

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups

Melbourne – Monday 20 October 2025

MEMBERS

Ella George – Chair

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Chris Couzens

John Lister

Cindy McLeish

Jackson Taylor

Rachel Westaway

WITNESS

Raphael Aron, Director, Cult Consulting Australia.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. My name is Ella George and I am the Chair of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee. I declare open this public hearing of the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting, the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and future.

I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues participating here today: Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon; Annabelle Cleeland, the Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair; Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; John Lister, the Member for Werribee; and Jackson Taylor, the Member for Bayswater. Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahran, is joining us online today.

On the 3 April 2025 the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee was referred an inquiry into cults and organised fringe groups. The terms of reference require the committee to inquire into cults and organised fringe groups in Victoria, the methods used to recruit and control their members and the impacts of coercive control and to report back no later than 30 September 2026.

Today the committee is holding its third day of hearings for this inquiry, where we continue to gather evidence. I ask witnesses to keep the terms of reference in mind when providing their evidence.

This inquiry is not about judging or questioning anyone's beliefs. What we are focused on is the behaviours of cults and high-control groups that use coercive techniques to recruit and control their members and the impacts of these behaviours. On behalf of the committee I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have engaged with the inquiry thus far, particularly the individuals and families who have bravely shared their personal experience with cults and organised fringe groups.

Today the committee will hear from Raphael Aron, director of Cult Consulting Australia. I thank Raphael for his time in participating in this important inquiry.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live. While all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

We will now commence the public hearing. I welcome Raphael to make a brief opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from members. Thank you.

Raphael ARON: Thank you very much for the introduction, and thank you for having me here. It is a big honour to participate in this particular forum, and I hope I can make some sort of contribution. I have been involved in this area for a long time, somewhere between 40 and 50 years, and it has been probably the most fascinating and impressionable part of my life. It started off when I was studying psychology at Melbourne University in the early 70s and I was doing a placement at Lifeline or a similar organisation, and during a two-week period we received two calls about cults. I knew nothing about them at all, and this was pre internet. There was nothing really to look up, nothing to do other than send a few faxes off to people in America who might know a little bit about these organisations. A number of cases dominated the world as far as cults are concerned. There was the famous case of Patty Hearst in 1973, who belonged to an organisation called the Symbionese Liberation Army. There was the Jonestown massacre in 1978, which caught the world's attention as the worst cult experience and still, really, retains that rather unfortunate accolade.

We started off as a very small organisation, and we still are a small organisation, but we have got many more people working with us, essentially volunteers. The paid staff is me and two consultants. We have a band of volunteers, most of whom are people who have been, themselves, in cults, because we know that one of the most common responses that we get from people we try to pull out of cults is, 'Well, yeah, we understand your concerns. If you would've been here, then perhaps you'd be talking differently.' Enter the person who says, 'Hold on. You've been there for five years. I was there for 10 years, so I think I have a little to offer to you,' and that changes the dynamic immediately.

The services that we offer are essentially exit counselling and family support. We also do what is called post-cult exit counselling, which is a very fulfilling area of work. It is for people who have been in cults and are now trying to make sense of what happened. How did they get in there? Are they crazy? Is there some vulnerability which could revisit them again? They are people who have been, in many, many ways, depleted in terms of their own sense of self, because the cult has, really, taken over. The groupthink, the peer pressure, becomes the order of the day, and they as individuals seem to have lost their way. So post-cult exit counselling is a particularly motivated program, because people are wanting to do it, as against trying to get people out of cults, because the last person they want to talk to is someone like me.

We work with the media extensively, and just a Google search for my name and Cult Consulting Australia will show up pages and pages of different things that have been done. We are not lawyers, but we work very closely with the legal fraternity in order to be able to assist the courts in coming to decisions about family disputes or civil disputes. A family dispute is typically a situation where partners – two people – joined a cult, one left, and there is a child. The one who has left is seeking orders to prevent that child from coming into the precincts of the cult, and the court is having to decide whether that is in fact a fair application. Interestingly enough, we do not use the word ‘cult’ in court. It is a pejorative word. It does not really mean a lot. It immediately calls for cross-examination, as far as cults and religions are concerned, so we do not talk about it. We talk about the deleterious social effect that a cult will have on the individual and on that child growing up and the long-term ramifications of being in a closed and possibly dangerous environment.

