

**From Misunderstanding to Dialogue:
Practical Strategies for Media Narratives of Religions**

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**7 Media Strategies for Reproducing the Cult-Narrative:
Observations from a Devil's Advocate**

5-Minute Statement by Martin Locksley

A few days ago, a scientologist sent me three newspaper articles published in 1978 and 1979 by the Austrian news magazine *profil*. The articles covered local controversies around Scientology, the Unification Church, Transcendental Meditation, and The Family Int'l, formerly known as The Children of God. What I found fascinating was that, almost fifty years later, little seems to have changed in the way large media outlets report on new religious movements.

So let me play devil's advocate and ask: **What strategies do the mass media use to construct lasting negative narratives about new religions?**

There are certainly more, but I think that seven strategies stand out:

(1) Use the cult-label as a tool for generalising.

Do not treat new religions as distinct groups in their own right. Do not explain the historical and cultural contexts of their teachings and practices. But do claim universal characteristics that apply to all 'cults.'

(2) Divide and conquer.

Use interreligious rivalries and the power of established religions to discredit minorities. Set concerned parents against their wayward children. Praise state authorities and experts for protecting society from 'dangerous cults.'

(3) Select experts carefully.

Objectivity and fairness are old-fashioned ideals. Avoid serious research by scholars of religion. Instead, rely on the opinions of other journalists, politicians, antireligious psychologists, theologically trained apologists, and anticult experts. This approach helps to preserve a black-and-white account of complex social realities.

(4) Accuse the group of secrecy.

Evil grows in darkness. To nurture suspicion do not consult the relevant sources before publishing on new religions, and never engage in direct dialogue with representatives of the group.

(5) Apply pseudo-psychological framing.

Portray young people's spiritual quests as products of psychological manipulation. Use terms such as "suggestive tricks," "brainwashing," "mind control," "psycho-terror," "psychological dependence," and "isolation." Never discuss the possible psychological benefits that members may associate with new religious movements.

(6) Demonise new religions.

Frame groups and their leaders by focusing on alleged misconduct involving finances, sex, and violence. Cast suspicion on charismatic leaders: society needs to be told that their uncanny power was built on exploitation and serves only their hedonistic lifestyles. Accuse groups of morally corrupting the young—a strategy that has worked successfully since the trial of Socrates.

At the same time, ridicule—or, better still, ignore—the spiritual dimension of these movements and their potential to offer members a deeper sense of meaning.

The following quotation, published in the *profil* issue of March 1978, illustrates the level of cynicism that journalists are expected to display towards new religions:

“(…) the omnipresent ‘soul-catchers’ are representatives of organizations operating globally, whose concerns are power and money, but never God. God, however, usually serves as the catchword that attracts weak-minded individuals. PR departments, contact offices, and state-of-the-art management ensure a smooth transition from sincere belief to big business.”

(7) Patronise members of new religions. Deny them religious freedom.

Deny that adults are capable of making informed decisions about their spiritual lives. Praise deprogrammers and portray their coercive methods as justified by the greater good they seek to accomplish: freedom from religion.

Taken together, these seven strategies do more than describe new religions. Rather than exposing genuine threats, they cultivate a selective mode of perception through which the image of the dangerous ‘cult’ is constructed. By repeating such stigmatising labels, reducing religious commitment to manipulation, and denying members agency in matters of faith, media reports turn religious difference into a divisive narrative of ‘us’ against ‘them.’

In her article “The Cult as a Social Problem” (2011), the British sociologist Eileen Barker – who is honoring us with her presence at this session – reminded us that “throughout history, religious leaders and the movements to which they have given rise have been perceived to be social problems.” This was true of Jesus, Muhammad, and the Buddha and the groups they inspired—and it remains true of new religious movements today.