

# Information Network on Religious Movements



**inform**

<https://inform.ac>

# Annual Report

## April 2022 – March 2023

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Inform is a registered charity (No. 801729) and is  
incorporated in England as a company limited by  
guarantee under the Companies Act (No. 2346855).

## Introduction

Inform has continued to fulfil its charitable objective of collecting, assessing and disseminating reliable information about minority religions. As usual, we were able to help a wide range of enquirers and service users, largely through email, but also through a return to face-to-face meetings in the Inform office. Enquirers included government departments; the media; students and academics; members and former members of religious, spiritual and other ideological movements, and their relatives; and members of the public. Staff have continued to update the Inform database of religions and our bibliographic records.

However, the focus of our work in this period was on funded research projects, including the Culham St Gabriel's funded project on exploring attitudes to the Religion and Worldviews schools proposal with external stakeholders including parents, community groups, SACRES, school heads, university researchers and policy professionals. Inform sees the provision of high-quality education on religion in UK schools as part of its work to promote the teaching of accurate information about all religious groups in order to prevent harm stemming from misinformation. We have enjoyed collaborating with the Faith and Belief Forum and the Open University's Religious Studies Department on this project.

Experiences of harm and abuse in religious contexts continued to be a focus of research interest for Inform staff through this period. Senior Researcher Dr Sarah Harvey began work on the AHRC-funded project, Abuse in Religious Contexts, in March 2022 and in September 2022 reduced her Inform time to focus more on this project. During this period, she has had regular meetings with the project team and is now writing a monograph on 'Abuse in Minority Religions', to be published by Routledge.

Inform/KCL are also hosting Professor Amanda Lucia as a visiting Research Fellow, September 2022-2023; she is the Principal Investigator on the project Religion and Sexual Abuse. Sarah and Inform Honorary Director Dr Suzanne Newcombe have attended a number of events in relation to these two abuse projects and have also continued to attend meetings of the National Working Group on Accusations Linked to Witchcraft and Spirit Possession, and meetings with various police organisations.

Among other activities during this period, we have completed work for different government departments, written blog posts, articles and fact sheets. We held two online public seminars as well as a film screening and discussion evening which was in hybrid format, held at King's College London and simultaneously streamed. We will return to an in-person seminar in Summer 2023.

With great sadness, in May 2022 we learned of the death of Professor James A. Beckford, PhD, DPhil, FBA. Jim was an important force in the life of Inform, joining the Board of Governors in 1991, two years after it had opened, becoming Chair of Inform's Management Committee in 1999 and Vice Chair of the Board of Governors in 2011. He retired from the Board in September 2018. Jim will continue to be greatly missed by all who knew him or were influenced by his prodigious scholarship. He is fondly remembered by those who worked with him at Inform as a brilliant scholar, a wise counsellor, and a great human being, who was always a gentleman, with a fabulous sense of humour.

## Some Significant Developments within Religious Movements

During this period, we have started to see the potential long-term effects on new religious movements from the Covid-19 pandemic. The most prominent of these include the continued digitalisation of many religious movements and the use of social media to engage and recruit members. A recent example includes the Lighthouse International Movement that gained media attention in 2023 after the BBC's publication of 'A Very British Cult'. The movement, which claims to provide mentoring, leadership, personal development, business, and career development, used the social media platform LinkedIn to recruit members. However, the BBC exposé claimed that the movement used 'coercion, isolation and bullying' to control followers.<sup>1</sup>

Other new religious movements have also entered the media spotlight. Most prominently, the Kenyan new religious movement 'Good News International Church' founded by Pastor Paul Mackenzie Nthenge. In April 2023, the movement made headlines after the discovery of mass graves in the Shakahola forest. The ideology of the movement appears to be loosely based on an early version of William Branham's Latter Rain "Message" – which was the same version used by Jim Jones of the Peoples Temple. In that version, fasting for as many as forty days was believed to make an individual become more holy. Pastor Nthenge reportedly adopted this doctrine and told followers to starve to reach salvation. At the time of writing this report (19/05/2023) the death toll is 226, but over 600 members have been reported missing.

The assassination of Japan's former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was another notable event from this past year. His assassination took place on July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022, and has been linked to Abe's connection with the Unification Church. According to media articles, the alleged assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, had a longstanding dislike for the Unification Church because his mother had reportedly donated more than \$700,000 to them and thus bankrupted the family. After viewing a video message that Abe had made at a virtual Unification church-linked event in September 2021, Yamagami reportedly decided to target him. The relationship between Japan's government and the Unification Church is complex and goes back decades, and this event represents the tension between the church and state in Japan.

The UK Home Office Hate Crime Statistics stated that there were 8,730 religious hate crimes reported between March 2021-2022.<sup>2</sup> This is an increase of 37 per cent in comparison to the previous year. The charities Tell MAMA and Community Security Trust both remain active in their work to combat hate crimes against Muslims and Jews.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-65175712>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2021-to-2022/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2021-to-2022>

**Table 2.2: Number and proportion of religious hate crimes recorded by the police<sup>1</sup>, by the perceived targeted religion, year ending March 2022**

| Numbers and percentages          |                            | England and Wales |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|
| Perceived religion of the victim | Number of offences 2021/22 | % 2021/22         |
| Buddhist                         | 36                         | 0                 |
| Christian                        | 701                        | 8                 |
| Hindu                            | 161                        | 2                 |
| Jewish                           | 1,919                      | 23                |
| Muslim                           | 3,459                      | 42                |
| Sikh                             | 301                        | 4                 |
| Other                            | 403                        | 5                 |
| No religion                      | 209                        | 3                 |
| Unknown                          | 1,426                      | 17                |

Table of recorded religious hate crimes between March 2021-2022. Taken from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2021-to-2022/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2021-to-2022#fnref:7>.

Streaming platforms have continued to publish coverage and accounts of new religions during this period. For example, since 2022, Netflix has published successful content on a variety of new religions: *Waco American Apocalypse*, a three-part series that includes original footage and images from the Branch Davidian siege in 1993; *Keep Sweet and Obey*, a four-part series about the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints; *Sins of Our Mother*, a three-part series about Lori Vallow who has been labelled the 'doomsday mom'.