We also work in the field of terrorism, which is working with families who are looking for advice in relation to teenagers who have showed interest in radical behaviour. That is a very difficult area. We do not work with the clients themselves. We also make it very clear that if anybody calls us and there is a reason for us to inform the authorities about what is going on, then we will do so. In all my experience, I think on maybe one or maximum two occasions has the phone call been terminated at that point. In most situations, the concern that the parents have overrides the possibility that a report will be made to the authorities. We are also working currently with a group of refugees from war-torn Syria and trying to make sense of that experience in terms of the processes of mind control or manipulation which they endured.

One of the most common questions I get asked is: are cults still relevant? Because people talk about the old days – the Moonies, the Children of God, questions about Hare Krishna and Hamilton-Byrne and all those sorts of things. They are gone, far gone. Even on the world scene if we look at the stories of the past, we have got the Charles Manson story in 1969, we have got Patty Hearst in ‘76, Heaven’s Gate, the Order of the Solar Temple, Waco and Aum Shinrikyo, and these things have all come and gone. But the reality is the cult problem today is probably more real than it has ever been before. I say that based on the experience of the number of calls that we are receiving. To be fair, as we become more well known, more calls come in, so it is not exactly a scientific experiment over here in terms of calls for help, but the number is increasing. What we are facing at the moment is an increase in the number of people involved in fundamentalist cults, many of them Christian-based. There is a strong presence of Asian-based groups in Australia. In fact over half of the calls that we get in relation to cults are in relation to those particular groups. We take this all very, very seriously.

There have been some terrible stories, and I do not think it is fair to tar everybody with the same brush, but we had the terrible story of the four police people killed on the Eastern Freeway, which I am not going to go into. I can if you want. It had a very strong cult base, the death of these four people. We had the terrible story in Toowoomba of Elizabeth Struhs, the young girl, a 6-year-old, who died from being denied insulin. And we just more recently had the Porepunkah story, which was connected with the sovereign state, which I do not really regard as being all that different from the cult experience in lots of ways. There was the story of Matthew Arnold and Rachel McCrow. They were the two police people killed in Wicambilla. So there have been some very, very tragic outcomes as a result of cult involvement, and they are very, very hard to come to terms with because of the depth of what is going on. So we are facing a plethora of organisations that I think are causing a huge amount of harm. There are also the MLMs, the multi-level marketing groups, which are very cult-like in their approach.

And then there is what I would call the cult of one. The cult of one really refers to one particular person who might be a therapist, might be a psychologist, might be a natural healer or might be a psychic. It might be anybody who is doing something ostensibly to help people who is gaining a level of control over that person which is completely and totally uncalled for. And in a way that is an even more serious situation. It is a bit of a to and fro over here, because when you have got a strong cult there is the peer pressure, there is the groupthink,

and that sort of seems to bring you into the milieu of the cult. But on the other hand, you have got people to share your concerns with. If you have got people in the group, you can say, 'You know, I'm not quite sure whether this is all 100 per cent okay' and so on and so forth. So there is an advantage of a large group in the sense that it provides people the opportunity to talk to others about their experience, and perhaps critically so, as against the groupthink of the peer pressure, which works in the other direction. In the cult of one it is a very tight relationship. You have got nobody to talk to. There are maybe two or three people that are under this person's influence. So therefore there is not really much that you can do in order to create a perspective, a landscape, a backdrop, within which these people can operate.

