

How Minority Religions React to the Law

**Reflection/Report on the Inform Seminar held in Association with the
Department of Theology & Religious Studies,
King's College, London, 1 June 2019**

by Peter Zoehrer



Eileen Barker had invited me to speak at the above annual INFORM Conference, and what follows is my brief report.

The event was held in the prestigious King's College and was attended by over 50 scholars, including sociologists, theologians and experts in various academic fields. Eight speakers, several of whom were longtime renowned associates of INFORM, presented their papers on issues related to the overall topic, and I was one of three speakers who represented a particular minority religion.

The conference concluded with the opportunity for the audience to direct their questions to a panel of the speakers. Not only was the conference content extremely interesting, but it also afforded a good opportunity for networking and forging new alliances.

Background

In December last year, Dr. Eileen Barker gave a presentation at the university of Graz, Austria. My wife Gaby and I, with our eldest son Dominic (currently working on his PhD at the Department of religious studies at Vienna University) met Eileen in Vienna for dinner. I then decided to drive her to Graz, so that we could have an opportunity to talk. Dr. Barker had many questions, especially about my work with FOREF Europe. However, her real interest was the current state of the Unification Church (FFWPU) after the schisms. She was particularly fascinated by the fact, that in Austria - 40 years after our the federal government stripped us of our official status in 1974 - we could finally be registered as an official community of faith. (June 2015).

I am not certain, but it did cross my mind, that this story gave her the idea for the theme of Saturday's INFORM Seminar...

Eileen Barker and INFORM

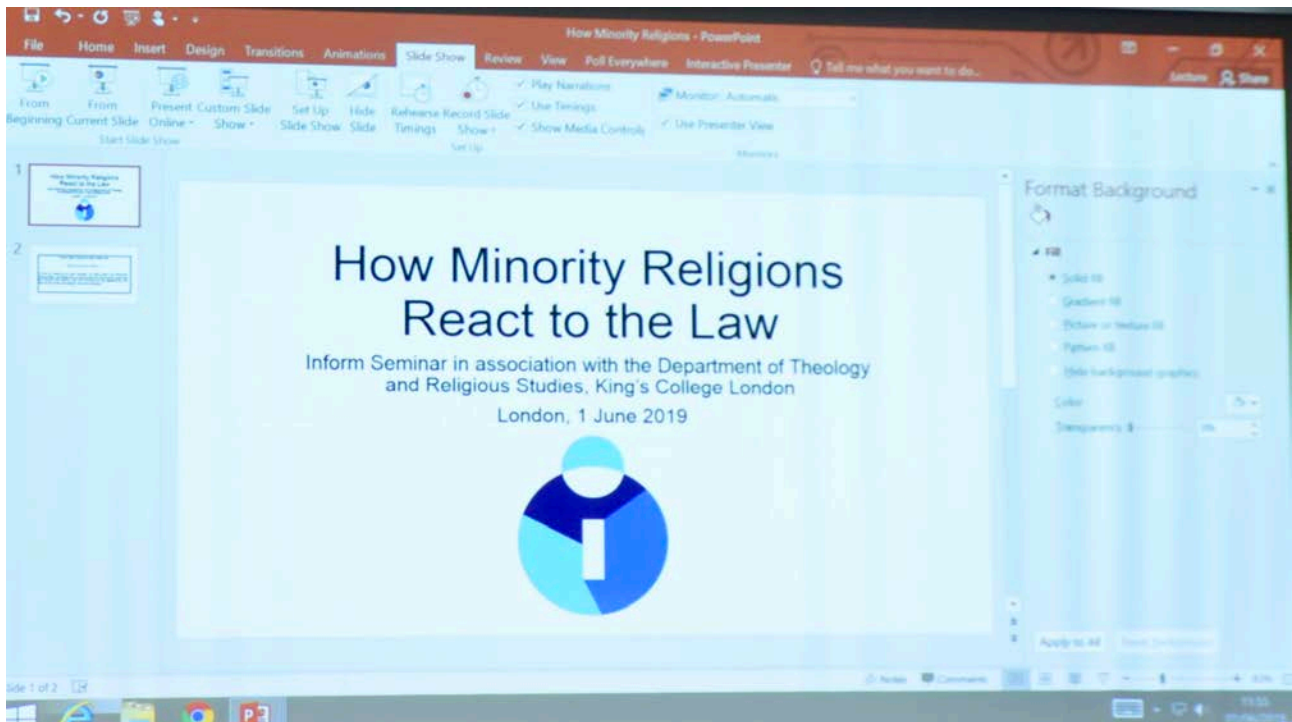


Eileen's credentials include FAcSS, FBA, OBE and Professor Emeritus at the London School of Economic. For the past four decades, she has studied minority religions and social reactions to them. In 1988 she founded INFORM in order to provide information that is as reliable, balanced, contextualized and up-to-date as possible. She has over 350 scholarly publications to her name and is editor of the Rutledge/INFORM series of edited volumes on various issues related to minority religions.

