

BRITISH AND AMERICAN RESPONSES TO NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS¹

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This article is in two main parts. The first presents some of the findings from a new study of print media accounts of new religious movements (NRMs) in the United Kingdom. It illustrates the predominantly negative image of these movements in the period from 1975 to 1985. Comparisons are also made with the findings of a very similar investigation of the American print media's accounts of NRMs.

The second part discusses the bearing of these findings on competing assessments of the public response to NRMs in the United Kingdom and the United States. Particular importance is attached to the consequences of the differential power and wealth enjoyed by the most controversial movements in the two countries.

The conclusion is that the higher levels of violence displayed by, and against, 'controversial cults' in the United States are to be understood only in part as functions of the American political and legal systems. Greater importance should be accorded to the frustrations engendered by tension between the NRMs' high expectations of religious freedom, their extensive wealth and power, and the persistence of largely suspicious or hostile attitudes towards them in the mass media and elsewhere.

NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND THE MASS MEDIA IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

It is widely agreed that today's NRMs in the West are far from being new in every respect. They display many parallels and continuities with movements that appeared to be new in earlier times.² But they *are*

¹ The Nuffield Foundation subsidized part of the research on which this article is based. This generous support is acknowledged with gratitude.

² See J. Gordon Melton, 'How New is New? The Flowering of the "new" Religious Consciousness since 1965', *The Future of New Religious Movements*, ed. D.G. Bromley & P.E. Hammond (Macon, GA.: Mercer University Press, 1987), 46-56.

distinctive, at least, in respect of the exposure that they have had in the media of mass communication. No predecessor movements have ever been the object, separately or collectively, of such persistent, intensive and extensive coverage by journalists.³ What are the implications of so much publicity for NRMs?

An early response to this question⁴ suggested that journalists had been respectful of participants in NRMs and, in spite of their differing interpretations, had generally concluded that marginal religious groups were no longer confined to a *sub rosa* existence. The argument continued that,

The media have not so much created the popularity of religious movements as they have helped to give them a kind of legitimacy through influencing the public viewpoint about them. Through extensive reporting the media have translated eccentric behavior into values and norms viewed as harmonious with society. . . [The media] have prevented a popular banishment or witch hunt and left any opposition to these movements to formal institutions.⁵

This assessment of the mass media's influence is problematic for several reasons. First, it confuses the mass media's ways of presenting material about NRMs with the ways in which the material is received and interpreted by audiences. Second, the quotation implies that journalists have defended NRMs and that opposition to the movements has been the separate preserve of 'formal institutions' (which could presumably be anti-cult organizations⁶ and/or agencies of the State). In fact, as will be argued below, the mutually beneficial relationship between journalists and anti-cult organizations in particular has been strong and enduring. Third, and most importantly, the quotation cannot be held to apply to mass media accounts of NRMs at any time since the mid-1970s. Zaretsky and Leone should clearly not be criticized for failing to take account of events which had not occurred at the time when they were composing the statement in question. The credibility of their argument must be called in question, however, by empirical evidence about the very poor image of many NRMs in the American mass media within one year of the publication of their book.⁷ Questions must therefore be raised about the claim that

³ For evidence of brief but recurrent and hostile campaigns against the Jehovah's Witnesses and other unpopular minorities, see J.A. Beckford, *The Trumpet of Prophecy: A Sociological Analysis of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975); and David B. Davis, 'Some Themes of Countersubversion: An Analysis of anti-Masonic, anti-Catholic and anti-Mormon Literature', *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present*, ed. D.B. Davis (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1971), 9-22.

⁴ I.I. Zaretsky & M.P. Leone, 'The Common Foundation of Religious Diversity', *Religious Movements in Modern America*, ed. I.I. Zaretsky & M.P. Leone (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1974), xvii-xxvi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁶ Anti-cult organizations are composed mainly of parents who campaign to have their adult children removed from NRMs and to prevent the movements from recruiting new members in public.

⁷ See B. van Driel & J.T. Richardson, 'Print Media and New Religious Movements: A Longitudinal Study', unpublished paper, 1986.

the mass media have helped to legitimize NRMs in the United States.