Finally, by way of introduction, I think the COVID pandemic has really given the cults a huge uptick for two reasons. Number one, people felt a vulnerability and cults created a sort of a safe haven for people. People did not know what was going to happen next, and cults welcome people into this bubble of security. The other thing is those Armageddon cults that believed that the world was coming to an end suddenly had some credibility because COVID was the beginning of the end, and as a result the number of people getting into cults really, in our experience, jumped substantially. This is overall against the world of globalisation, where people want to belong, and they are feeling that sense of belonging is being passed up. Also with the conflicts which we are dealing with now, the world is not a very pretty place at the moment – again, cults are creating that sort of safe haven for people to be able to escape the pressure and bring the temperature in the room a little lower so that they can actually survive.

Finally, we are non-faith-based organisation. I myself am Jewish, but we do not bring our faith into our work. I have a concern about organisations that are overly active in presenting a faith-based model, because people coming out of cults are very vulnerable. I can tell you the story of a book that somebody wrote in relation to cults, and I went to see her because she was helping me in an exit counselling operation up in Queensland. She gave me a copy of her book and she said, 'This is the full book,' and I said, 'What do you mean it's full?' She said, 'I've given you the last chapter as well.' The last chapter had been a chapter about her coming back to her faith, and she had felt that that was something which was not called for at the time. When she had given out that book, which she had self-published, she ripped out that chapter because she thought it was not right; to me she gave the full book. What I am saying is that people who come out of cults are in a very vulnerable situation, and one needs to deal with them professionally, therapeutically, in a manner in which they can find themselves and reclaim their lives and their independence – only then can they choose what they choose to do in terms of the way they would like to live their lives.

I am happy to take as many questions as possible. I prefer to take questions than just sit here and rattle on.

Annabelle CLEELAND: You have done very well then.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I certainly have a few questions, and I am sure my colleagues do too. Over your 40 years working in this field, how have the characteristics of cults or high-control groups in Australia changed?

Raphael ARON: I think the main difference that we have between what was happening then and what is happening now is the fact that the groups that used to operate, the ones that were around in those earlier days, were very clearly defined and marked by the way they behaved and the way they conducted themselves. You could tell what these people were doing. There was no ambiguity about it; you could see that this was a very closed group. If you look at the American experience with Heaven's Gate and the Order of the Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, Charles Manson – there is something very 'culty' about it. Today the groups do not really present that way; they do not look so culty. A lot of the fundamentalist churches do present in a manner which seems to be quite okay. They have got large crowds on the Sunday or on the Saturday coming in, they offer pastoral care, they offer all sorts of other different social services and so on. But behind all of that there is often an agenda, and that agenda can often be quite nefarious. It could be quite sinister and something which really concerns us. It is probably more the outward look of what we are experiencing rather than the process of what is actually going on.

The CHAIR: And are there any other emerging trends that you are seeing with contemporary cults and high-control groups, particularly with things like online recruitment and the use of technology?

Raphael ARON: The biggest concern that I have is the concern about people in universities being targeted, and I had a recent conversation with some of the university people in Tasmania in relation to one particular group called Shincheonji, which I imagine you will have heard about during the content. This is the group about which we receive more inquiries than any other group; we have never received as many inquiries as we have about any group as we have in relation to Shincheonji. They were using RMIT, and I actually had contact with RMIT in relation to this. They disagreed with the fact that RMIT was being used for renting rooms or providing rooms, so we corrected that. But what was happening is they were meeting people outside RMIT in the city and then asking them to come inside and they could have a talk, which was completely unauthorised, but it created a sort of air of legitimacy – that this was happening in an established college. The targeting of people through the university, the academic or the TAFE systems is something which is new; it is relatively new.

We have also got the internet. The internet is actually a two-edged sword, because on one hand it is used as a targeting element and in terms of terrorism and so on there are literally thousands of sites pulling people into that mode of behaviour, but the good thing about the internet is you can also look up and check the cult out. People often ask me when I do my public speaking, ‘What can we do to secure our children?’ and there are lots of answers for that. But one of the answers in relation to the internet is that if anybody says to you that they have joined a movement and they know the name of the movement – a lot of times you do not know the name of the movement, and this is one of the differences between a cult and a religion; with a religion, at least you know what it is – you can look it up. In a cult you may not find out for the first six months, 12 months, what it actually is, but if you do know what it is and you can find out what this organisation stands for and you type in that together with ex-members, former members, you get a whole lot of pieces of information which can be very useful for parents.

