1 Introduction

This Element addresses abuse in new religious movements (NRMs). Abuse in both old and new religious movements, historical cases and new, are increasingly coming to public notice and being examined in policy and legal contexts, in popular culture and in various academic disciplines. While this is a relatively recent area of analysis in the discipline of religious studies and mainstream sociology of religion – arguably emerging from the widespread exposé of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in the early 2000s – it has long been a focus in the study of new religious movements. This is a field comprising two historically polarised disciplines: NRM or new religions studies and cultic studies. The issue of abuse is inherently connected with the development of these disciplines and with the terms that they use: that is, minority or new religious movement *versus* cult. Abuse is considered a defining feature of cults, whereas NRM studies developed partly as a reaction against this coupling. This is not to say that NRM scholars have not highlighted issues of abuse, as the literature drawn on throughout this Element shows. However, it has not necessarily been their focus. In this Introduction, I set out what is meant by the terms new religious movement, minority religion, cult and abuse. This is best done through a brief history of the development of NRM and cultic studies.[1] I analyse definitions used within these fields and how scholars have addressed the issue of abuse.

In Section 2 of this Element, I suggest a theoretical model of structural and cultural factors which could be potential contributing factors to abuse and/or barriers to reporting and addressing abuse. These factors are drawn from both the theoretical literature outlined in the Introduction, and from analysis of examples of NRMs from a scholarly database of religious movements. I briefly outline six structural and six cultural factors before analysing in more depth four groupings of factors. In Section 3, I use the theoretical model to analyse the abuses that occurred in a British-based and now defunct NRM, the Jesus Fellowship Church (JFC).

The research on which this Element draws was undertaken as part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project, Abuse in Religious Contexts. This project, which ran from March 2022 to June 2024, led by Gordon Lynch, comprised seven different pieces of work.[2] My own piece of work was an analysis of the 200 or so NRMs that had been marked with the theme of abuse on the Inform database of religious movements. This initial mapping exercise recorded the allegations of abuse; the sources of information (noting,

[1] See Ashcraft (2018) for a more detailed analysis of the history of these fields.
[2] See https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/airc/.

unfortunately, a preponderance of media sources); whether there had been legal cases; structural (organisational) and cultural (beliefs and practices) factors which were mentioned in relation to abuse; and outcomes, such as internal or external investigations and apologies by leadership. I then looked in greater depth at the approximately fifty movements about which Inform held more in-depth information, including enquiries to Inform and internal or external investigation reports. Some of the fifty movements are discussed briefly throughout this Element with one selected as the applied case study based on the wealth of information, including its own reports and responses to charges.

Inform (Information Network on Religious Movements) is an educational charity founded by sociologist of religion Eileen Barker in 1988 in order to provide information about minority religions and sects which is as accurate, up-to-date and as evidence-based as possible. I have been a researcher at Inform since 2001, and my twenty years of experience with Inform, an organisation established firmly on the NRM studies side of the cult wars, places me within the NRM studies field. The factors discussed in this Element arise out of my theoretical grounding in NRM studies and my experience as a researcher at Inform. However, they were refined both by analysis of specific movements and by discussions in project meetings with other members of the Abuse in Religious Contexts team.

1.1 A Brief History of NRM and Cultic Studies

The categorisation of religion into different types has its origins in the foundations of the discipline of sociology. In the early twentieth century, sociologists created typologies of forms of religion with attention to a religion's relationship with its social environment. The crux of these typologies is the distinction between church and sect, created by Weber (1922) and Troeltsch (1931), church being open to all and in alignment with the social order, sect being in tension with society, setting itself apart and accepting only religious adepts. This model was refined over time. Niebuhr (1929) added the concept of denomination to indicate the transformation and accommodation of a sect after the first generation of converts; Becker (1932) created a four-fold typology consisting of denomination and ecclesia, sect and cult; and Yinger (1946) further developed the cult category to indicate groups which break from the dominant norms and traditions of society, unlike sects which are schisms from a church. Cult and sect were defined by their state of tension with wider society, unlike church and denomination, which were in alignment with society. Although these were intended as technical, sociological terms with wide applicability, from the

outset their origins in and applicability to a Christian, Western social context was clear. The term 'cult', however, did not originate within sociology.