It will be argued below that this claim is also inapplicable to *British* print media accounts of NRMs. Much of the information on which the following section is based was collected in the course of an investigation by the present authors into British print media accounts of NRMs between 1975 and 1985.⁸ It was designed in part to replicate a study conducted in the United States by means of content analysis of a sample of influential newspapers and magazines.⁹ In the case of the United Kingdom, four publications were selected to match, as closely as possible, the same broad types of publication as had been used in the American research: *The Times*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Daily Mail* and *New Society*.¹⁰ For the sake of comparability, all items about exactly the same NRMs (and other religious groups) were coded for analysis in the two projects even though no items had appeared about some movements in the sampled publications. The following seventeen were counted as NRMs for present purposes: Ananda Marga, Children of God/Family of Love, Divine Light Mission, est/Centers Network, Hare Krishna, Meher Baba, Neo-Sannyas movement, Unification Church, Campus Crusade, Youth for Christ, Navigators, Church Universal and Triumphant, Eckankar, Jesus Movement, Scientology, The Way International, Transcendental Meditation. Items about NRMs in general were also included. In addition, items about a small number of other minority religious groups were analyzed in order to control for the common factor of minority religious status. This provides an opportunity to check whether print media accounts of NRMs are significantly different from these *other* religious minorities. The minority groups were: Christian Science, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Salvation Army and the Mennonites. Again, this list was used in both the American and the British projects.

A total of 745 items appearing in the four sampled publications between 1975 and 1985 were coded for content and analyzed by means of the SPSS-X computer program. 665 of the items referred primarily to the seventeen organizations deemed 'NRMs' for our purposes. The distribution of items by religious group and publication is illustrated in Table 1. In addition, 19 items about the People's Temple which appeared in three of the sampled publications, but not in the *Daily Mail*, were analyzed separately. The scope of the project was not wide

⁸ The project was entitled 'New Religious Movements in the British Print Media, 1975–1985' and was funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

⁹ B. van Driel, 'New Religious Movements and the Print Media in the United States: A Longitudinal Study' (Doktoraal Skriptie, Universitet Nijmegen, 1985).

¹⁰ The American publications included high-quality regional newspapers (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*), as well as three major weekly magazines (*Newsweek*, *Time* and *US News and World Report*). It is impossible to find an entirely satisfactory set of matching publications in the United Kingdom. It was therefore decided to select a quality daily, a quality Sunday, a mid-range tabloid daily and a social affairs weekly. The selection is not representative in any strict sense, but it does cover most of the range of publications which have carried more than a few items about NRMs.

enough to cover such other media of mass communication as television, radio, cinema, comics, advertisements and specialist magazines. Items about NRMs have certainly appeared in all of these media, and, on the basis of findings about research on the influence of television in particular, it might be suggested that the most formative influence on public opinion is not the print media. Since television probably sets the tone and agenda for other popular media, it must be borne in mind that print media items about NRMs occur against a background which was not available for analysis in our research. Moreover, the total number of items and their irregular distribution by religious groups and publications indicate that the topic of NRMs is of relatively weak salience in the British print media.

Table 1
Number of items about religious groups in selected UK print media, 1975–85

RELIGIOUS GROUP	PUBLICATION				Total
	<i>Times</i>	<i>Sunday Times</i>	<i>Daily Mail</i>	<i>New Society</i>	
1. Unification Church	165	17	285	6	473
2. Scientology	39	4	7	2	52
3. Hare Krishna	11	5	11	-	27
4. Transcendental Meditation	18	3	6	3	10
5. Divine Light Mission	5	4	1	-	10
6. Children of God	3	1	1	1	6
7. Meher Baba	-	-	-	-	-
8. Neo-Sannyas	25	2	3	1	31
9. Erhard Seminars Training	-	2	-	-	2
10. Ananda Marga	2	-	-	-	2
11. Way International	3	-	-	-	3
12. NRMs in general	11	4	3	7	25
13. Christian Science	2	-	-	-	2
14. Jehovah's Witnesses	11	3	6	3	23
15. Salvation Army	46	4	2	2	54
16. Mennonites	-	-	-	1	1
17. Jesus Movement	-	-	1	2	3
18. Campus Crusade	1	-	-	-	1
19. Youth for Christ	-	-	-	-	-
20. Navigators	-	-	-	-	-
21. Church Universal and Triumphant	-	-	-	-	-
22. Eckankar	-	-	-	-	-
Total	256	53	326	29	745

Nevertheless, research among the close relatives and friends of British members and ex-members of the Unification Church (UC) has shown to what a large extent information about NRMs was first acquired from the mass media, especially national newspapers and magazines.¹¹ People who had no other means of knowing anything about the UC found that they were becoming dependent on journalists' accounts of the movement and of the effects that it allegedly has on recruits. The next stage was for these relatives and friends to discover, again from journalists, the existence of self-help groups offering support to people in their situation. Groups such as Family Action Information and Rescue (FAIR) and the Deo Gloria Trust¹² not only kept journalists supplied with cult-related information but also acted as collators and distributors of relevant press articles, including some from overseas. The circle of communication was thus completed, with all the participants becoming more dependent on each other for eagerly-sought information about the UC or about individual Moonies.