## Inform's Governors

### Management Committee

Professor Kim Knott (Chair)  
The Reverend Andrew McGuire (Treasurer)  
Dr George Chryssides (Chair of Management Committee)  
Dr Suzanne Newcombe (Honorary Director)

### *Other Governors*

Amma Anane-Agyei (Co-ordinator, African Families Service, London Borough of Tower Hamlets)

Rabbi Charley Baginsky (Chief Executive Officer, Liberal Judaism UK)

Professor Emeritus Graham Harvey (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Open University)

Mark Hill KC (FTB Chambers, specialist in Ecclesiastical Law and Religious Liberty)

The Reverend Stephen Hollinghurst (Mission Enabler (Environment), Anglican Diocese of Hereford)

Dr Humeira Iqtidar (Professor of Politics and Political Economy, King's College London)

Father Toby Lees, OP (Roman Catholic Chaplain, King's College London, Director of Radio Maria England)

Dr Marat Shterin (Professor of the Sociology of Religion, Theology and Religious Studies, King's College London)

Dr Jasjit Singh (Associate Professor of Philosophy, Religion and the History of Science, University of Leeds)

The Reverend Alan Walker (former Vicar of Saint-Jude-on-the-Hill, Hampstead)

### *Observers*

Professor Eileen Barker (Emerita Professor of the Sociology of Religion, London School of Economics; Founder and former Director of Inform)

Dr Anne-Rhiannon Richards (National Public Policy Adviser, the Church of England)

### **Inform's Staff**

Inform is under the Directorship of Dr Suzanne Newcombe, who is also a Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at The Open University. Other members of the permanent team are:

Dr Sarah Harvey, Senior Research Officer, who is responsible for the day-to-day work of Inform, in consultation with Suzanne – contributing to and managing projects, responding to enquiries and ensuring the database of information is as up-to-date as possible. From September 2022, she reduced her Inform days from three a week to one in order to work on the Arts and Humanities Council funded project, Abuse in Religious Contexts.

Silke Steidinger, part-time Research Officer, who this year primarily provided assistance and support with online seminars, book launches and post-event video production.

Warwick Hawkins, Office Manager, worked with Andrew Maguire on financial management.

Ruby Forrester, who began a student placement with us in September 2020, became a paid member of staff in April 2022, initially for one day a week, and then full-time from February 2023. Ruby is responsible for Inform's social media profile and does an excellent job of advertising our work through Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. She now also helps with database and enquiry work, funding applications and project work.

Former staff members Dr Shanon Shah and Jane Cooper returned on a contractual basis to work on specific projects.

Most staff now combine working from home with working in the office: Sarah is usually in the office once a week, Ruby twice a week and Warwick once a month for the financial reconciliation. Suzanne comes in regularly for meetings with staff.

## Student Placements

Jo Banks, who had a student placement with us in 2019 when he was a Master's student at King's, is now a PhD student in the department and has returned to assist us. He has written a number of leaflets and factsheets for us and for the Religion Media Centre (as an Inform researcher) on QAnon, Baha'i, Atheism and Shamanism.

Anna Kira Hippert, a PhD candidate located at the Center for Religious Studies in Bochum, Germany, has been an intern with us since 2021. She made two visits to the Inform offices in this period, in May and September 2022. She too has written leaflets and factsheets for us and the RMC as an Inform researcher, on Raelians and on New Religious Movements.

Connie Jones, a PhD candidate from University College London, writing her thesis on Spiritualism, was a student placement with us in the summer of 2022. She assisted us with reorganising the office library.

## Enquiries

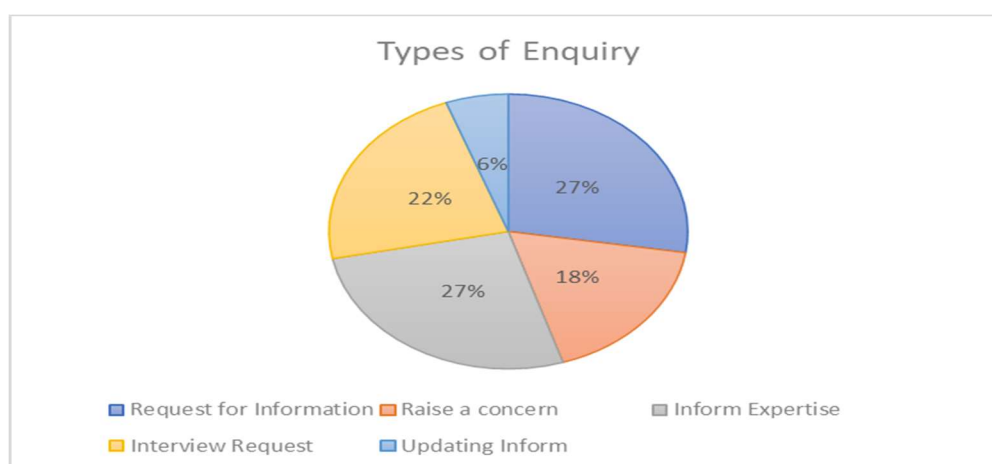
142 enquiries were received in the year April 2022 to March 2023, about twelve different general themes and 38 different groups. This is a slightly higher number of enquiries than in the previous year (120).

We only received one enquiry about most groups throughout the year, so it is difficult to track patterns, areas of public concern or media stories which might have generated enquiries – aside from the assassination of Japanese former prime minister, Shinzo Abe, by a man critical of his mother's donations to the Unification Church and Abe's links to them. The groups about which we did receive more than one enquiry are as follows:

| Name of Group                          | Number of Enquiries |
|--|---------------------|
| Unification Church                     | 9                   |
| New Kadampa Tradition                  | 6                   |
| Church of Scientology                  | 4                   |
| International Churches of Christ       | 4                   |
| Branch Davidians                       | 2                   |
| Mohan Singh                            | 2                   |
| Order of Nine Angles                   | 2                   |
| Sahaja Yoga                            | 2                   |
| Tergar                                 | 2                   |
| Universal Church of the Kingdom of God | 2                   |

The enquiries about general themes account for 66 of the 142 enquiries. Of the general themes, the majority (35) were about the work of Inform and/or requests to interview Prof Barker or other Inform staff, or to arrange speaking engagements.