The CHAIR: To explore a bit more about what you were saying with young people, particularly university students, we are aware of Shincheonji, and we have heard evidence about Shincheonji. That example you provided of what was happening RMIT where they were using rooms on campus – do you think that is happening at other universities?

Raphael ARON: All I know is that during orientation week these people are everywhere, they are around and they are targeting people. The tragedy of this is that most of the people in this particular organisation, but in others as well, lie through their teeth in terms of their involvement. They will not tell their parents what is going on. Their parents often find out. We receive these horrible calls from people who suddenly find out for the last one year their child was involved in a cult. I had a call recently – I can only repeat what happened: there was a young woman who had joined this particular organisation, and the parents were completely unaware of it. Again, I am repeating a story; I cannot authenticate it. She told her parents that she was working after hours at KFC, and they believed that.

The CHAIR: Why wouldn’t you?

Raphael ARON: She came home with a KFC uniform, and she talked about the experiences she had at KFC. Something did not seem to be right, so the parents went down to KFC where she said she was working – they did not know who she was. What they found out was that the cult bought her this uniform and told her that this was what she needed to wear in order to disguise her involvement in the group. The deception in that particular group is probably at the higher end of the scale. The other problem is that a lot of them just disappear from the university scene in terms of academia. We had a young man whose parents came to see us whose son was two months away from a PhD, and he just threw the whole thing out. It was absolutely shocking. You feel quite affected by these sorts of stories – two months away from PhD, and it was complicated, whatever it was – it was not a simple course. He had been doing it for five or six years, and two months away he has decided he is not only stopping the course; he is travelling overseas on some mission. These sorts of things are hard to stomach at times. The presence of recruiters on university campuses is something which is significant. I also believe the university needs to be doing checks and balances in terms of whether these people’s visas are actually being dealt with properly. They have come in on a student visa, and a lot of the times they are just not studying. That is a concern which I think needs to be dealt with.

The CHAIR: And do you have any recommendations for the Victorian government about how we could address recruitment on campuses and the targeting of young people, particularly young international students?

Raphael ARON: I think in terms of explanation and information we really fall very short of what we should be doing. This is a question which has been asked many, many times, and there is no simple answer. At the end of the day people make their own decisions as to what they want to do, but I do believe that information needs to be made available readily for people on campus. There is a whole lot of stuff people receive when they sign up to campus; they need to understand that campus is a fertile breeding ground and recruiting ground for cults. That would be one thing which would really help. In terms of the actual services, if universities could offer specialised counselling services to people who have got questions about cults, that would help as well. We work with quite a few of the counsellors on the various different campuses, and they are quite green when it comes to this. They do not know; they do not really understand what it is all about. A lot of people who find cults interesting also have questions, but there is no-one really to whom to address the questions. They end up addressing it to the people who are actually recruiting them, so it is a sort of a closed circle where they do not get any help.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will hand over to Annabelle.

Annabelle CLEELAND: You said so many significant things in such a consistent tone. I have made some notes, because I wanted to clarify a few things. With your exit counselling, we have heard from a few people that are cult survivors that have left that volunteer to support other people to leave cults. Yours is a paid service.

Raphael ARON: Yes.

Annabelle CLEELAND: How do they find you?

Raphael ARON: Well, let me say it is a paid service; we are also a not-for-profit organisation, so therefore we attempt to support anybody who we can. The problem we have got is that there are certain out-of-pocket costs sometimes which we just cannot carry. It is actually quite strange that in Australia there are only two organisations doing this work. There is us and there is CIFS – I understand that CIFS is having representation tomorrow, Tore Klevjer, who is a friend of mine – and that is it. I will be quite blunt about the fact that there is no funding for us. It is all funded by private donations or by fee for service. Our standard letter which we write to people who ask about cults is, ‘We are currently a fee-for-service organisation. We hope that will change.’ It is a fee-for-service organisation. We do our best to be able to provide a comprehensive service. The volunteers do not ask for payment other than out-of-pocket expenses. I am currently involved in a situation now in Adelaide where we are going to have to have someone from Sydney come to Adelaide. Obviously the family has to cover that cost, but the person doing it is doing it out of the goodness of their heart because they feel it is part of their own contribution to give back, as part of their own healing as well. But I am not going to be shy about the fact that finances are an issue. I would like to believe that there were counsellors funded on campus who could deal with these situations. I would like to believe that organisations like ourselves could receive some assistance. We are really swimming on our own, and it is really, really difficult.