Another reason for believing that the mass media have played a prominent role in attempts to shape the popular image of NRMs in the United Kingdom is that the majority of cult-related litigation has concerned accusations of libel uttered in newspapers. Certain NRMs have issued numerous writs against journalists and others for publishing critical statements about the movements. Large sums of money have been 'invested' by these NRMs in attempts to use the law for the purpose of averting or punishing what their leaders have considered to be malicious defamation. It is unlikely that so much money would have been spent on libel actions if the capacity of the mass media to shape public images of NRMs had been in doubt. The consequence has been that cult-related controversies have tended to centre on matters in which the mass media have themselves been strongly involved. This is not to say that the controversies are merely 'media constructions': it is, rather, to stress the point that the activities of cultists and anti-cultists are more likely to be made controversial if journalists also play a role in them.

This was certainly confirmed in the case of the legal action brought by members of the UC against the *Daily Mail* in 1980 for claiming that the movement brainwashed people and broke up some of its members' families. The hearings in court lasted for what was then a record length of time for a libel case – six months – and resulted in a defeat for the plaintiffs both in the High Court and on appeal. Leave to appeal to the House of Lords was denied, and the UC incurred costs

¹¹ J.A. Beckford, 'Beyond the Pale: Cults, Culture and Conflict', *New Religious Movements: A Perspective for Understanding Society*, ed. E.V. Barker (New York & Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 284–301.

¹² J.A. Beckford, *Cult Controversies: The Societal Response to New Religious Movements* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985), 224–30.

estimated at £1.5 million. The loss of this case was followed by a significant reduction in the scale of the Moonies' operations in the United Kingdom.

The importance of the *Daily Mail* libel case, which ran from October 1980 to March 1981, is reflected in the frequency distribution of items about NRMs in a sample of British print media publications (see Figure 1). In the period from 1975 to 1985 items about the UC amounted to 71 per cent of all items concerning NRMs, but the proportion increased during the *Daily Mail* case and in the weeks following its conclusion. The importance of this case is therefore comparable with the prominence accorded by the American press to items about the destruction of the People's Temple community in Guyana in November 1978.¹³

Moreover, the trial provided the *Daily Mail* and other newspapers with an opportunity to deploy the 'negative summary event'¹⁴ as a device for maintaining the momentum of what it termed its 'crusade against the church that breaks up families'. The case was reported at some length in many newspapers, but special attention was given to the High Court jury's recommendations that '. . . the tax-free status of the Unification Church should be investigated by the Inland Revenue Department on the grounds that it is a political organization'. The government's response to the recommendation provided further scope for recurrent items about both the UC and other NRMs long after the case had been concluded. What began, then, as a newspaper item about a single NRM eventually turned into a story about a campaign against the movement and a long-running saga about the law on charities in England. Yet, it is also important to note that the prominence given to the UC did not bring about a corresponding increase in print media items about *other* NRMs.