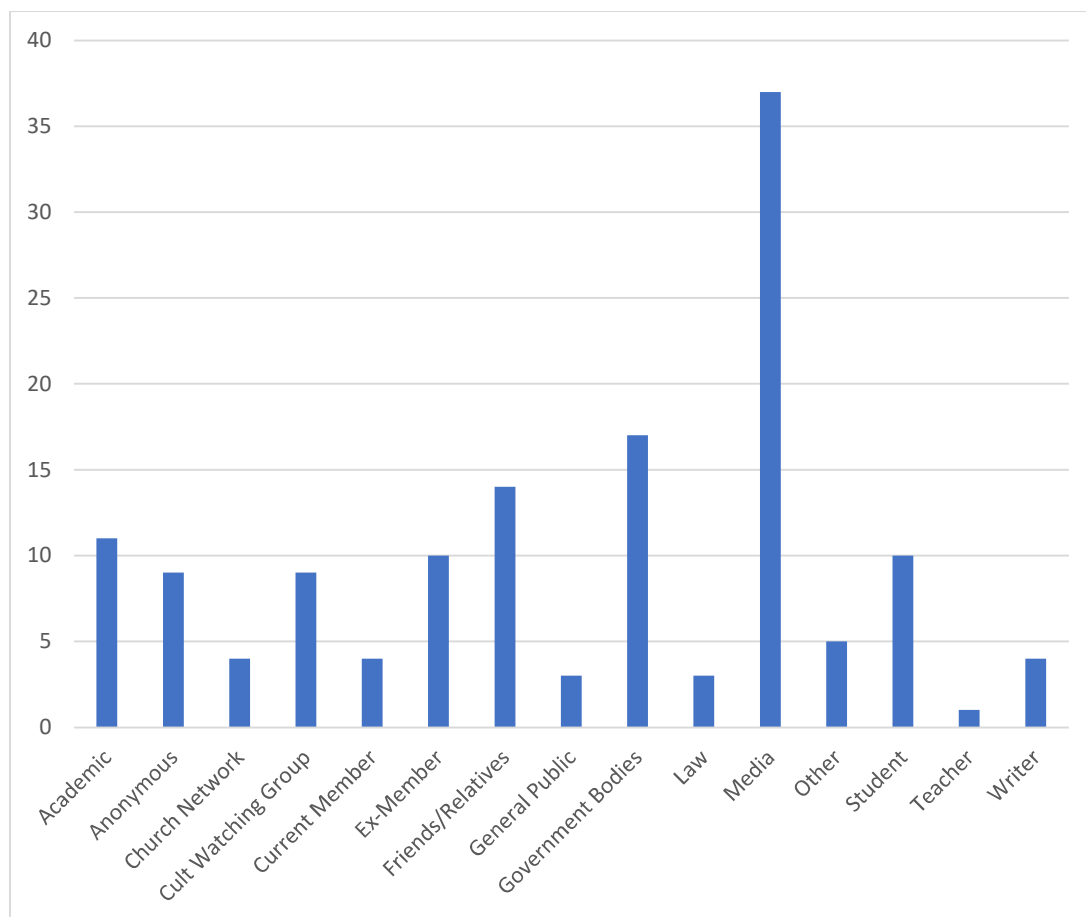
The content of the 142 enquiries covers a number of themes: requests for information (33); discussing a concern (23); asking for Inform's expertise on a group or situation (27); requests to interview staff or arrange a speaking engagement (25); and updating Inform on a group, situation, book, event etc (12).



Consistent with previous years, the greatest number of enquiries were received from the media. Enquiries from government bodies were significantly higher this year, and we received more enquiries from relatives and friends of members than from former members. We also received more enquiries from cult watching groups and from academics than in the previous year.

Types of enquirer were as follows:

| Enquirer                         | Number of Enquiries |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Media                            | 36                  |
| Government bodies                | 17                  |
| Relatives and friends of members | 15                  |
| Cult watching groups             | 11                  |
| Academics                        | 11                  |
| Former members                   | 10                  |
| Students                         | 10                  |
| Anonymous                        | 8                   |
| Other                            | 5                   |
| Current members                  | 4                   |
| General public                   | 4                   |
| Writers                          | 4                   |
| Law                              | 3                   |
| Chaplains and church networks    | 2                   |
| Teacher / education institutions | 1                   |
| Counsellor / therapists          | 1                   |



29 international enquiries were received: six from Germany, six from the USA, four from Japan, four from Switzerland, two from Canada and one each from Brazil, China, Ireland, New Zealand, Slovakia, South Korea and Taiwan.

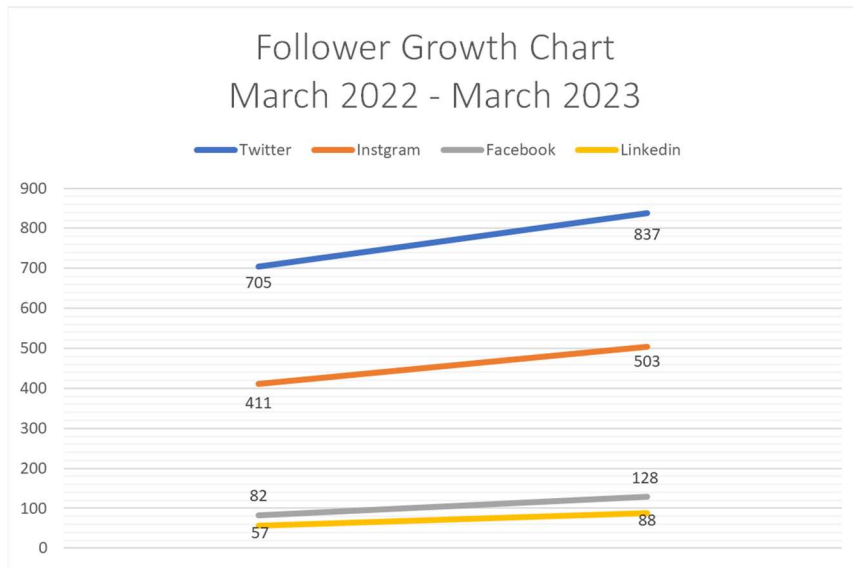
As with previous years, over one-third of our enquirers (51) had previously enquired with us; two-thirds (91) were new enquirers. The majority of enquiries (103) were received via email. 36 enquiries went to Professor Barker initially. She either answered these directly or asked Inform to respond.

## Social Media

In last year's annual report, we recorded a dramatic growth in followers and engagement across our primary social media accounts – Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. We are pleased to reveal that social media growth has continued at a rapid pace again this year.

In this period, our follower growth rate has been steady; with Twitter being the most popular of our social media channels again. Twitter has been beneficial to Inform's wider engagement in multiple ways, and we have been effective results in live tweeting throughout our online seminars.