The Latin *cultus* is used to refer to worship, veneration or adoration of a particular figure, saint or deity, for example, the cult of the Virgin Mary. In some academic disciplines, including archaeology and ancient history, this usage is retained. The use of cult as a label for a problematic religion has been linked with mid-nineteenth-century Protestant movements' theological critiques of new Christian sects such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – popularly known as Mormons – and Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as new spiritual movements such as Theosophy and Spiritualism (Ashcraft 2018; Zeller 2023; Chryssides 2024). From a normative, Protestant perspective, these movements were considered dangerous heresies. Critiques remained largely theological until the mid-twentieth century. Wider usage of the term 'cult' to indicate a controversial or bad religion, or indeed not a real religion, entered public discourse with a concern around Western youth's turn to new and alternative spiritual movements during the counterculture of the 1960s. For numerous intersecting reasons, including the rise of youth culture, a breaking of adherence to established rules and traditions – including Church membership – and the relaxing of immigration regulations, Western youth were exposed to new religious movements and had the financial, social and temporal capital to commit to them for the first time. This was framed as dangerous by some, including the young people's families, the established churches and media. Academics, on the other hand, largely approached this as an interesting rise in new forms of religiosity and meaning-making.

As noted by numerous authors (Beckford 1985; Barker 2014, 2017; Gallagher 2017; Ashcraft 2018; Chryssides 2024), this situation developed into the cult wars of the 1980s and 1990s in which the field became polarised between cultic studies scholars, often associated with psychology, counselling and mental health professionals, and NRM studies scholars, often associated with sociology, history, and religious studies, but also including scholars from the fields of law, psychology and psychiatry. Cultic studies scholars contributed to a wider anticult or cult awareness movement (Barker 2002a; Giambalvo et al. 2013) which sought to warn the public about the dangers of cults and, at times, to campaign for legislation to restrict their activities or ban them outright. NRM studies scholars saw the anticult practices of kidnapping members to 'deprogram' them as 'human rights violations' (Barker 2014: 251), and converts' agency and choice as a religious freedom issue was a guiding principle.

Points of difference between the two fields hinged to some extent on the definition of cult, its inherent link with concepts of harm, abuse and danger, and the issue of brainwashing. Cultic studies scholars prioritised ex-members'

testimonies while NRM scholars were generally sceptical of the extent of their value, arguing that the ex-members who spoke out were those who had negative experiences and were critical of their former movements (Bromley 1998). These testimonies were described as atrocity stories by some (e.g. Wilson 1990). A focus on ex-members who went public with their stories missed the perspective of those who left for more prosaic reasons it was argued (Chryssides and Gregg 2019). NRM scholars also noted the high attrition rates of the movements, indicating that people clearly could join and leave of their own accord (Barker 1984; Beckford 1985). Some NRM scholars, informed by sociological research methods, sought to include all perspectives on a religious movement in the belief that an objective picture could then be portrayed. Barker, writing about the methodology of Inform, has written 'not only should the methodological techniques be as varied as possible, but that as wide a range as possible of the different actors affecting the situation should be studied in their own right and taken together' (2011: 25). In this, she rejects the view that one should commit themselves to research either with leavers or with members. As a student of Barker and an employee of Inform, I too am committed to this principle of triangulation. However, it should be noted that this Element is part of a survivor-centred project; inevitably then, survivor voices and accounts of abuse are prioritised within this Element. It also stands in an emerging tradition among a fresh generation of NRM scholars who missed the cult wars of the 1970s and 1980s who are reconsidering ideas on issues of objectivity, subjectivity, reflexivity and former member accounts (Thomas and Graham-Hyde 2024). Scholars such as Thomas and Graham-Hyde have acknowledged, for instance, an historical overreliance on 'insider experience' and a neglect of 'the valuable testimonies of ex-members' in NRM studies (2024: 9). Their work, and this Element, is an attempt at an intervention and rebalancing from within the field.

There is no single agreed-upon definition of cult, but prominent cultic studies authors (Hassan 1988; Langone 1994, 2015; Dubrow-Marshall 2024) and organisations[3] convey similar ideas with the term. These largely draw upon Lifton's (1961) eight principles of 'thought reform' or brainwashing developed in the context of American prisoners of war held in Korea in the 1950s. These eight principles – milieu control, mystical manipulation, demand for purity, confession, sacred science, loading the language, doctrine over person and dispensing of existence – remain important factors in analysing the dynamics of some religious and social movements. They bear similarity to some of the

[3] The most important of which is now the American-based International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) – https://internationalculticstudies.org/ – founded as the American Family Foundation in 1979.

factors of abuse I discuss in this Element. However, they are not true of all NRMs, and neither is it true that converts to an NRM are brainwashed (Barker 1984).[4] More recent definitions of the term cult contain similar checklists such as Hassan's (1988) 'BITE Model of Authoritarian Control' and Langone's (2015) 'Characteristics Associated with Cultic Groups'. Following Lifton, these models describe ways in which individuals are controlled to the detriment of their own health and wellbeing and for the gratification of a charismatic leader. They include such factors as unquestioning commitment to the leader, mind-altering practices, such as meditation and chanting, a preoccupation with recruitment and/or making money, converts cutting ties with family and friends and dedicating all of their time to the movement.