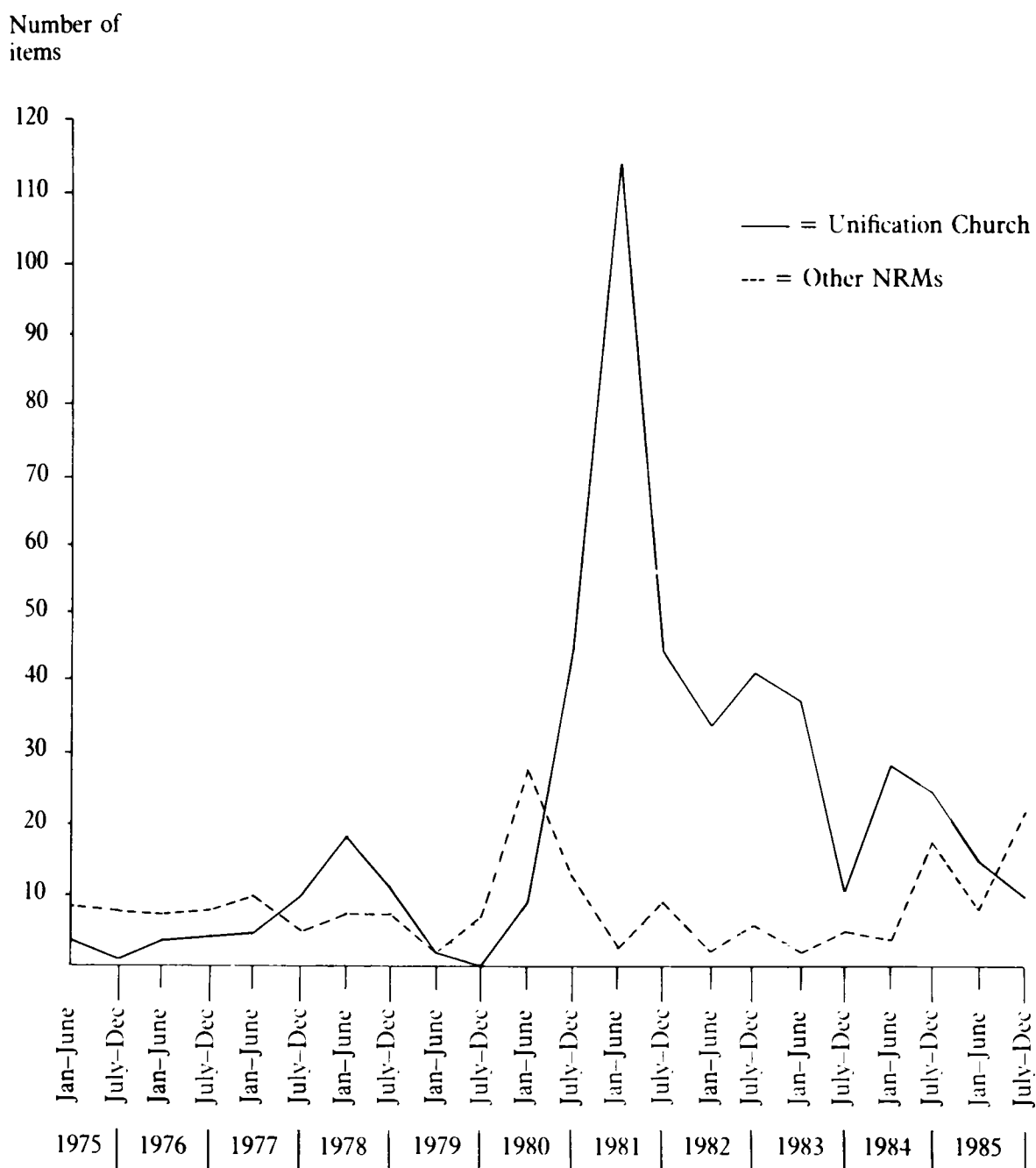
British journalists also paid scant attention to the greatly reduced level of the UC's activities in the United Kingdom since 1981 and to controversies surrounding the European Parliament's debate in 1984 on a motion which seemed likely to have serious repercussions for NRMs and their critics alike.¹⁵ But, perhaps because the implication for the press appeared to be slight, the event received very little coverage. Even the agitations of the anti-cult lobby and of its opponents who were worried by perceived threats to civil liberties and/or the freedom of religion failed to catch the lasting attention of journalists.

¹³ van Driel, 'New Religious Movements and the Print Media.'

¹⁴ A 'negative summary event' is a journalistic description of a situation or event which captures its negative essence as part of an intermittent or slow moving story. An apparently isolated incident thus serves as an occasion for keeping the broader, controversial phenomenon in the public eye.

¹⁵ J.A. Beckford, 'The Role of the State and Government in the Management of Controversial New Religious Movements', paper presented to the Conference on 'Religion and the State: The Struggle for Legitimacy and Power' at the Council on Religion and International Affairs, New York, 1986.

Figure 1
Frequency of print media items about the Unification Church and other NRMs, 1975–1985



The record-breaking length of the *Daily Mail* libel trial and the stunningly high level of legal costs involved on both sides were sufficient in themselves to ensure that the event was extensively reported in the British press. But it also became a highly dramatized spectacle by reason of the fact that the twin allegations that the UC brainwashed its recruits and broke up families resonated strongly with the themes which had dominated British press coverage of NRMs

since the mid-1970s. In other words, the trial symbolized the culmination of a long series of attacks and counter-attacks between various NRMs and widely differing sources of anti-cult sentiment.

The themes in question arise from cultural assumptions about the moral integrity of the 'normal' person in modern Western liberal democracies.¹⁶ The key to the dominant assumptions about the normal person is the notion of autonomy. A person is normally expected to act in such a way as to be able to give adequate reasons for his or her actions and to assume responsibility for them. This amounts to a form of moral integrity and entails the idea that the normal person does not willingly choose to commit self-harm or to be subjected to external control. It is also expected that the normal person freely chooses to live in some form of family unit or, at least, to remain emotionally close to the members of his or her family of origin.

The image of the normal person is thrown into sharp relief by the preoccupations of anti-cultists and of many journalists in the United Kingdom with precisely those characteristics of cult members which appear to be its very negation. That is, the cult member is often depicted as a mirror image of the normal person. Particular emphasis is placed on the alleged loss of moral autonomy or accountability.¹⁷

The brainwashed cultist is therefore identified in terms of diminished capacity for self-responsibility and accountability. Control over the cultist's thoughts, actions and emotions is attributed to other people with the presumed power to manipulate him or her in accordance with the cult's overriding interests and purposes. The engineered loss of moral autonomy is then made responsible for the incidence of self-harm and infantilization. This may take the form of ill health as a result of inadequate nutrition or of exploitative or dangerous types of work. Similarly, the abandonment of the cult member's personal possessions, career or educational opportunities is also cited as evidence of the alleged loss of moral autonomy.