The demographic of our social media followers remains diverse. Instagram provides accurate follower analytics, with main insights suggesting:

- On average, the gender of our followers is split between 60% women and 40% men.
- The most popular age range of followers is 25-34 (31%), 35-44 (26%), and 18-24 (16%).
- The most active countries, based on followers, are UK (45%), USA (14%), Germany (12%), India (3%), and Canada (2%).

These insights reveal a welcome growth in younger followers, which could suggest increased attention and awareness amongst university students – a goal of ours.

Twitter analytics do not reveal follower demographics based on age, work, and location, which makes it hard to access our Twitter follower demographics. However, the image below reveals that 85.8% of our followers are 'real accounts', in comparison to bots or spam accounts.



Facebook insights reveal a similar trend to Instagram, with followers' genders roughly being split to 55% of women and 45% of men. The most popular countries, based on followers, include the UK and USA, however, we have a small number of followers in Australia, Canada, France, Brazil, Israel, Italy, Poland, and South Africa.

This year, we have also re-launched our LinkedIn account. We have gained a total of 31 followers in the past 12 months, revealing the potential for a wider audience on this platform. Profile views also reveal interesting trends, with 13% of our viewers identifying as Business Development accounts, 11% as Researchers, 10% as Education, 6% as Legal, and 5% as Media and Communications.

Additionally, social media has allowed us to be more aware of internet trends that involve new religious movements. We hope that our social media platforms will continue to grow over the next year.

As of last year, there have been limited interactions on social media with NRMs or related accounts. We direct enquirers with questions or complaints to send an email for a response and emails are logged as enquiries.

## **Project Work and Partnerships**

### **Promoting the Exploration of Religion and Worldviews (RW) in Schools**

In this period, we concluded this project funded by Culham St Gabriel's Trust and undertaken in partnership with the Open University and the Faith and Belief Forum. We produced numerous resources, blogs, videos and presentations in relation to this project. An overview of our work can be seen in the video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqhVqy1t5Y0>.

The major final outputs were:

- The Open University, Open Learn Course, 'An Education in Religion and Worldviews', a free online course for those interested in the purpose and content of religious education in schools. <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/an-education-religion-and-worldviews?active-tab=description-tab>.
- Three Resource Packs introducing Religion and Worldview, one for teachers and subject leads, one for parents and one for community groups. <https://faithbeliefforum.org/resources/religion-and-worldviews-in-schools/>.
- The 'Insights Report' which analyses the primary data gathered through surveys and focus groups held in 2021. <https://inform.ac/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Insights-Report-Final.pdf>.

We disseminated the project to our stakeholders at our final celebration event on 18th July 2022 and held a briefing event with the Religion Media Centre on 19th July 2022. Suzanne wrote an accompanying blog post, 'How can we teach religion in schools better?', 12th July 2022, available at <http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/religious-studies/?p=1375>.

The project was also showcased as Culham's 'Research of the Month' in June 2022. In addition, we presented the project at the following conferences:

- NASACRE Annual Conference, 16th June 2022, where we led a workshop, 'Public Perceptions of RE: What SACREs need to know'.
- Sarah presented on the panel, 'Public perception of an education in religion and worldviews: Insights from stakeholders', organised by Kathryn Wright for the BASR Annual Conference, 31st August 2022.
- Sarah participated in the 'Policy and Research' panel, RExChange, 8th October 2022.

In February 2023, Sarah and Suzanne published an article about their research for this project in the *Journal of the British Association of the Study of Religion*.

Sarah and Suzanne have been invited to act as advisors on various RE projects. Suzanne is an advisor on the project 'After Religious Education' led by Dr David Lewin. She attended a meeting for this project in Birmingham on 12th-14th January 2023. Sarah is an advisor on the project 'Foregrounding Teachers' Voices' led by Dr Céline Benoit and Dr Tim Hutchings. Both Sarah and Suzanne will be attending their conference at the University of Nottingham on 27th April 2023.

### **Abuse in Religious Contexts**

Since March 2022, Sarah has been a Research Associate on the Arts and Humanities Council-funded project, Abuse in Religious Contexts, led by Professor Gordon Lynch at the University of Kent. This two-and-a-half-year project aims to deepen knowledge of factors that shape the context and experience of abuse in religious settings and the ways in which communities and organisations respond (see <https://research.kent.ac.uk/airs/>). The project is comprised of seven individual pieces of research. Sarah's research is a secondary analysis of Inform's material about the nature and contexts of abuse in minority or new religious movements. She is currently analysing some of the 200 records on the Inform database which have the keyword 'abuse', and revisiting several case studies in more depth, which include the Jesus Fellowship Church. She is drafting her major output for this project, which is a short monograph (45K words) for the Routledge Focus series, 'Rape Culture, Religion and the Bible'; her proposal has been accepted by the publishers.

### **Religion and Sexual Abuse Project**

On 25th January 2023, Sarah and Suzanne attended a workshop at the University of Leeds, organised as part of the Abuse in Religious Contexts project. Organised by Professor Johanna Stiebert, a Co-Investigator on the project, the workshop focused on abuse in Buddhism and was led by Ann Gleig and Amy Langenberg. Ann and Amy are involved in the Religion and Sexual Abuse Project (<https://www.religionandsexualabuseproject.org/>) led by Professor Amanda Lucia from the University of California Riverside. Inform is also an associate on this project and Amanda Lucia is spending a sabbatical year in London, September 2022- September 2023, hosted by KCL/Inform.

### **Mapping the Sociology of Religion in Britain via the history and development of SOCREL**

Sarah continues to work on this project for which she won the funding in Summer 2021. She has interviewed a dozen members of SOCREL (the British Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion study group), reflecting on their experience in the study group and its

relevance to the wider discipline. She will conduct around another dozen interviews and will then draft an article for the Journal of Contemporary Religion (subject to peer review).

### **Understanding the Experiences and Brain Processes of Spirit Mediums**

Sarah and Suzanne continue to be involved in this King's Together project. Sarah was a Research Associate on this project between September 2019 and April 2021 and Suzanne is an advisor. The project, conducted by different KCL departments, seeks to investigate how revelatory experiences, like hearing divine voices, are experienced, and how they are socially understood. Sarah, along with other members of the team, has drafted an article on spirit mediums' use of the concept of energy based on interviews with 40 mediums. It will be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal in May 2023.

