent their informants. There are, however, some who do deliberately mislead us to “set us up to put us down.” We have no control over the editing of what we say – and others say about us. Even in a live broadcast it can be extremely difficult to get across one’s actual position if misrepre-

sented or suddenly attacked for something we have never done. We can protest, but most of us tend to be so taken aback that we find ourselves unable to think up an effective response – until we are off-air. Apart from being extremely frustrating and unpleasant, such experiences can make one wonder whether agreeing to take part in any program is not simply counterproductive.

But such behavior is the exception rather than the rule (and antagonistic programs often elicit more letters of support than protest). What is more to the point here is that we do not react to the pressures of media interests or the competition of ACM interests by allowing ourselves to slip into facile generalizations for the sake of a good sound bite, that we do not make cheap jokes at the expense of someone else’s beliefs, that we do not pass judgments about which are the “good” and which the “bad” cults – which is not to say that we cannot report that in movement X they carry out child sacrifice, in Y they have weekly sex orgies, and in Z they pray to little green men in flying saucers – so long, of course, that what we say is true and we make it clear that the other 99.9 percent of NRMs do not do such things. The media usually give us an opportunity to put things in context through comparisons, although I have been asked not to quote Luke 14:26, as it results in so many angry denials that Jesus ever said such a thing.

Our relationship with the courts is in some respects like that with the media. It is they who are largely in control of both the content and the context of what is transmitted. It is they who ask the questions. If we do not bow to their interests, they will ignore us and, in all likelihood, turn to our competitors. If our unbiased perspective results in our giving responses in court that are helpful to one side on one occasion but damaging on another occasion, lawyers brand us as “unreliable” or “whore witnesses.” There can be temptation to say just what the side that calls us (pays us) wants us to say, collaborating in the suppression of relative information or distorting with sophistry the position of the other side.

Taking sides or sitting on the fence?

A more subtle problem arises when, trying to *appear* balanced, we become unbalanced. Broad-minded and liberal media often ask us to give an objective and balanced point of view in the middle – which usually means halfway between an NRM and the ACM. But, as was intimated when discussing legal constructions, to give a balanced account is not necessarily to be in the middle. Science is not summing two extreme positions and dividing by two. Sometimes one “side” *is* right – but to say so may be seen, even by ourselves, as “taking sides.” Indeed, a question that is constantly posed by both competitors and potential buyers is “whose side are you on?” The social scientist’s answer might be “the side of accuracy and balance,” but we find ourselves being pushed and pulled in a number of directions. Some of us hold back information because we fear that we might be taken to court and, even if we feel confident that we could eventually vindicate what we say, it could still cost us a lot of time and money. Sometimes it is the producer or publisher who does not dare risk a court case and we do not want the hassle of finding a bolder (or perhaps more foolhardy) producer or publisher.

While codes of ethics have been produced by professional organizations (the British Sociological Association has such a code), there are gray areas where our personal feelings may incline us one way rather than another. We may not want to betray confidences about individual informants. This is normally not too great a problem as we can usually find some way to preserve a person’s anonymity while incorporating the information if it is of importance. But I have given information to the police or other authorities, such as the Charity Commissioners or the social services, or, occasionally, to the more reputable media when I have learned of criminal or anti-social activities. Has this been a betrayal of trust? Would *not* telling not be a betrayal of another kind of trust? I believe that any citizens in a democratic country, be they social scientists or not, have a duty to other members of society not to allow criminal or harmful behavior to go unquestioned, but it is

not always easy to see how widely one should disseminate this information. One may want to alert the public to potential problems, but one also needs to be aware that, irresponsibly used, such information might lead to greater damage. Evangelical countercultists alerting the public to the dangers of ritual satanic abuse have provided us with a salutary warning (Richardson et al. 1991).