Another aspect of 'negated normality' is the common image of the cultist as a person whose priorities have been thrown out of balance by an abnormal and exclusive focus on a cult's interests. Images of fanaticism abound in print media accounts of NRMs and their members. Total devotion to their leaders and selfless dedication to their movements' goals are often alleged to be characteristic of cultists. This is partly why cult leaders figure so prominently in the mass media. In fact, 45 per cent of the print media items which were accompanied by one or more photographs carried a picture of a cult leader. By comparison, the next most frequent subjects of photographs in items about NRMs were cult members (34 per cent) and

¹⁶ J.A. Beckford, 'Politics and the anti-cult Movement', *Annual Review of the Social Sciences of Religion*, 3 (1979), 169-90.

¹⁷ F. Bird, 'The Pursuit of Innocence: New Religious Movements and Moral Accountability', *Sociological Analysis*, 40 (1979), 335-46.

ex-members (16 per cent). Similarly, cult leaders were second only to legal conflicts as the most important topic in all stories about NRMs. In items which were mainly about the UC, the order of priority among topics was the same.

However, the unquestionably negative image of NRMs that occurs widely in the British print media does not go unchallenged – far from it in fact. Table 2 shows that the tenor of 52 per cent of all items about NRMs can be characterized as neutral, positive or extremely positive¹⁸ (compared with 85 per cent for other religious minorities). But these findings conceal the fact that most of these items were merely brief news reports. By contrast, the longer feature articles about NRMs are much more likely to be negative or extremely negative in tenor. Moreover, items that are characterized as somewhat and extremely positive in tenor account for only 5 per cent of items about NRMs, but for the control group of other religious minorities this figure was 30 per cent. *Headlines* of a positive character about NRMs, at 2 per cent, are even harder to find.

It could be reasonably hypothesized, then, that the longer feature articles are relatively more likely to convey negative images of NRMs and to have a lasting effect on readers' attitudes towards them. There is some confirmation of this interpretation in the finding that feature articles make greater use of quotations and that quotations favourable to NRMs (18 per cent of all quotations) are heavily outnumbered by unfavourable ones (82 per cent). The mean number of favourable quotations per item is 0.17, and the mean number of unfavourable quotations is 0.82. This disparity is considerably sharper than the 7:10 ratio of favourable to unfavourable quotations about NRMs in American publications. Moreover, the sources of quotations about NRMs in all items are much more likely to lie outside the movements than inside them. The single largest source of quotations (31) is parents of NRM members. Second come politicians and government officers (28), followed by ex-members (22). By comparison, only 13 quotations originated with members and 6 with NRM leaders. Only 9 quotations came from scientists and academics.

Another indication of the generally negative character of print media accounts of NRMs is the pattern of metaphors which are applied to them. The 'brainwashing' metaphor was used most extensively, occurring in 24 per cent of the sampled items about NRMs. The next most common metaphors included 'deprogramming' (4 per cent) and 'mind control' (2 per cent). By comparison, the pattern of negative metaphors in items about NRMs in the American print media is quite similar: 'brainwashing' (21 per cent), 'deprogramming' (13

¹⁸ We are indebted to Dr Bryan R. Wilson for the observation that much of the neutrality may have been a function of the disproportionately large amount of *necessarily* objective reporting of the *Daily Mail* libel case. It may not therefore have reflected a lack of strong feeling either for or against NRMs.

Table 2
The tenor of print media items about NRMs
and other religious minorities
by publication

	NRMs			OTHER RELIGIOUS MINORITIES		
	<i>Daily Mail</i>	Other publications	Total	<i>Daily Mail</i>	Other publications	Total
TENOR OF ITEMS						
Extremely positive	1 (0.3)	5 (1)	6 (0.9)	0 (0)	2 (3)	2 (2.5)
Positive	4 (0.7)	26 (8)	30 (4.5)	1 (12)	21 (29)	22 (27.5)
Neutral	101 (32)	207 (60)	308 (46.3)	4 (51)	40 (56)	44 (55.0)
Negative	139 (44)	99 (28)	238 (35.8)	3 (37)	8 (11)	11 (13.75)
Extremely negative	73 (23)	10 (3)	83 (12.5)	0 (0)	1 (1)	1 (1)
Total	318	347	665	8	72	80

per cent), 'mind control' (7 per cent), and 'zombies/robots/automata' (4 per cent). It should be added, however, that these metaphors may occur in contexts where their meaning may actually be positive. For example, cultists may refer to the brainwashing metaphor in order to defend themselves against it.