### **Partnerships**

Inform continues a number of other partnerships, including the **Religion Media Centre** (<https://religionmediacentre.org.uk>), where Sarah and Suzanne are both advisors. We are in regular contact with RMC's Director and assist with its media enquiries whenever we can, as well as with writing factsheets for their website.

Inform is also part of the **National Working Group for Abuse Linked to Witchcraft and Spirit Possession (NWG ALWSP)**; Suzanne and Sarah attend their online meetings. Inform continues its partnership with the **Regional Regulation of Religious Plurality in Comparison (Regionale Regulierung religiöser Pluralität im Vergleich, (RePliv))** project largely through continuing association with one of the affiliated PhD students at the Center for Religious Studies (CERES) at the Ruhr University Bochum, Germany who is also an Inform intern, Anna Kirra Hippert.

Suzanne remains as an educational advisor to **CenSAMM** (Centre for the Critical Study of Apocalyptic and Millennial Movements - <https://censamm.org/>), and sits on the Scientific Advisory Board for the **Dekk Institute** (<https://dekk.sk/en/>), an independent social stability research centre based in Bratislava, Slovak Republic.

In March 2021, Eileen, Suzanne and Sarah attended a multilateral meeting organised by **CIAOSN** (<https://www.ciaosn.be/>) in Brussels, Belgium. This continued the annual meet-up of various 'cult watching groups' to discuss their work, initiated by Eileen Barker over a decade ago. This was the first face-to-face meeting post-Covid. Also in attendance were representatives from ICSA, USA (<https://www.icsahome.com/>), Info-Secte, Canada (<https://infosecte.org/en/home/>) and CIC, Switzerland ([www.cic-info.ch](http://www.cic-info.ch)). Each organisation presented on the theme of "How to inform about spiritual and religious organizations in virtual times?". It was a great day of learning, exchange and networking.

### **Annual statement on research integrity**

Inform has affirmed its commitment to the principles of the UK Concordat to Support Research Integrity and has registered with the Information Commissioners Office.

We primarily refer to the ethical frameworks provided by the British Association for the Study of Religion (BASR) as guidance on best practice for research. All staff and interns

conducting research on behalf of Inform discuss best practice for research integrity with either the Honorary Director of Inform and/or Inform's Senior Research Officer. Ongoing dialogue on emerging issues regarding research integrity while conducting and writing-up research is actively encouraged.

#### *Processes for dealing with allegations of misconduct in research*

This can be found within our policy documents found on our website:

[https://inform.ac/about-us/inform\\_policy/](https://inform.ac/about-us/inform_policy/).

The first point of contact for concerns about research integrity is Inform's Office Manager, Warwick Hawkins ([Warwick.Hawkins@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:Warwick.Hawkins@kcl.ac.uk)).

Concerns about any research misconduct also can be raised the Chair of Inform's Management Committee in the first instance, Dr. George Chryssides ([GDChryssides@religion21.com](mailto:GDChryssides@religion21.com)).

#### *Allegations of research misconduct*

There have been no allegations of research misconduct in the reporting period.

#### *Funding ethics*

Since its inception, Inform has been committed to avoid taking any funding from sources which might seek to influence the nature of the information it provides on minority religious movements. Inform will not knowingly accept funding from any religious, spiritual or other group about which it may be asked to give a report.

We accept small non-anonymous donations from individuals as 'friends' who offer a monthly commitment in support of Inform and who receive regular updates and invitations to our online and offline events. We also accept anonymous donations (which *can* be gift-aided) through Stewardship.org; the identities of donors are not revealed to Inform.

We have traditionally accepted small amounts in support of our work from mainstream churches and religious organisations, e.g. The Church of England, the Free Churches and the Catholic Archbishop, about whom we do not directly research or provide information.

Most of our work is supported by grants and funded research projects from various UK government departments and academic funding bodies. Details of funding sources and spending year-on-year can be found in our accounts and annual returns which are available on the charity commission website.

## Speaking and other Engagements

### ***Inform Governors***

Dr George Chryssides

#### *Lectures and conference papers*

4th May: “Successful Prophecy? Jehovah’s Witnesses, Covid-19 and the War in Ukraine”. York St John University

16<sup>th</sup>-18th June: “Jehovah’s Witnesses and the War in Ukraine”. CESNUR Annual Conference, Université Laval, Québec City

7th-8th July: “Jehovah’s Witnesses and the War in Ukraine”. CenSAMM Annual Conference (online)

22nd July: “Descending from the Ivory Tower: Engaged Scholarship in the Study of Religion”. UNIPACE (International University for Peace), Rome, Italy (online). Keynote lecture

#### *Interview*

22nd August: “Multifaith Matters: George Chryssides Introduces Jehovah’s Witnesses” (Podcast interview with John Morehead – Director at Evangelical Chapter of the Foundation for Religious Diplomacy) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYbm38C7B4M>

Professor Eileen Barker (Observer)

29nd April: “Getting Heaven Down to Earth - and what must we get rid of first?” ISORECEA conference, Warsaw (by Zoom)

5th May: “You’re Free To Do Anything We Want: How States Enable and/or Constrain the Freedoms of Religious Communities.” Keynote address. ISFORB, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven

20th May: “‘Othering’: A Necessary but Dangerous Social Process” Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University, Conference of Kyiv Philosophy Studies (by Zoom)

16th June: “Once Upon a Time, There Were Three New Religions: Global, Local and Glocal. But Wherein Lies the Difference?” Keynote CESNUR annual meeting, Ontario. Canada (by Zoom)

24th June: “Peace, Violence and New Religions”, International Cultic Studies Association Annual Meeting (by Zoom)

28th June: “Clarifying or Muddying the Waters? The Combatting 'Cult Watchers' of the UK” European Association for the Study of Religion, Cork University, Ireland

4th July: “Jim Beckford”, BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group (SocRel) (by Zoom)

8th August: “Remembering Jim Beckford.” Annual Meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion (by Zoom)

30th August: “From Ivory Tower to Impact: Transformations in engagement patterns by scholars and new religions over the past 50 years” Annual Meeting of the British Association for the Study of Religion, Open University

31st August: Panel on Inform at BASR at the OU.