However, for Unificationists Eileen Barker is best known as the author of the book that has definitely impacted the public perception of the Unification community more than any other scholarly publication in 20th century Europe: *"The Making of a Moonie"*. Through this publication and the establishment of INFORM, Eileen has arguably contributed more to the debunking of the "brainwashing myth" and countering the media bias as well as the attacks by the anti-cult lobby, than any other person on the continent. It is also said that it was Eileen's founding of INFORM that put the infamous British anti-cult group FAIR out of business...

Eileen's diligent empirical research and her powerful input in the public discourse on the "cult-phenomena" has not always earned her praise and gratitude. She was often denounced by the anti-cultists as the "cult-apologist", whereas members of minority groups called her the "anti-cult apologist". The latter can be understood within the context of her purely scientific approach, void of any "propaganda" on the groups she researched. To this day, Eileen maintains a remarkable up-to-date knowledge of most religious minority groups as well as their schismatic offshoots.

The annual INFORM Conference 2019



Speakers and content summary

After Eileen Barker's brief introduction the first speaker was:

Eric Roux

Member of the Church of Scientology for more than twenty-five years and Vice-President of the European Scientology Office for Public Affairs and Human Rights. Religious freedom and human rights activist for many years, and current President of the European Interreligious Forum for Religious Freedom.

In his presentation Mr Roux, who was at the forefront of Scientology's legal battles for many years, gave numerous examples of how the Church reacted to the law directly in court cases and of successful advocacy that resulted in changes in the law. Eric's concluding statement: "As Scientology we always win in court... or at least we never lose!"

Susan J. Palmer

Internationally acclaimed expert on new religious movements and lives in Montreal, Quebec where she is currently directing a four year research project "*Children in Sectarian Religions and State Control*" (McGill University's School of Religious Studies, where she teaches).

Palmer's research as a sociologist in the field of new religious movements is funded by

six federal grants from the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).
Member of the FOREF scientific advisory board.

In her presentation she shared stories of several serious cases, where she was called to give expert advice. In January 2013 the Royal Canadian Mounted Police responded to a call from a small **Mennonite community** near Winnipeg who reported sexual misuse of children by one of their ministers. When the children were interviewed by the police, they described having undergone severe physical punishments. Finally the Child and Family Services (CFS) took 42 children into care and 13 adults faced assault charges. Susan and a team of “helpers” resolved the conflicting perspectives of CFS and the Mennonite parents. She analyzed the case within the unique religious ecology of Mennonite culture in Canada, which dates back to the 1780s.

Dr. Palmer was also a mediator during the “**12 Tribes**” controversy several years ago in Bavaria, where police conducted a heavy-handed raid on the properties and took numerous children into custody (FOREF reported).

Peter Zoehrer



Secretary General of FOREF Europe (Forum for Religious Freedom), Austria, and a member of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.

The title of my own talk was: “***Big Fish Eats Little Fish***” or ***Why Religious Minorities are Still a Soft Target in the Marketplace of World Views***”

In her briefing on the content of my talk, Eileen had asked me to share about the specific situation of religious minorities in Austria and the struggle of the Unification community to gain official state recognition 40 years after having been stripped of its legal status in 1974.

She also wanted me to tell the story of how, as a member of the Unification Church since 1972, I became a journalist and defender of religious freedom. Eileen is well familiar with FOREF and occasionally uses our website as a resource pool for her research.

I started my PowerPoint presentation with a very personal story, which immediately attracted everybody’s attention. My “defining moment” was in September 1995, after Rev. Moon gave a public speech in Budapest, Hungary (where I was the then UC national leader). He and Mrs. Moon left Hungary the following morning, intending to travel to Spain, the next stop in their European public speaking tour. At the Charles de Gaulle airport they were interrupted and interrogated as criminals by the French police before being sent back to Hungary later in the day. Meanwhile we received the shocking news via the German 'Bild Zeitung' that **Rev. Moon had been placed by German authorities on the SIS** (Schengen Information System, which serves as a blacklist for foreign criminals) **and consequently banned from entering the Schengen countries.**

Our founders arrived back the same afternoon in Budapest and a small group had a late lunch with them in their suite at the Hilton. Since I was in a state of shock I was unable to eat, something that did not escape Rev. Moon's attention. To his question as to why I looked so serious and was not eating, I told him how shocked I was by the way he was being treated by Europe. But he tried to cheer me up with these words: "*Don't be shocked! I am already used to this kind of thing. It happens to me all the time...!*" That shocked me even more. There and then I made a profound life decision: "*I will fight for religious freedom, whatever it takes! And I will do all I can to bring Rev. Moon back to Europe!*" I stated to the audience: "*This was my defining moment and this is why I am here today!*"

I also shared about the history of FOREF: from 1998 when the first website was created until 2005, when Prof Brünner and I founded FOREF Europe as an association and he became its president until 2014 when Dr. Aaron Rhodes, the former head of the International Helsinki Federation took over.