A final indication of the generally negative image of NRMs portrayed by British journalists is based on the number of so-called atrocity tales recounted about them. But it should be made clear that the term 'atrocity' is being interpreted here, for comparative purposes, in accordance with van Driel's usage to mean 'an event or series of events which have severe negative consequences for individuals, groups or society'.¹⁹ This usage is much weaker than all but the fourth and colloquial meaning stipulated by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Some caution must therefore be exercised in interpreting findings based on the relatively weak sense of the term employed by van Driel.²⁰ The results show that 31 per cent of items about NRMs in the sample of British publications contain atrocity tales about the movements, and only 3 per cent of them recount atrocities about their anti-cult opponents. By contrast, 'positive tales' about NRMs ('an event or series of events which result in the vast improvement of the well-being of an individual, a group or society'²¹) occurred in only 5 per cent of items.

The fact that only one item contained a positive tale about anti-cultists is entirely in accordance with the findings from van Driel's study of the American print media. It suggests that journalists perceive greater newsworthiness in the negative aspects of NRMs than in the positive aspects of the movements' opponents. Indeed, support for anti-cultists is much more implicit than explicit. This is reflected in the finding that only eight out of all 665 items about NRMs in the sample supplied an address at which readers could contact an anti-cult organization. This is even more significant when it is borne in mind that four items actually supplied a contact address for an NRM. There seems to be a disparity between the strongly negative tenor of items about NRMs and the weakly implicit support for anti-cultism. Van Driel's study of American publications made a similar observation: '... although NRMs met severe scepticism and suspicion, the anti-cult movement and the repression exerted by governmental agencies were also criticized by the print media'.²²

Journalists rarely recommend anti-cultism directly – and even more rarely do they act as advocates for NRMs. Instead, they select

¹⁹ van Driel, 'New Religious Movements and the Print Media', 44.

²⁰ For use of the term in a stronger sense, see A.D. Shupe, Jr. & D.G. Bromley, 'Apostates and Atrocity Stories: Some Parameters in the Dynamics of Deprogramming', *The Social Impact of New Religious Movements*, ed. B.R. Wilson (New York: Rose of Sharon Press, 1981), 179–215.

²¹ van Driel, 'New Religious Movements and the Print Media', 44.

²² *ibid.*, 49.

stories and 'angles' which dramatize conflicts on categorial boundaries: parents/children; cults/anti-cults; normal adult/cult zombie; normal family/cult commune; minister of religion/cult leader. The precise issues at stake in each conflict are treated as less important in themselves than are the formal features of boundary disputes between cultural categories. Consequently, explanation is achieved virtually by definition: the very process of repeatedly associating normality with anti-cultism and abnormality with NRMs makes it difficult for readers to entertain questions which could challenge the underlying assumptions.

An important corollary of the oppositional structure of many print media items about NRMs is that, because they often contain quotations from both sides of the boundary disputes, claims to journalistic objectivity can be made. A spokesperson for a movement, for example, is often quoted in response to an accusation from parents that their children have been brainwashed or alienated from them. It may even appear in some items as if 'equal time' has been allowed to the two sides. But this kind of objectivity conceals the fact that these typically, if not uniformly, adversarial structures only reinforce the image of NRMs as primarily controversial. Journalists in effect set the agenda by framing NRMs in this overwhelmingly contentious way. This is not, of course, to deny that the disputes about NRMs are real, divisive and painful: it is merely to argue that supposedly objective or balanced accounts can nevertheless shape public opinion in determinate ways.

COMPARISONS BETWEEN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND THE UNITED STATES

In an informative and provocative article²³ Roy Wallis attempts to explain the differences between the public response to NRMs in the United Kingdom and the United States primarily in terms of the level at which public regulation of the movements is effective. (We shall return later to Wallis's decision to play down the evident disparities between the relative strength of NRMs in the two countries as a factor in his explanation.) His argument is summarized as follows:

The high level of institutionalised toleration and protection of minority and civil rights, plus the constitutional protection of religion in America has created a situation where the state machinery has little effective power to control NRMs. Thus problems escalate until the Federal apparatus can intervene or the local machinery can overcome its natural reluctance to act.

In the UK controls are stricter earlier. Public officials are less susceptible to pressure not to act in enforcement of regulations; many of the legal rights claimed in

²³ Roy Wallis, 'Paradoxes of Freedom and Regulation: New Religious Movements in Britain and America', *Sociological Analysis*, 48 (1988), 355-71. For a German version of the paper, see Roy Wallis, 'Zum Problem religiöser Minoritäten in Grossbritannien und den USA', *Toleranz und Repression. Zur Lage religiöser Minderheiten in modernen Gesellschaft*, ed. J. Neumann & M.W. Fischer (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1987), 287-312.

the USA do not exist, and there is less recourse against executive or legislative [*sic*] action by appeal through the courts in respect of constitutional rights or 'due process'.