September: “NRMs, influence and the Moonies - with Professor Eileen Barker” interview on Jon Atack’s YouTube [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hO-bMA\\_Qsvg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hO-bMA_Qsvg)

10th September: “Celebration of Jim Beckford’s Life” University of Warwick

20th September: “A Strange Case for Article 9”, ICLARS (International Consortium for Law and Religion Studies) Annual Meeting of Cordoba, Spain

7th October: “From Patriarchy to Matriarchy in a New Religious Movement: The Case of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification International under the Leadership of The Only Begotten Daughter” International Symposium Religions, Gender, and ‘Genderism’: Interactions Shaping Gender Equality, Vilnius, Lithuania

13th October: “Minority Religions as Perpetrators of Violence”, University of Bordeaux symposium on Religion, War and Peace

20th November: “Does It Matter Where We Are? A Comparative Contemplation on the Relevance of Country for the Indigenous Religions of Korea”, American Academy of Religion, Denver, Colorado, USA

2nd December: “In the Shadow of Russia: Jehovah’s Witnesses and Religious Freedom in Central Asia. Some Introductory Considerations”, CESNUR Conference, In the Shadow of Russia (by Zoom)



*Suzanne Newcombe (far left) presenting at a panel at the American Academy of Religion annual conference in Denver, Colorado in November 2022*



## ***Inform Staff***

### Dr Suzanne Newcombe

18th May: 'The Creation of a 'Subtle Body' in BKS Iyengar's *Light on Prāṇāyāma* at 'Yoga darśana, yoga sādhanā: methods, migrations, mediations', an international conference at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland

27th June: Lectures on 'Modern Yoga' and 'Decolonising Yoga?' at SOAS Yoga Summer School

31st August: Roundtable participant on panel 'Cult Rhetoric in the 21st Century' and roundtable discussion: 'Inform Past, Present and Future' BASR Annual Conference, Milton Keynes

1st September: 'Decolonising Religious Studies and Promoting Equality, Diversity and Inclusion' with Hugh Beattie, Maria Nita and Paul-François Tremlett at the BASR Annual Conference, Milton Keynes

22nd September: Presented with Stephen Christopher on 'The INFORM database and Coding New Religious Movements' as part of a panel on 'Large-Scale Cultural Databases: The Challenges Ahead' at the Cultural Evolutionary Studies 2022 Conference in Aarhus, Denmark.

24th November: Participant in Panel Session on 'Situating Medicine and Religion in Asia' co-sponsored by the Chinese Religions Unit, Daoist Studies Unit, Indian and Chinese Religions Compared Unit and the Religions, Medicines, and Healing Unit at the American Academy of Religion Conference in Denver, Colorado, USA

February: 'History of Asana in the UK' Keen on Yoga Podcast No. 124.  
<https://www.keenonyoga.com/podcast/suzanne-newcombe-history-of-asana/>

24th March: Contributed lectures on 'Positioning & Yoga Studies: Where are we standing?' and 'Yoga in the Modern World: Continuity and Change' to Triyoga Yoga advanced teacher training

March: Religion under Attack? | Discourse! March 2023 | The Religious Studies Project; Chair of Discourse on the Religious Studies Podcast  
<https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/religion-under-attack-discourse-march-2023/>

6th March: book launch for Ruth Harris (2022) *Guru to the World: The Live and Legacy of Vivekananda* (Harvard University Press), King's College London



Dr Sarah Harvey

10th May: CenSAMM Symposium: 'Religion and European National and Civic Myths: Contemporary Nordic and Slavic Paganism and Nationalism' (with Suzanne Newcombe)

16th June: NASCARE Annual Conference, contributed to the workshop, 'Public Perceptions of RE: What SACREs need to know'

30th August: BASR Annual Conference, participant in the roundtable discussion on 'Cult Rhetoric'

30th August: BASR Annual Conference, participated in a roundtable discussion on the work of Inform

31st August: BASR Annual Conference, 'Stakeholder Perceptions of an Education in Religion and Worldviews: Strengths, Challenges and Potential Ways Forward'

1st September: BASR Annual Conference, participated in the roundtable discussion on final reflections on the conference

8th October: RexChange, participated in the 'Policy and Research' panel

21st March: Multilateral meeting organised by CIAOSN, Belgium, 'How to inform about spiritual and religious organizations in virtual times' (with Suzanne Newcombe)

Suzanne Newcombe and Ruby Forrester

2nd November: 'Miracles and Research Methods at Inform', Sociology and Religious Studies A-Level Students at St Marylebone Sixth Form College

## Resources

Throughout the year we updated and added to Inform's resources. By the end of March 2023, our electronic database held information on 5162 organisations. 19 new groups were added to the database during the period covered by this report and countless other files were updated.

Work remains ongoing to secure the archives a permanent home at King's College London. Although we have the use of two storerooms in the basement of Kings College's Norfolk Building, these are too small for our materials to be displayed or easily accessed. King's Archives are keen to integrate our archives into their own, providing they are professionally catalogued. We are hence looking for sources of funding to pay the salary of an archivist to catalogue our materials.

## Publications by Inform Staff and Governors

Inform has a new book series with Bloomsbury, entitled **Religion at the Boundaries**. Suzanne Newcombe and Sarah Harvey are series editors, Aled Thomas and Edward Graham-Hyde are assistant editors and George Chryssides is senior editorial consultant. The first book in this series will be Thomas and Graham-Hyde (eds) *Cult Rhetoric*. A second book on Paganism edited by Ross Downing and Kaarina Aitamurto is under contract and a number of other proposals are being drafted.

We have one book still to submit in the Routledge Inform Series on Minority Religions and Spiritual Movements (<https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Inform-Series-on-Minority-Religions-and-Spiritual-Movements/book-series/AINFORM>). The final volume in this series will be *Health and Healing in Minority Religions*, edited by Eileen Barker and Sarah Harvey.