These practices have led to a more recent conceptualisation of high-demand or high-control movements.[5] These models are concerned with issues of manipulation, undue influence, control and deception, and the propensity for abuse and harm that can follow. Some of these factors are certainly true of some NRMs. There are overlaps with some of the factors which can enable abuse that I will discuss. The significant difference is that NRM scholars approach these factors as behaviours present in some groups some of the time, including in mainstream or established religions, rather than as inherently defining characteristics. Of course, there have also been developments in cultic studies over time and some authors associated with ICSA have also written about cultic properties being on a continuum and as interactionist. Rosedale and Langone (2015) note that because of this definitional ambiguity, ICSA does not produce a list of cults but rather directs 'inquirers' attention to potentially harmful practices, rather than to a label'. This is no different from the practice at Inform. In practical, day-to-day work, rather than in theoretical literature, there is arguably greater convergence between some areas of NRM and cultic studies. Barker has been pivotal in this practical convergence as ICSA's current philosophy of dialogue has been influenced by her approach (ICSA 2013).

NRM scholars argue that the term 'cult' is too pejorative to be of scholarly use, being little more than a label to indicate deviance and illegitimacy (Barker 2004; Wessinger 2008; Laycock 2022; Zeller 2023; Thomas and Graham-Hyde 2024). They argue that its use as a definitional tool is bound up with a priori assumptions about religious movements. It serves to de-humanise members,

[4] For further analysis of the brainwashing debate see Barker (1984), Anthony (1990), Zablocki and Robbins (2001), Reichert, Richardson and Thomas (2015), Ashcraft (2018), Moore (2018) and Introvigne (2022a). It is important to note that in the 1987 Molko legal case, the American Psychological Association stated that the theory of brainwashing was not accepted in the scientific community, a ruling that was reinforced in the 1990 Fishman legal case and which has remained into the present (Introvigne 2022a).

[5] See Laycock (2024) for a more in-depth discussion of these terms.

eradicating their agency in its linkage with brainwashing narratives and sometimes legitimising excessive action against movements by governments and law enforcement, such as the siege of the Branch Davidian compound at Waco in 1993, or laws in China criminalising *xie jiao* – heterodox teachings. These scholars argue, following Barker, that brainwashing is 'little more than a metaphor that expresses the speaker's distaste for the end result of a process of conversion, without actually explaining the process itself' (Barker 2009: 11). In contrast, cultic studies scholars argue that the term 'cult' is valuable *because* of its negative connotations: it can act as a label to signify certain controversial practices, for example, manipulation techniques, coercive relationships, abuse and violence. It should not then be restricted to religious movements but can be applied to any organisation which displays such tendencies, including street gangs, organised crime groups and terrorist organisations (Dubrow-Marshall 2024). In fact, Dubrow-Marshall (2024) distinguishes between cult and NRM as two separate entities: NRMs are not more likely to be cults than other non-religious organisations. He suggests that this inaccurate conflation has led to the circular academic arguments of the cult wars.

Nevertheless, the term 'new religious movement' was popularised by scholars of religion who sought a less value-laden label to describe groups that became visible in the 1960s and 1970s. 'New' initially had a temporal dimension, with scholars citing the mid-1940s (Wallis 1984), 1950s (Barker 1989) or 1960s (Beckford 1985) as the significant start date for marking the current rise of NRMs. This was a practical device, with recognition that many movements had much older origins, and over time scholars have refined their definitions. Melton has argued that NRMs have no shared characteristics in terms of 'beliefs, practices, or attributes' and that the 'new' should therefore refer to tension with society (2004: 73). NRMs are assigned a fringe status by dominant forces in society, both because members disagree with the beliefs, norms and values of the society and because they engage in activities deemed unacceptable, 'such as violence, illegal behavior, high pressure proselytism, unconventional sexual contacts, or minority medical practices' (Melton 2004: 73). In this they differ from sects, which 'dissent but within acceptable limits' (2004: 78) thus retaining the possibility of evolving into churches. Barker, on the other hand, has argued that new religions do share characteristics based on their newness, and it is 'as a consequence of their newness' that they are relegated to the fringes of society (2004: 88). She focuses on newness not as a temporal quality but in relation to membership. She defines new religions as consisting 'predominantly of first-generation members' (converts) and that particular characteristics follow from this (2004: 94). These characteristics include the enthusiasm with which members hold their beliefs and the NRM's