Thus the United Kingdom is said to be more repressive earlier, but perhaps a more tolerant climate in the long run. Massive differences undoubtedly separate the American and British systems of law and politics, and they have clearly shaped the development of cult controversies in each country.²⁴ But Wallis's interpretation puts the procedural cart before the substantive horse. In his concern for differences between the two countries he overlooks the grounds on which, and the processes whereby, issues are publicly defined as controversial. In short, the *substance* of the accusations against some NRMs in the United States *and* the United Kingdom is grounded in socio-cultural considerations about the boundaries between the normal and the abnormal, the benign and the harmful, the authentic and the fraudulent, etc. Constitutional, legal, political and administrative particularities constrain the uses to which these cultural considerations can be put in the struggles between NRMs and their opponents. But these particularities are not at the root of cult controversies.

Wallis's argument overlooks the fact that, in the United Kingdom and the United States alike, the print media have accounted for NRMs in such a way as to create a highly unfavourable image of them. But when proper account is taken of the socio-cultural roots of cult controversies, it ceases to be paradoxical that the constitutional protections of religious freedom in the United States are accompanied by higher levels of conflict and violence than in the United Kingdom. The paradox is partly dissolved by acknowledging that the definition of religion, for American legal purposes, reflects deep-seated assumptions about the normal, morally autonomous religious person. The American legal system and political processes allow, or even require, these assumptions to be explicitly debated in courts of law. The limits of acceptability are constantly being probed in litigation, and the risks of defeat, no less than the fruits of victory, are considerable. NRMs and other religious organizations in the United States are therefore relatively free from the arbitrary, *ad hoc* and unaccountable controls which beset them in the United Kingdom.²⁵ But, on the other hand, they must also pay the price of continually having to justify and defend their activities by means of litigation. This is not paradoxical: it is the price to be paid for one particular version of religious freedom.²⁶

²⁴ Beckford, *Cult Controversies*, Chapter 9.

²⁵ J.A. Beckford, 'Cults, Controversy and Control: A Comparative Analysis of the Problems posed by New Religious Movements in the Federal Republic of Germany and France', *Sociological Analysis*, 42 (1981), 249–64; and J.A. Beckford, 'The Public Response to New Religious Movements in the United Kingdom', *Social Compass*, 30 (1983), 49–62.

²⁶ J.A. Beckford, 'The State and Control of New Religious Movements', *Acts of the 17th International Conference for the Sociology of Religion* (Paris: Editions CISR, 1983), 115–30.

The occasional recourse made by NRMs in the United States, but not in the United Kingdom, to violence and other serious criminal activity is not therefore the response to belated, cataclysmic attempts at official regulation (as Wallis has argued). It can be more plausibly interpreted as an expression of the frustration arising in the minds of some religious leaders from the tension between a Federal Constitution which promises religious freedom in the abstract but which is necessarily interpreted in courts of law in accordance with prevailing cultural assumptions about 'real' or 'normal' religion. Print media accounts of NRMs are, as we argued above, important vehicles of these assumptions. The advantages of formal freedom of religion are tempered by the need for religious organizations to have frequent, and sometimes unsuccessful, recourse to courts in order to have their activities defined as religious in the face of lively opposition from various quarters. This is the point at which leading individuals in some NRMs have collided with prevailing, restrictive notions about what counts as normal religion.

Expectations of religious freedom are so much more modest in the United Kingdom, and the history of institutionalized discrimination against religious minorities is so much longer,²⁷ that the level of frustration experienced by the leaders of NRMs is likely to be considerably lower than among their American counterparts.

This point should be taken in conjunction with the fact that the scale of NRMs' operations in the United Kingdom is considerably smaller than in the United States. It is questionable whether Wallis was well advised to play down this consideration on the grounds that the number of cult members per million of the population was said to be not significantly higher in America than in Britain.²⁸ For, in addition to the problems that Wallis correctly detects in the calculation of this ratio, there is the much more serious factor of differential wealth and power. NRMs in the United Kingdom have mostly been missionary outposts of American organizations. This was even true of Scientology at a time when its international headquarters was technically based in this country. Of course, a certain amount of the 'parent' organizations' money has been invested in the United Kingdom, but British operations have generally been self-financed. For reasons that remain obscure, British operations have never matched the financial success of their American counterparts. This, in conjunction with the English legal system, has weakened their ability to mount effective legal campaigns against their opponents. In any case, it is unlikely that the leaders of what amount to British subsidiaries of American NRMs, with the exception of the UC, have ever enjoyed the authority to risk

²⁷ E.V. Barker, 'The British Right to Discriminate', *Church-State Relations: Tensions and Transitions*, ed. T. Robbins & R. Robertson (New Brunswick, NJ.: Transaction Books, 1987), 269–80.