The NRMs we study are likely to want us to take their side – several of them have actually approached social scientists because they believed that, even if we do not do a “white-wash,” we shall at least be fairer to them than most other constructors (Barker 1984: 15 1995: 176). To a greater or lesser extent, we have been subjected to “love-bombing,” hints of eternal damnation and/or emotional blackmail. Such techniques tend to be counter-suggestive for seasoned researchers, and despite the fact that some NRMs many try to convert us, we are unlikely to start promoting their beliefs, proclaiming Moon the messiah or Berg an Endtime prophet. Nonetheless, the very fact that they give us time, that we accept their hospitality (be it a cup of tea or an expenses-paid conference), might make us feel beholden to them. But then, we might feel equally or more beholden to their parents and others whom we also meet in the course of our investigations – and, perhaps, to society as a whole. Certainly, the fact that we are fellow human beings means that as we get to know those whom we are studying as individuals we may make friends (or, conversely, may generate antagonisms). We may come to feel protective and when we see them attacked unfairly come to their defense. There is nothing wrong in this if we are merely introducing into the scene an accurate and balanced version of the NRM reality, but what would be reprehensible according to the canons of science is if, feeling bound by friendship or loyalty to “our” NRM, we promote what we know from our research to be a biased version of the truth.

More frequently, I suspect, we have held back information for the scientifically questionable reason that we felt that the way information would be used would be unacceptable to us. Here I am referring less to a “pull” from

the NRM than to a “push” from the ACM or sections of the media. We have learned from experience that the negative aspects we report will be taken out of context and added to the list of “bad things that cults do,” while the more positive aspects will be ignored or taken as proof that we have been deceived or bought off. I am, moreover, painfully aware that what I am now writing offers our competitors further evidence that we are not as scientific as we pretend – the dilemma here being that the *suppression* of discussion of such concerns would be the more unscientific pretense.

If we are to be honest and self-critical, we have to admit that several of us have reacted against the selective negativity of the ACM by, sometimes quite unconsciously, making our own unbalanced selections. Having been affronted by what have appeared to be gross violations of human rights perpetrated through practices such as deprogramming and the medicalization of belief, there have been occasions when social scientists have withheld information about the movements because they know that this will be taken, possibly out of context, to be used as a justification for such actions. The somewhat paradoxical situation is that the more we feel the NRMs are having *untrue* bad things said about them, the less inclined we are to publish *true* “bad” things about the movements.

The other side of the same coin is that there are social scientists who have felt that they have had to publish negative material and withhold more positive aspects because they are aware that they are in danger of being defined as cult apologists or accused of being covert members of a movement that they have been studying. I know of two sociologists of religion who have been warned that they would be denied tenure or not be awarded their Ph.D. if they did not make it quite clear that their monographs were *exposés*.

As the converse of “taking sides,” we are not infrequently stung by the comment that we insist on sitting on the fence and that we are indifferent to the suffering of others. Most of us have infuriated the media by refusing to give unequivocal answers to questions about who the goodies or, more frequently, the

baddies are. (A frustrated journalist once made me the butt of a humorous article entitled *No Room for a View*). But if we are being interviewed as social scientists, we need to declare the limits of our expertise and make it clear that we have no special criterion to choose between opposing theological or moral claims. The meta-values of science require us to use the hypothetical form in answer to ethical or definitional questions. Of course, it is silly to be too pedantic with statements such as “if you consider multiple murder a bad thing, then you will not consider the Manson Family a good thing” or “it all depends what you mean by ritual sacrifice.”

And, of course, we have as much right as anyone else to express our beliefs so long as it is quite clear that we are speaking as a private citizen. But, just because most of us are *not* indifferent to what is going on, some of us have taken advantage of the air time to communicate our own values and prejudices. And while we are unlikely to promote a particular theological belief, we are quite likely to start from an assumption that, for example, prophecies will fail. While we are unlikely to make a prescriptive distinction between benign and destructive cults, we do tend to produce examples of behavior that we consider (or believe our audience will consider) either reprehensible or praiseworthy if we want to make a point – especially when we want to question a competitor’s claims about the movements. Similarly, when social scientists have been pressed in a court of law to say whether a particular NRM is “really” a religion, they have not always insisted as clearly as they might that science cannot *give* the definition of a real religion. It is only when the court provides a definition, or we use the form “if by religion you mean . . .,” that we can say whether, *according to that definition*, the movement is “really” religious.