desire to keep its members separate from the world to protect these beliefs; a dichotomous worldview, in which people are divided into members and non-members, us and them; the frequency of charismatic leadership in NRMs; and the movement's propensity to change more rapidly and radically than older religions. Movements become less new and, often, less in tension with society as second and subsequent generations arrive (Barker 2014). Using this definition raises some important questions about the possible characteristics of those religions that have a significant number of converts in addition to members born into the movements, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses. More recently, Singler and Barker (2022) have defined NRMs as having three characteristics: a first generation of converts, a leader with charismatic authority and beliefs and practices alternative to the mainstream.

The classic NRMs of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), now have subsequent generations and have changed significantly, due in part to the deaths of their charismatic founders, somewhat refuting their categorisation as NRMs with a first generation of converts and charismatic leaders. However, an alternative term to NRM has not been agreed upon. Minority religion is one possible term which has both pros and cons. Minority is a contextual term, always existing in relation to the majority, and hence differs according to geographical location and time period. It is a political term, indicating the process through which a group of people are 'othered' in a process of 'minoritization' (Stausberg et al. 2023). It is the term favoured by Inform, whose remit also encompasses new movements within mainstream traditions and intra-faith relationships (Newcombe and Harvey 2024). Graham-Hyde (2023) found that members of religious movements preferred the term to NRM but that it was not well-recognised within public discourse. Thomas and Graham-Hyde (2024) nevertheless advocate academic usage of the term 'minority religion' to replace both NRM and cult. Ashcraft, however, argues that other terms, including minority religion, have not 'achieved widespread usage like NRM has' (2018: 4). In this Element, I largely stick with the term 'NRM' as this best characterises the case study on which I draw to illustrate factors which can lead to a propensity for abuse. I turn now to the issue of how NRM scholars have addressed issues of violence and abuse.

Approaches to Abuse and Violence in NRM Studies

If cultic studies scholars approach cults from an assumption of harm, it could be argued that NRM studies scholars approach NRMs from an assumption that

they are not necessarily problematic, or at least are innocent until proven guilty. Generally, NRM scholars approach the study of these new movements no differently than that of mainstream religions – describing their beliefs, practices, history, leadership, membership composition and their interactions with wider society. Sometimes they focus on controversial issues, including abuse and violence. In a presentation at the 2002 ICSA conference, Barker noted that

> Sociologists who study new religions/cults/sects are trying to find out what these movements are like – what they believe, what they do, how they organise themselves, how they interact with the rest of society, and so on. They do not orient their research toward looking specifically at the harmful or the non-harmful aspects of the movements, but the harmful and non-harmful aspects will form part of their overall description, which they try to make as reliable and objective as possible. (2002b: n.p.)

She goes on to state that some of the characteristics of new religious movements can 'predispose' them 'toward situations in which harm might ensue'. Ethnographies and articles which have analysed children raised within NRMs in particular have not shied away from addressing the issue of harm (Rochford and Heinlein 1998; van Eck Duymaer van Twist 2015; Palmer 2016; Frisk et al. 2018; Barker 2022; Nilsson 2024).

However, the conceptualisation of harm in NRM studies has tended to be on 'deadly' or 'lethal' violence – 'either suicide or homicide' (Ashcraft 2018: 177). Scholars have tended to focus on the 'big six' internationally renowned cases of Jonestown, the Branch Davidians, the Order of the Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo, Heaven's Gate and the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God.[6] Important anthologies which analyse these cases include Wessinger (2000), Bromley and Melton (2002) and Lewis (2011, 2014). These NRM studies scholars have developed interactionist models of violence to explore the internal and external factors which can contribute to situations of violence. Internal factors include some of the characteristics of NRMs described by Barker (2004), such as charismatic leadership, a dualistic worldview, millennial beliefs and a degree of social isolation. This suggests that there is something in the structure of NRMs which lends itself to situations of violence. However, internal factors alone are not a sufficient explanation as the vast majority of NRMs do not turn to violence. The interactionist model suggests that violence may occur as a reaction to external factors, which can include the movement's relationship with wider society and/or an anticult or

[6] It now seems likely that what has become known as the 'Shakahola forest incident' or the 'Kenya starvation cult' will be added to this list. In spring 2023 it emerged that over 400 members of the Good News International Church had starved themselves to death, apparently on the direction of leader Paul Nthenge Mackenzie. See e.g. www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-65412822.