### ***Inform Governors***

#### Dr George Chryssides

Chryssides, George D. and Amy R. Whitehead (eds) (2023): *Contested Concepts in the Study of Religion: A Critical Exploration*. London: Bloomsbury. ISBN 978-1-3502-4380-4

Chryssides, G. D. (2022): "Disseminating Daesoon Thought". *Journal of Daesoon Thought and the Religions of East Asia* (2):1: 127–151. <https://doi.org/10.25050/JDTREA.2022.2.1.127>

Chryssides, George D. (2022). "Jehovah's Witnesses and Religious Persecution: Do Signed Declarations Help? Canopy Forum: On the Interactions of Law and Religion. 13 June 2022. URL: <https://canopyforum.org/2022/06/13/jehovahs-witnesses-and-religious-persecution-do-signed-declarations-help>

Chryssides, George D. (2022): *Prophecy*; in Chryssides, George D. and Amy R. Whitehead (eds) (2022). *Contested Concepts in the Study of Religion: A Critical Exploration*. London: Bloomsbury: 99-103

Chryssides, George D. (2022): New Religious Movements; in Chryssides, George D. and Amy R. Whitehead (eds) (2022). Contested Concepts in the Study of Religion: A Critical Exploration. London: Bloomsbury: 87-91

Professor Graham Harvey

Harvey, G. (2023): 'We have always been animists...' in Karen Bray, Heather Eaton, and Whitney Bauman (eds). Immanent Religiosities, New Materialisms, and Planetary Thinking. New York: Fordham University Press. pp.74-87

Harvey, G. (2023): 'Indigenous Religions' in George Chryssides and Amy Whitehead (eds). Contested Categories in the Study of Religions. London: Bloomsbury. pp.57-62

Professor Kim Knott

Knott, K. (2022): 'Diaspora', Contested Concepts in the Study of Religion: A Critical Exploration. Chryssides, G. D. & Whitehead, A. R. (eds.). London: Bloomsbury, pp. 33-37

Lee, B. & Knott, K. (2022): 'Fascist Aspirants: Fascist Forge and Ideological Learning in the Extreme Right Online Milieu', Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression. 14: 3, pp. 216-240

Knott, K. (2022:), 'Afterword on Islam and space in Europe: The dynamism of a field', Rethinking Islam and Space in Europe: The Politics of Race, Time and Secularism. Moses, C. J. J., Muller, T. & Taleb, A. (eds.). Abingdon and New York: Routledge

Dr Marat Shterin

Shterin, M: (2023): 'Islam in Russia: Religion, Politics and Society', edited by G. Simons, M. Shterin and E. Shiraev, Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, Co.

'Russia's Muslims with and without Islam' (co-authored Introduction and Conclusion, single authored Chapter One)

Professor Eileen Barker (Observer)

Barker, Eileen (2022): 'What Do They Do About It? A sociological perspective on reactions to child abuse in three new religions' in Beth Singler & Eileen Barker (Eds.), Radical Changes in Minority Religions. London, New York: Routledge

Singler, Beth, & Barker, Eileen (Eds.) (2022): Radical Transformations in Minority Religions. London, New York: Routledge

Barker, Eileen (2022): 'The Changing Faces of New Religions in a Global World; Challenges they Face and Challenges they Present', in Mario Marinov, Valentina Milenkova & Boris

Manov (Eds.), Transformations and Challenges in the Global World Blagoevgrad (pp. 190-204). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars

Barker, Eileen (2022): New Religious Movements. In Lester R. Kurtz (Ed.), Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, and Conflict (Vol. 4, pp. 339-353). Oxford: Elsevier, Academic Press

Barker, Eileen (2022): 'Protection or Persecution? The State, the Law, and Minority Religion' in Joseph Marko, Maximilian Lakitsch, Wolfgang Weirer, Franz Winter, & Kerstin Wonisch (Eds.), Religious Diversity, State, and Law: National, Transnational and International Challenges (pp. 54-73). Leiden and Boston: Brill

Barker, Eileen (2022): Professor James Arthur Beckford, PhD, DPhil, FBA, 1 December 1942–10 May 2022. BSA SocRel News, 16(Autumn), 2-6

Barker, Eileen (2022): "Othering": A Necessary but Dangerous Practice" Київський університет імені Бориса Грінченка, Kiev. 66-68

Barker, Eileen (2022): 'Ritual as a religious and philosophical form', Culture and Religion Issue No3. <https://crj.fi/vypusk-%e2%84%963-ritual-kak-religiozno-filosofskaya-forma/>

Barker, Eileen (2022): Foreword in Yu-Shuang Yao, 'Chinese Buddhism Today: Conservatism, Modernism, Syncretism and Enjoying Life', Sheffield: Equinox (pp. ix-xi)

Barker, Eileen (2023): 'In the Shadow of Russia: Jehovah's Witnesses and Religious Freedom in Central Asia, Some Introductory Considerations', Journal of CESNUR 7(1), 3-11

### ***Inform Staff and Interns***

#### Dr Suzanne Newcombe

Barois, Christèle, Wujastyk, Dagmar and Newcombe, Suzanne (2022): 'Introduction to new vernacular translations of the Usman Report (1923)' *eJournal of Indian Medicine*, Supplement 4, pp. ix-xxxi, Groningen, The Netherlands: Barkhuis & Groningen University Library. (33% contribution to introduction) DOI: 10.2307/j.ctv29j3dnx.3

#### Dr Suzanne Newcombe and Dr Sarah Harvey

Harvey, Sarah, Newcombe, Suzanne (2023): 'An Opportunity for Expanding University-School Connections: Stakeholder Views of the Religion and Worldview Proposal'. *Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religion (JBASR)*, [S.l.], v. 24, p. 61-86, Feb. 2023. Available at: <https://www.jbasr.com/ojs/index.php/jbasr/article/view/65>

#### Dr Shanon Shah, Jane Cooper and Dr Suzanne Newcombe

Shah, Shanon, Cooper Jane and Newcombe, Suzanne (2023): 'Occult Beliefs and the Far Right: The Case of the Order of Nine Angles.' *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (Early access). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2195065>

## Inform Events

Inform held a number of events in this period: a hybrid film screening and discussion evening, two online public seminars and co-sponsored the BASR Annual Conference.

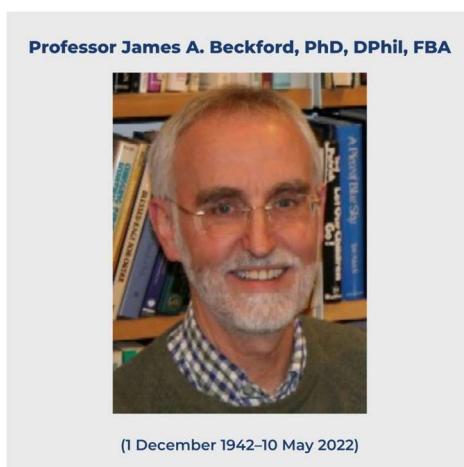
### **'Rites Undone' Film Screening**

In April 2022, we hosted a hybrid film screening and panel discussion of Dr. Naomi Richman's short film 'Rites Undone' (<http://www7.bbk.ac.uk/hiddenpersuaders/documentaries/rites-undone/>). The film investigates the psychological methods of control used by sex traffickers and explores the epistemic challenges faced by European mental health workers seeking to offer therapy across cultural and religious divides.



