



## Information Network On Religious Movements

### Extremism on University Campuses

Universities are under pressure to reduce the risk of fostering 'extremism' on campus, while remaining committed to promoting lawful freedom of speech. This is a challenging balance to maintain. Politically or ideologically oriented debates, for example, may be followed by accusations of religious intolerance, discrimination, racism, Islamophobia or anti-Semitism. Universities are an obvious place for students and staff to discuss complicated and sensitive topics, but these may significantly affect social relations on campus. Student societies may cause tension on campus because they find themselves on different sides of current debates. With new and unfamiliar groups applying to start new societies on campus, the situation may become more complicated.

Inform's extensive database and over twenty years of experience in researching minority religious groups, including radical groups, can help assist you to discover the likely affiliations of an unfamiliar religious group and/or the likely effects of such a group's presence on campus. This leaflet outlines the issues surrounding extremism on campus. It summarises concerns that have been raised with Inform in the past.

Inform can help you decide how best to handle controversial religious and ideological groups: we provide information that is as neutral, accurate and up-to-date as possible on minority and alternative religions and spiritualities. We assemble the latest academic research, media reports and legal cases, with reports from former-members and current members where possible. In collating and contextualising this information, we aim to provide you with the information you need to make an informed decision based on your own needs and criteria.

### 1 'No Platform'

The National Union of Students (NUS) has a formal 'No Platform' policy which bans organisations considered to be racist or fascist from formally attending NUS events. This also bans NUS officers from sharing a platform with representatives of organisations against which the NUS has a 'No Platform' policy. Examples of banned organisations include the British National Party (BNP) and Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT). However, it should be noted that not all university Student Unions (SUs) adhere to this NUS policy (some argue that this policy contravenes the right to freedom of speech). Furthermore, not allowing a platform for extremist views at NUS events does not necessarily remove such views from campus, instead it merely relocates certain meetings/events off campus – but still within easy reach

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for university students. Off-campus events may be held under entirely different conditions which can shape the participants' experience, such as not allowing for dissenting views, whereas meetings on campus are more likely to be managed by the university to some extent.

Inform is frequently asked by universities whether HuT is active on their campus. HuT, in response to the NUS' 2004 'No Platform' policy banning them from formally attending NUS events, has either created, or connected with, other organisations to organise talks, panels and other events. HuT's presence on campuses since 2004 has been under such names as: the Islamic Front; the International Islamic Front; the Islamic Forum Against Communism; Al Khilafah Publications; the Young Liberating Party; Asian Youth (Waltham Forest); the 1924 Committee; the Muslim Media Forum (University College London); Muslim Current Affairs Society (Leeds University); the New World Society (Nottingham and Sheffield universities); and the Global Ideas Society (University of Westminster). In addition, individual members of HuT have attempted to gain positions within non-HuT Islamic Societies at Universities; and individuals alleged to have links with HuT were elected as SU leaders at the University of Westminster in 2011.

## **2 Groups using university premises**

Inform is frequently asked by universities for information about groups or organisations seeking to use university premises. In some cases universities, or their chaplaincies, may not want to be associated with certain groups for religious and/or moral reasons. Furthermore, they may want to avoid tension with or between existing societies on campus. For example, a university may wish to think carefully about the implications of making premises available to:

- the Citizen's Commission on Human Rights, a branch of the Church of Scientology, which amongst other positions, is likely to denounce psychiatry as 'an industry of death'
  - this would be likely to attract a demonstration from critics of Scientology (e.g. Anonymous).
- Falun Gong, which may organise a meeting revolving around the topic 'crimes committed by the Chinese government'
  - this would be likely to raise a response from the Chinese Students' Society and potentially the Chinese Embassy.

To illustrate the issues at stake, here are some specific cases known to Inform:

- The University of Westminster cancelled an event organised in 2010 by the Global Ideas Society entitled 'Islam and Europe' after allegations of an HuT connection. However a panel discussion organised by the Global Ideas Society entitled 'What is the way forward for the Arab world?' took place in February 2011. This meeting featured several speakers, ranging from a senior member of the Muslim Brotherhood to someone who at the time was a PhD candidate at the LSE and HuT member.
- In 2011 a healing group used LSE premises for a public meeting about ThetaHealing techniques, teaching that through thought and prayer one can realise instantaneous healing.

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Critics consider these techniques controversial, and in some cases potentially criminal. The LSE was criticised for offering its premises (and hence its name and reputation). It responded that this was a 'commercial booking' and that it could not be held responsible.

### **3 Student societies' events**

Student societies may hold political views and ambitions, which can give rise to events that are challenging for universities to manage. Student societies may invite speakers from outside the university; and events may be open to non-members of the university. Such events can lead to polarisation within the student community and could be used to attract supporters to their cause.

The situation becomes more complicated when students apply to form religious societies that are unfamiliar to the university advisors involved. For example, many such advisors and chaplains had no idea what to expect when students requested permission to start a 'Luciferian Society' or a 'Modern Satanism' society.

In some cases, proposed societies may meet protests from existing societies. For example, proposals for a New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) Society have raised criticism from Buddhist and Tibetan Societies who disapproved of the NKT's members' vocal protests against the Dalai Lama. In other cases the disapproval may centre on criticism of particular techniques of practice (e.g. meditation, yoga, Qi Gong, martial arts) specific to a guru, master or lineage that may also be associated with controversies (e.g. Sahaja Yoga, Falun Gong).