The loneliness of the long-term researcher

The loneliness, psychological and emotional discomfort, and the intellectual uncertainties of research can become greatly intensified as we move into the competitive market. It is not

unusual for the social scientist to wonder why no one else's construction seems to tally with the reality that he or she is perceiving (Asch 1959; Barker 1992: 246–7; 1984: 21–2). Sometimes we long to find others who agree and who might thereby save us from the gnawing doubts which can at times reach a point where it is difficult to be certain even on those matters about which we ourselves must be the best placed to know the truth. Responses to the feeling of isolation vary, but they are seldom conducive to scientific study. A few succumb to the desire to “belong” and become involved with or, very occasionally, join the ACM or an NRM. Others avoid or drop out of the arena altogether. For some of us the emotional discomfort of being branded “the enemy” becomes so disagreeable that we find excuses for not checking out our sources as thoroughly as we might. On a couple of occasions, I have found myself asking colleagues or students to deputize for me at meeting at which I suspected I would be attacked. Although I rationalized this cowardice by saying I was too busy or that those going in my place would cause less antagonism and therefore get a better idea of what was happening, I suspect that the truth was that I would have preferred not to find out what was going on rather than subject myself to the unpleasantness once more.

The situation becomes compounded when a group of social scientists who have been similarly vilified get together and exchange their experiences . . . In some ways we are doing precisely what members of a professional body are expected to do – exchanging information and providing a critique of each other's work. But one can also recognize the process whereby we are creating a cozy little support group within which we collaborate to construct a monolithic image of the ACM, taking insufficient account of the differences and changes within the movement as we collectively confirm our prejudices about “them” (but see Bromley and Shupe 1995). Insofar as we respond to the ACM's response to us in this way, we are in danger of ignoring what it has to say that might be of relevance to our understanding of the NRMs, but also, and

more significantly so far as the topic of this paper is concerned, of actually obstructing ourselves from acquiring a fuller understanding of how the ACM operates within the cult scene. The fact that it is unpleasant, or in some cases impossible, to have direct access to certain groups or members of the ACM does not excuse us for characterizing them by the very methods that we accuse them of using in their characterization of us and the NRMs . . .

Conclusion

Social reality is not an unchanging structure; it is an ongoing process that exists only insofar as individuals recognize its existence and act as the media through which it is processed. Whilst some perceptions always overlap, no two people ever share exactly the same vision of reality. All constructions of social reality are more or less affected not only by subjective understandings (previous experiences, values, assumptions, hopes, fears, and expectations), but also by the social position from which the social reality is perceived. Secondary constructions exhibit differences that can be observed to vary systematically and significantly according to the professional or group interests of the constructors.

As social scientists, we are interested in producing accurate and balanced constructions. To achieve this objective, we may believe that, rather than remaining clinically removed, part of our research necessitates an involvement with the people we are studying. This gives rise to the complication that we are likely to affect, and may ourselves be affected by, our data – a complication that becomes even more acute if, as individuals holding certain values, we actively engage in competing in the open market with others who are trying to sell their secondary constructions of the same primary reality.

. . . I do not believe that the idea of a scientific study of religion is utterly ridiculous. I would like to affirm that the exercise of social science is, despite its problems, an important and valuable discipline. We have a method-ology that can produce a more accurate and

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balanced account of social reality than those adopted by other secondary constructors. So far as “the cult scene” is concerned, I have argued that methodologically we ought to “get in there” to find out what’s going on, and that politically we may, perhaps even should, “make a difference.” We ought to communicate so that we can be *heard*; there is no reason why we should not fight ignorance and misinformation when we see it. Nor is there any reason why, *as citizens*, we should not use the findings of social science to fight bigotry, injustice, and what we conceive to be unnecessary misery.

But if we are to take on this mission, we also need to be careful that we do not throw the baby out with the bathwater or, to mix my metaphors still further, let the political tail wag the empirical dog. We need to be more aware, careful, and true to our meta-values as professional social scientists than has sometimes been the case. We need to recognize that others may start defining our agenda – that we could be starting to select and evaluate according to criteria that violate the interests of social sciences. And when promoting and defending our versions of reality, we must remember that we can claim professional proficiency only within a limited area – that there are many legitimate questions which we cannot and should not address – *qua* social scientists.

If we are to preserve our expertise . . . then we need to sharpen our tools of reflexive awareness, open debate, and constructive critique. We need to keep a constant vigilance not only on the pronouncements that we . . . make in the name of social science, but also on the pronouncements others make in the name of social science . . .

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