Although occasionally defending the UC, FOREF's fundamental premise is that religious freedom is indivisible and that an attack on the freedom of one is an attack on the freedom of all. Thus, it focuses primarily on defending the rights of all religious groups and now does so in former Soviet Union nations, in the Middle East and even Asia.

The applause and feedback I received was overwhelmingly positive. In fact I hardly can remember any other of my public talks, when I got such favorable response as on that Saturday at the King's College!

Dr. Rin Uishiyama

British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Sociology at Cambridge and a Research Fellow at Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge.

His doctoral thesis in sociology: 'Memory struggles: narrating and commemorating the Aum affair in contemporary Japan: 1994-2015' explored how various actors such as victims, ex-members, anti-cult activists, the media and public intellectuals have competed over the moral significance of Aum Shinrikyō's violent crimes and terrorist attacks.

During his fieldwork he interviewed victims, experts and former Aum believers including members of the splinter group Hikari no Wa.

Rin's latest research investigates links between nationalism and religion in contemporary Japan, especially in relation to neo-nationalist individuals, groups and political parties that deny the occurrence of atrocities committed by Japan before and during the Asia-Pacific War.

His talk presented contrasting responses to the law by Aum Shinrikyō's successor organizations, Aleph and Hikari no Wa, from the 1995 Tokyo subway gassing to the executions of the founder Asahara Sōkō and 12 others in July 2018. In 2000, Aum's mainstream faction renamed itself Aleph, and has continued to worship Ashara as a spiritual leader. By contrast, Hikari no Wa which separated from Aleph in 2007, has repudiated Ashara as a figure of worship. Both organisations are legally obliged to pay

reparations to the victims. Aleph continues to operate as a 'world-rejecting' group, while Hikari no Wa has sought to improve its public image by engaging in debates with public figures and emphasizing a clear break with the past.

Ringo Ringvee

Ringo graduated with a Master's degree from the University of Helsinki as a historian of religion, and his PhD thesis was on the State and religion at the University of Tartu. Mr. Ringvee works in the Religious Affairs Department, Estonia and is a member of the Estonian Chancellor of Justice's Advisory Committee on Human Rights. He also serves on the editorial board of the *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*.

The title of his talk was: **Stand Up for Your Rights: (Minority) Religions' Reactions to the Law in Estonia.**

Ringo's talk focused on three religious minority communities in Estonia: the Jewish community, Jehovah's Witnesses and the indigenous pagans. Each of them have successfully managed to influence legislation to the advantage of their religious freedom in areas such as an alternative to military service and access to medical treatment.

Common to all three cases is an out of court settlement.

Jason D.A. Wise, J.D.

Received his law degree from Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto, Ontario, Canada and was admitted to the Ontario Bar in 2005. The focus of his practice is civil litigation, family, constitutional and criminal law.

Since 2009 Jason has specialized in international human rights. He has been consulted in human rights litigation in countries such as Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bulgaria, Ireland, Macedonia, .Mongolia, the Netherlands, Sweden, Ukraine and the United Kingdom.

His presentation was entitled: *Jehovah's Witnesses and the Law - 'Give what belongs to Caesar to Caesar, but what belongs to God to God'*

How do Jehovah's Witnesses react to the law? In short, they obey the law. Jason made the point, that Jehovah's Witnesses adhere to Jesus' command to pay back to Caesar what is his (Matthew 22:21). As a result, Jehovah's Witnesses remain politically neutral. They do not lobby or participate in any action or protests against government or legislation.

However, where the law obliges them to do something contrary to their religious beliefs or conscience, they follow Jesus' command to pay back "to God what is His" They likewise follow their conscience and the biblical commandment and obey God when there is a clash with the law. Thus cases involving Jehovah's Witnesses often come before supreme and international courts and tribunals. Recent examples of legislative changes in favor of Jehovah's Witnesses pertain to conscientious objection to military service (Korea), public manifestation of religious beliefs ((Azerbaijan), and religious autonomy (Canada).



Foto: Panel / Q & A at the end of the conference