Annabelle CLEELAND: I certainly did not ask that as a negative at all, but understanding the support services and the model of funding for stability is quite important, so I appreciate your honesty. One thing we are grappling with is that a lot of the submissions we have heard are about adult consenting behaviour, and how you legislate around that is really, really challenging with some of the potentially unintended consequences. Do you have any guidance on that?

Raphael ARON: I can give you a therapeutic answer, and that is the answer which I give all the time when people ask the question. You can be sitting with a family over a period of several months, planning an intervention to get somebody out of a cult, and right at the end one of the daughters or the sisters gets up and says, ‘By the way, I love my sister, and I think what she’s doing is terrible, but on the other hand she’s made an informed decision, she’s joined this organisation, and do we really have the right to be doing this? I feel I am betraying her.’ There are lots of answers, but the general answer that I give is that in order for a person to make an informed decision you need to have two components: one is information, and the other one is free choice, and they need to come concurrently. When you join an organisation, you have free choice but you do not know what the organisation is. You do not know its name, you do not know its charter, you do not know anything, but you have got your free choice. By the time you have got into that organisation and you find out what it really is your free choice has been compromised. You have been love bombed. You have been pulled in through all sorts of different tactics, so you do not really have the opportunity to be able to make an

independent decision. My answer is that the idea of informed consent, which is often the argument used by cults saying, 'Well, they joined. That's what they wanted to do,' is really faulty. It is not a very solid argument.

Annabelle CLEELAND: That is an excellent response for clarity in my own head, which leads me to your comments around organisation, structure and transparency. How do you see that operating? Where is the information? Currently are you saying that charities might be protected with the transparency of information? Explain how that transparency of organisation structures would work in the world.

Raphael ARON: Well, there is not transparency in the cult environment. If you look at the –

Annabelle CLEELAND: Why?

Raphael ARON: Because if there was transparency, they would not have registration with the ACNC. There would be all sorts of issues. If the idea is to be able to recruit people into a cult, it is somewhat dangerous to be able to suggest that this organisation has been set up for the welfare of human beings and set up to be able to increase the compatibility of different societies and for all sorts of other rather highfalutin and lofty ideas. I mean, cults have a very clear agenda, and that is to recruit people, to make money and to be able to exercise control. That is what cults are all about. Nobody is going to be able to talk about that as being their platform, but it is their platform. So I think that the idea of being able to present a very wonderful picture of the world, with the dancing and the singing and all the other things that go on over there, as being representative of a very benevolent and very warm environment, covers up the very fact that people are losing their independence, losing their autonomy, losing their freedom of thought, losing their family connections and losing their careers and so many other things that come with it. Cults are not going to come along and tell you, by the way, 'That's what's going to happen if you join us.' So I think that there is a real disconnect between what is going on within the cult and the message they try to broadcast outside.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Some online reviews, maybe? No. My last one: you said that the word 'cult' does not have strength in the legal world. We also grappled with the definition of 'cult' in our own inquiry. How can we as legislators iron those challenges out so that it does suddenly give weight to the word?

Raphael ARON: It is a really good question, and it is probably the one which is the most perplexing one if one is going forward in this direction. But just a few thoughts: the difference between a cult and a religion – which comes up all the time – is that with religion at least you can find out what it is all about. If somebody comes along and asks, 'Do you want to join and become a Hindu?' 'Do you want to become a Catholic?' or become a Muslim, become a Jew, whatever it may be, you can find out what it is all about, and there is no ambiguity about it. It is what it is. When it comes to cults, you cannot do that. If you look at their own websites and look at their own platforms, you will find a whole lot of waffle which really disguises what the cult is all about. That is not to say that people cannot get into cults and walk away without necessarily being harmed. One of the common things we get is, 'My daughter's in a cult – is that bad?' Well, it might be. She might just go along for a meditation or for a yoga exercise, or she might go along to be able to learn something which she has not learned before, and walk away. Similarly, people might say religions are good, but people can get into religions, become horrible and do awful things in the name of religion.