Finally, applications for 'new' religious societies that appear unfamiliar may also be from 'known' societies operating under a different name. At Inform, we are aware of several religious groups that have, in some cases successfully, tried to register religious societies under different names. Hence a society can distance itself from its reputation for sometimes well-deserved controversy.

### **4 The information market and threats to the well-being of students**

In addition to formally planned events held at university premises, there is a large informal 'information market' on university premises that advertises meetings and groups that could pose a threat to the well-being of students. Some examples include, but are not limited to:

- Information leaflets
- Advertising in student publications
- Meditation, yoga, relaxation, self-development classes
- Student support (e.g. warning about danger of alcohol/drugs campaigns, sexual relations, counselling)
- Gap-year charity work

#### **Leaflets and Freshers' Fairs**

At Inform, many of the leaflets held in our files on controversial movements have been picked up at Freshers' Fairs. Leaflets which appear to offer information about mainstream philosophies or religions may offer teachings from controversial sources. For example, Al Muhajiroun, which disbanded in 2004

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(although there were two offshoot organisations, Al Ghuraaba and The Saved Sect, which were soon banned for promoting the 'glorification of terrorism'), attempted to re-launch itself in June 2009. Although the re-launch event was not organised on university premises, it was held near several universities in a central London location and leaflets had been distributed on university premises. The movement was proscribed in 2010, under its new name of Islam4UK, in accordance with the UK Terrorism Act 2000.

### **Student newspapers**

Groups may seek to publish or advertise in student newspapers. Organisations associated with the Unification Church, Church of Scientology and Falun Gong, among others, have sought to publish in student papers without making their full identity clear.

### **Activities offered by outside groups**

A group may offer classes to students on or near campus. The classes may not be harmful in themselves but could lead to advanced involvement in an organisation with a controversial history. For example, in 2010, leaflets from the Tara Yoga Centre, advertising an event and offering yoga classes, were distributed around some London universities and campuses. The founder and current leader of this organisation (Movement of Spiritual Integration into the Absolute) became controversial as a result of accusations (currently unproven) by the Romanian government of trafficking of women, sexual abuse and other criminal offences.

Religious groups known to have held relaxation and meditation classes on campuses include the New Kadampa Tradition, Sahaja Yoga and the Brahma Kumaris. Some of these groups also have vocal critics who dispute the appropriateness of such arrangements, and some universities/SUs have banned them from their campuses.

Similarly, organisations offering support to students in the form of drugs education, counselling, or other campaigns can be affiliated to controversial ideological groups (e.g. Narconon is affiliated with Scientology).

### **Charity work abroad**

Students may be interested in gaining work experience or doing charitable work abroad, which may be arranged through organisations to which they have been exposed on campus or by fellow-students. Organisations offering gap year or charity opportunities may be connected to ideological organisations that may be controversial without the students being aware of it. Consequently, students may go abroad expecting one thing, but encounter a different experience. For example, Humana, The Necessary Teacher Training College and People to People Movement are Danish organisations that sought to advertise their charitable efforts to 'fight poverty' through university careers advice centres by offering gap-year opportunities to students. However, they are all associated with Tvind, a network of charities running development projects, which has been accused of being a political cult. Tvind is well known to the Danish tax authorities, who have prosecuted the leaders for financial crimes and accused the humanitarian arm of exploiting its workers and volunteers.

### **Groups that have raised questions**

Inform often receives enquiries from universities about groups that operate near a campus in order to target students. The main concerns tend to address the level of commitment required and the extent to which involvement affects a student's day-to-day life and relations with family and friends. Ideological and religious groups often see their campus ministry as a growth strategy, and such groups can be demanding of a student's time and loyalties.

The fact that Inform has received a significant number of enquiries about these groups and others does not mean that they are necessarily controversial or harmful in every respect or in the eyes of all people. Examples of frequently enquired about groups that operate on, or around universities, and about which we have received a significant number of enquiries include, but are not limited to:

- International Churches of Christ (which has, in the past few years, split up into different factions although the London International Christian Church is still operating on campuses)
- University Bible Fellowship
- Redeemed Christian Church of God
- Believers' Love World (also known as Christ Embassy and other names)
- Winners' Chapel International
- Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles (the campus-outreach branch of the Unification Church)
- Local Church of Witness Lee (also known by other names, such as The Local Church, the Church in London, The Lord's Recovery)
- The Jesus Fellowship (also known as the Jesus Army)
- The New Kadampa Tradition
- The Prem Rawat Foundation (also known as Human Development Through Self Knowledge and by its older names of Elan Vital or Divine Light Mission)

To ask any further questions or to seek clarification about problematic religious groups on campus or new religious movements in general, you are invited to contact Inform.

### **HOW INFORM CAN HELP:**

- by providing reliable, up-to-date information about new religious movements
- by putting you in touch with a nation-wide network of experts with specialist knowledge concerning NRMs
- by putting you in touch with people who can give counselling, legal advice - or just lend a sympathetic ear
- by putting you in touch with former-members or families who have personal experience of a particular group.

*New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (London: HMSO, revised 1995) has been written by Professor Eileen Barker to provide practical suggestions as well as general background information. It is available to order at <http://www.tsoshop.co.uk>.