

## LAUNCH OF THE RELIGION RESEARCH GROUP AT BRUNEL UNIVERSITY LONDON

BASR members Dr Eleanor T. Higgs and Dr. Owen Coggins, with their colleague Dr. Sam Han announce the launch of the Religion Research Group at Brunel University London. Brunel does not have a Religious Studies department, so the new Religion Research Group exists to connect colleagues at the university working on diverse dimensions of religion in different disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, law, history, education, social work, and media studies. For us, 'religion' includes traditions, beliefs, groups, and practices, in plural sociocultural, political, and legal contexts, and in interaction with arts, media, and political movements. Through transdisciplinary research and scholarship, RRG members are engaged with theoretical innovations and in conversation with grassroots organisation and communities. We generate new knowledge about religion, belief, and practice - and we bring critical perspectives to existing knowledge.

From our different disciplinary locations, Religion Research Group members conduct critical, socially engaged, and participatory research with groups and communities in different parts of the world. We are long-standing and active participants in relevant scholarly associations including the British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR), British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion group (BSA SocRel), Centre for the Critical Study of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements (CenSAMM), International Society for Metal Music Studies, and the International Association for the Study of Religion and Gender (IARG). Research projects of RRG members have been funded by the American Historical Association, the American Institute of Indian Studies, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the British Academy, the Druze Heritage Foundation, the Issachar Fund, the John Templeton Foundation, and the Leverhulme Trust. Current and planned activities include a working paper seminar series, a guest lecture series, and collaborative research projects.

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# conferences

## '35 YEARS OF INFORM' SEMINAR KING'S COLLEGE, LONDON, JANUARY 2024

The most recent Inform conference was held at King's College's Bush House on the thirteenth of January, with the various featured speakers all actively acknowledging and celebrating the milestone of the charity's 35th year of operation. The importance of Inform within the field of New Religious Movement (NRM) studies cannot be understated – an importance which cannot be appreciated without acknowledging its founder Professor Eileen Barker. As a seminal figure in NRM studies, Barker's hugely influential '*Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?*' (1984) provided a sympathetic perspective, with the rejection of the 'brainwashing' thesis in favour of the demystification of NRM conversion processes. emblematic of Barker's work, Inform has sought to prevent the harm that can be caused through misinformation about minority religions, by bringing the insights of academic research into the public domain.

The event saw a prompt start with Amanda van Eck Duymaer van Twist, Georgie Chryssides and Marat Shterin all providing short introductions – each speaker elaborated on the evolving face of the study of New Religious Movements, and how adequately equipped Inform is to facilitate collaborative conversation between communities for years to come. The last of these commencing addresses came from Professor Barker, who delivered a heartfelt speech conveying the importance of those who have dedicated their time to sustaining Inform's existence. Equal parts modest and moving, her words united those in attendance who stand as representatives for several communities who, like Barker, are primar-

ily interested in the study of "peculiar people." Linda Woodhead then provided the event's keynote address, speaking at length about Inform's firm power as an "antidote" to unproductive and stereotyped conversation between members of conflicting communities.



The first panel platformed the stories of several members and ex-members of a range of NRMs. As honorary director Suzanne Newcombe identified, Inform is far from the official expert in the context of people's lived experiences, and so it is the essence of this panel that exemplifies Inform's emphasis on the triangulation of data through several sources and networks. The panel opened with secretary of the Pagan Federation, Vivianne Crowley, who detailed the way in which Inform provided necessary demystification amidst the satanic panic scare of the early 1990s, and in assisting in the federation's longstanding battle to be recognised as an official registered charity.

Hazel Barlow, a former member of the Unification movement, then provided a short speech on the ways in which Inform was a source of valuable clarificatory information in both her personal and academic life, praising Professor Barker's foresight in creating such an important educational organisation. Next to speak was full-time staff member of the Church of Scientology, Graeme Wilson. Wilson honoured Inform in its role of "filling a vital need" in the context of clarifying academic truths against sensationalised media stories, offering "a much-needed sane alternative." Wilson praised the charity's power to "resolve situations of disharmony and conflicts and repair upsets" caused by misinformation. The panel closed with William Haines, a current member of the Unification

movement. After Haines joined the movement, his mother was understandably concerned as a result of widespread media misinformation. Haines personal reflection commended Inform for their work in supporting concerned relatives through the provision of unbiased and factually correct information about the Unification movement.

The second panel platformed various academics who have engaged with Inform over its thirty-five years of operation. First to speak was Professor Milda Alisauskienė. Marking her initial interactions with Inform as a “turning point” in her academic career, Alisauskienė detailed how Professor Barker’s agreement to supervise her master’s thesis cemented Barker as a role model in her life. Within an event which had so far highlighted Inform’s importance in a British context, this speech branched explored Inform’s global relevance. Alisauskienė remarked on Barker’s constant academic communication with the Lithuanian Centre for New Religions Research and Information, to demonstrate how inspirational Barker’s forethought has been in the creation of like-groups worldwide. The next speaker was Susannah Crockford, who originally came to Inform to consult its database, yet eventually became an Inform staff member after being inspired by the interactions with members of the public via the phone lines. It was these conversations that, for Crockford, emphasised how imperative Inform’s work is in manufacturing spaces which don’t ridicule members of NRMs, and take people and their testimonies seriously. Next to speak was Professor Abby Day, who reflected on her upbringing in the heart of North American cultic discourse of figures such as Jim Jones and Charles Manson. Highlighting the demystifying power of Inform’s services, Day reflected on how these people were deemed “strange” because they were “made strange by those in established religions who wanted to view themselves as more authentic or established.” The ‘academics’ panel closed with Professor Jean La Fontaine, who gratefully reflected on Inform’s capacity in making her academic research into ‘satanic panic’ a reality, effectively turning something which “sounded like a dangerous or ridiculous” idea into an approachable task.

The penultimate panel of the day saw several professional speakers detail the ways in which they, or the communities they have attended on behalf of, have benefitted directly from the services provided by Inform. First to speak was Revd Pedr Beckley, who accentuated the applicability of Inform’s work and services in all faith communities. Following Beckley was Henri de Cordes, the former President of Belgium’s CIAOSN, an organisation which acts as a junior sibling to the “grown-up” Inform. De Cordes specified how the two organisations have existed as key players in a mutually beneficial academic microcosm. The next speaker was retired civil servant Hugh Marriage. As an instrumental figure in the securing of Inform’s first government grants, Marriage detailed how his own department within the Home Office which was initially responsible for ‘cult’ management was grossly underinformed – until Inform became involved in an advisory position. As a member of the Estonian Ministry of the Interior with twenty-five years of history with Inform, Ringo Ringvee then emulated Marriage’s experience in an international context. Retired solicitor Kim Speller then highlighted how he had personally sought the informed testimonies of several Inform members to aid in numerous childcare cases concerning wardship in the wider familial context of a New Religious Movement. This panel closed with the words of Jim Walters, director of the LSE Faith Centre. With the aid of Inform, Walters highlighted how he is now able to appreciate the complex intersectionality of the ways “big religion” can inform “small religion,” and vice versa. This panel was both necessary and enlightening in terms of contextualising Inform in spheres that lie outside of academia.

The final panel was delivered online, and saw three American scholars beam into the proceedings. The first of these was Gordon Melton, who stressed the importance of fieldwork in religious studies, claiming that it is amongst the worst of trends in modern religious studies to neglect its importance. Susan Palmer then spoke of the equal status that Inform gives to members of NRMs alongside academics and officials, thus providing a space for productive conversation to take place. The last speaker was Catherine Wessinger, who echoed many of the sentiments expressed throughout the day.