²⁸ R. Stark, 'Europe's Receptivity to Religious Movements', *Religious Movements: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers*, ed. R. Stark (New York: Paragon House, 1985), 301–43.

large sums of money in this fashion. As a result, the illegal actions taken in the United States in the name of, for example, the People's Temple, Synanon, the Rajneesh Foundation and Scientology are unlikely to be emulated in the United Kingdom. The relative lack of money and the power that it can command is just as important as low-level regulation by the British state.

The disparity in wealth and power between American and British NRMs also casts a different light on one of Wallis's sub-arguments. He partly attributed the relatively higher rates of violence and criminal activity in the American movements to an ecological factor:

The USA is a country of enormous size and low population density compared to Britain. A NRM seeking to implement a distinctive mode of life can relatively easily locate a sizable area of land on which to settle, sufficiently isolated from population centres to ensure only a low level of routine surveillance.

This is an important consideration but, again, it puts the cart before the horse. The advantages of remoteness from routine surveillance have to be either purchased or received in the form of legacies and donations. Some NRMs have acquired relatively remote properties in Britain, but communities on the scale of Rajneeshpuram in Oregon, New Vrindaban in West Virginia, the Synanon ranches in Northern California, the People's Temple settlement in Guyana, or the Church Universal and Triumphant's properties in Montana would be beyond the financial means of most NRMs in the United Kingdom. Remoteness can unquestionably be turned to advantage, but it may be less important in itself than the financial strength or credibility that it presupposes. In any case, the eventual downfall of Synanon, the debacle of Rajneeshpuram and the growing disquiet associated with New Vrindaban and the Church Universal and Triumphant's Camelot property suggest that, in the long run, local surveillance of even these remote communities has been *very* effective in the United States. The American political and legal systems actually enable opponents of NRMs at the local level to *instigate* control by challenging plans for communal development and incorporation. This is clearly illustrated in the continuing saga of the largely successful local campaigns to block the expansion of Scientology's facilities in Clearwater, Florida.

Local residents' challenges to the development of NRMs' properties in the United Kingdom have been comparatively less successful. The Scientologists in Sussex, the Hare Krishnas in Hertfordshire, the Moonies in Wiltshire and the Community of the Many Names of God in Dyfed, for example, have all overcome varying degrees of local resistance to their attempts to pursue their religion in isolation. The demise of the Rajneesh commune in Suffolk may appear to be an exception but was actually brought about by the fragmentation of the Neo-sannyas movement from within. Local opposition was intense but

not decisive. In short, the ecological factor cited by Wallis does not, by itself, help to differentiate between American and British responses to NRMs.

Wallis has undoubtedly identified features of the American political and legal systems which help to canalize cult controversies in distinctive ways. But we are not convinced that these basically procedural differences are sufficient to explain the egregious outbursts of violence by, and against, NRMs in the United States. Moreover, the ecological factor does not support his argument, for it shows that low-level regulation of some NRMs' American properties in remote areas has actually succeeded in blocking development.

Is there a more satisfactory explanation of the unquestionably higher rates of violence associated with NRMs in the United States? The political and legal factors cited by Wallis need to be supplemented by at least four additional considerations.

1. The wealth and power of many NRMs in the United States are much greater than in the United Kingdom. Consequently, the stakes are higher, and the temptation to pursue extra-legal policies is all the stronger.
2. The leaders/founders of the most controversial NRMs have been personally present for long periods in their American communities, and this may be an encouragement to the pursuit of more audacious and risky policies than would be conceivable on the part of leaders of the much weaker British branches.
3. The knowledge that the Federal Constitution formally protects the freedom of religion may induce higher aspirations to spiritual and material success in the minds of NRM leaders in the United States than would be likely among their counterparts in the less open society of the United Kingdom.
4. The degree of frustration with continual challenges, at local as well as at higher levels, to the activities of the most controversial NRMs is likely to be higher among their leaders in the putatively less repressive American society than in the patently more closed British society.

In sum, the leaders of NRMs in the United States may be inspired to entertain higher aspirations than their counterparts in the United Kingdom and, consequently, to run into more painful frustrations when their ambitious plans are thwarted by opponents in courts of law and by a predominantly negative image in the mass media. The greater promise of religious freedom offered by the First Amendment to the American Federal Constitution, in conjunction with legal and ecological factors, has undoubtedly helped to foster these aspirations and frustrations. However, due account must also be taken of the more fundamental facts that NRMs are more powerful in the United States than in the United Kingdom but that the print media tend to depict them no less favourably than their British subsidiaries.