The event was in collaboration with the King's TRS student organisation, 'Religion Outside the University' and included a panel discussion with Suzanne, Dr. Naomi Richman, a Junior Research Fellow (JRF) in Anthropology at Trinity College, Cambridge, and Opeyemi (Yemi) Ebulu-Eyuruntari, the Principal Consultant/CEO of Saffron Social Development Global Foundation. The film and panel discussion took place in Bush House, King's College London, and were simultaneously streamed.

## A Celebration of the Life of James A. Beckford



In May 2022, we hosted an online event celebrating the life of James A. Beckford (Jim), organised by Eileen Barker. Jim's colleagues reflected on his life, and shared photographs and memories. The event can be watched and a full statement in memory can be read at [https://inform.ac/james\\_beckford/](https://inform.ac/james_beckford/).

## 'New Media and New Religiosity – Possibilities and Pitfalls'



In July 2022, we held our first online seminar of the year, 'New Media and New Religiosity – Possibilities and Pitfalls'. A recording of the seminar is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNGPSad42Ko&t=1s>. This was organised in association with Anna Kira Hippert, who is a PhD candidate located at the CERES – Center for Religious Studies in Bochum, Germany – and an intern with Inform. Anna also chaired the event. The other speakers were:

- Joseph Szimhart – Cult Information Specialist and member of International Cultic Studies Association Art committee.

- Jacqueline Hargreaves – Project Consultant for YogaStudies Online at SOAS University of London.
- Dr Robert J. Wallis – Staff Tutor in Art History, The Open University.
- Renasha Khan – PhD student, Theology and Religious Studies, King's College London and Documentary Maker.
- Dr Jasjit Singh, Associate Professor, School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science, University of Leeds, and Inform Governor was the respondent.

### *Seminar description*

How has technology changed how we understand and perceive the world? How we connect with each other and manage ourselves as individuals? As a global society, we are only beginning to get to grips with tentative answers to these questions – and figuring out what the most useful questions are to ask.

Religious movements have taken a variety of approaches to new media, sometimes being 'early adopters of technology' and using the media to great effect. Some social movements, which are based almost entirely in online social networking spaces, have been identified as 'cultic groups' and 'new religions' in themselves.

Imagery has an important role to play in the most recent forms of new media and new religiosity. Younger generations have claimed TikTok and Instagram as ways to self-represent new forms of their own self-understanding and religiosity, fostering an environment of support and positivity. Meanwhile some groups displaced by identity politics have embraced images of edgy 'cool' encompassing a visual identification with white supremacist and esoteric religious symbols, while not necessarily interacting with established religious organisations.

The academic study of the relationship between imagery, new media and new forms of religiosity is only just beginning. This seminar will bring new and established researchers together with practitioners and those helping survivors of 'spiritual abuse' to address the following questions:

- What role does the visual have on contemporary religious identification and practice?
- What can we learn about new media and new religiosity from studying the imagery they employ?
- How does the imagery in virtual forums relate to embodied and material experiences, protests, activism and 'real world' choices?

## British Association for the Study of Religion (BASR) Annual Conference 2022: Religion and Public Engagement

The BASR annual conference co-organised with Inform and was held at The Open University, 30<sup>th</sup> August-1<sup>st</sup> September 2022.

There were several panels relevant to the themes of Inform's work and the event included a roundtable discussion on the history and work of Inform with Sarah, Suzanne, Eileen Barker and George D. Chryssides which was chaired by David G. Robertson as well as roundtable on 'Cult' Rhetoric in the 21st Century which was organised by Aled Thomas and Edward Graham-Hyde and also included Suzanne Newcombe, Sarah Harvey, George D. Chryssides and Donald Westbrook.

Inform trustee Dr. Jasjit Singh was the keynote speaker on 'Becoming an accidental activist: Religion, Academia and Community Engagement'

The full [programme](#) and a [report of the conference](#) are available on the BASR website.



*Professor Eileen Barker speaks at the BASR roundtable discussion with Sarah Harvey, Suzanne Newcombe and George Chryssides in the background*



## **'New Religious Responses to the Climate Crisis – Radical Environmentalism and Protest'**

Our second online seminar of the year was held in December 2022 and was on the topic of 'New Religious Responses to the Climate Crisis – Radical Environmentalism and Protest' (watch the recording at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gj3mrEqVx\\_A&t=4479s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gj3mrEqVx_A&t=4479s)).



This was organised in association with Dr Shanon Shah, Director of Faith for the Climate, and Inform staff member, who also chaired this seminar. The other speakers were:

- Dr Linda Sever, Senior Lecturer, School of Arts and Media, University of Central Lancashire, Documentary Filmmaker and environmental activist.
- Olivia Fuchs, Coordinator, Eco Dharma Network.
- Dr Alessandra Palange, Co-founder and Core Member, Muslims Declare.
- Dr Maria Nita, Lecturer in Religious Studies, The Open University.
- Lucia Harrington, Climate Activist and Community Organiser, who used to work for Extinction Rebellion.
- Grace Da Costa, Public Affairs and Media Manager, Quakers in Britain.
- Inform Governor, Rev. Steve Hollinghurst responded.

### *Seminar description*

This Inform Seminar considered a range of new religious responses to the uncertainty and crisis precipitated by climate change. It looked at responses by minority religions, but also considered a range of ways in which the current environment of crisis has impacted religious thinking and behaviour in new ways more broadly.

Whether or not one 'believes' in man-made Climate Change, everyone has been impacted by unexpected weather in recent years from wildfires and droughts to hurricanes and changing monsoon patterns. Whilst it is impoverished and more vulnerable populations in the Global South that have been experiencing the worst of climate-related breakdown, we are seeing increasingly frequent and severe weather events in highly industrialised and wealthy nations. Again, it is more impoverished and vulnerable communities within the borders of these countries that are affected more severely. These trends look set to continue and everyone will eventually be affected by the damages and disruptions caused by climate change.

## The Future

Inform remains committed to its charitable objective of helping enquirers, through providing accurate, up-to-date and contextualised information about minority religions to the wide range of enquirers who approach us every year. We shall continue to gather material to add to our unique collection of resources, and to further a greater understanding of minority religions through our publications and events.

In addition, we will continue to work on funded projects, work on government enquires and seek out new sources of funding and project work. Sarah's work on the Abuse in Religious Contexts project continues until June 2024 and a number of exciting events are planned in the next year.