One of the factors that is really central to all of this is mental health, and that is something we could spend a lot of time on. One of the things we really want to find out a lot about when people join cults is their mental health. That is important for a number of reasons, one, because we want to be able to understand how we can work with them. We have also got to understand if there is a risk involved in getting them out of the cult. Sometimes – and I know it might sound strange – it is actually easier leaving the person there, because coming out of a cult presents all sorts of challenges, and for someone with a fragile mental health situation it could end them up in real trouble. We are very careful to ensure that the people we work with totally inform us about what is going on with their child or with their loved one, and possibly get a medical opinion from someone who actually knows that person in order to be able to go further. In most situations it is not an issue, but we do not need even one situation where a cult intervention ends in tragedy. It is a delicate area to work in. We ostensibly put the pressure or put the responsibility on the parents to be able to let us go, but generally it is murky waters.

We do not use the word in court, as you mentioned – in relation to cults – because what does the word 'cult' actually mean? It has all sorts of connotations. As I said, it is a very pejorative word. It is more important for us

to be able to show that this particular organisation is dangerous, and this organisation is going to cost its members far more than they gain from the experience.

In relation to children being brought up, I am dealing now with a young family whose child is involved. They are all involved in a fundamentalist cult, and they all believe the world is going to come to an end – even the kids. The grandmother said to me the other day, ‘We went shopping – I took my kids shopping, and there were some toys on the floor and she said, “It’s a waste of time buying those toys; they are going to last forever. We’re not going to be here forever.”’ And this was a six-year-old girl. Those sorts of influences are really quite serious.

Cults characteristically change the dates all the time. There are some cults which have probably gone through eight or 10 different iterations of the end of the world, and they are still here. Just give a thought to the children being brought up in an environment where the parents say, ‘We are not painting our house’ – this was another example I had – ‘because it’s not going to be here for much longer, neither are we going to be here,’ and these are children growing up in what we would like to believe is a healthy, multicultural society being brainwashed to believe that the world is coming to an end.

Annabelle CLEELAND: I will share the microphone with my colleagues.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Annabelle. Christine.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you, Raphael, for your time today and for your submission. It is greatly appreciated. I just wondered how many councillors you have at Cult Consulting.

Raphael ARON: What we have at the moment is we have me in charge of the organisation. We have three other people who are working in various different capacities. One of them is assisting me in terms of the actual admin and getting it all done. We have somebody who is a research officer. She has a legal background. One of the things that often happens, especially when it comes to court reports and so on, is you want to know exactly what this cult is, what its structure is, its corporate identity and so on. Then we have half a dozen, I would say, possibly a little more, former cult members who are really ready to go when it comes to cult intervention. We would like to employ somebody else to assist me in terms of the actual organisation itself, but we cannot afford that. We are very constrained in terms of what we can do. We want to be as generous as we can in terms of people seeking assistance. As a result, we are sort of caught between on one hand feeling we could offer a better program if we were better funded, but being better funded means asking for more money, and asking for money is not what we want to do, so it is really difficult. We also work with other professionals. If there are people coming to us who have been to a psychologist, who have got a diagnosis of either ADHD or autism or whatever it might be, then we will go back to those people and find out more about the individual. It is really important to know your customer before you actually start trying to work with them.

Chris COUZENS: What are the most pressing service gaps for survivors and families seeking help after leaving a cult in your experience?

Raphael ARON: I would like to see the training of psychologists and counsellors, and psychiatrists for that matter, in the cult area so they can know what they are dealing with, because the most common situation is that somebody calls me up and says they have been to a psychologist who said, ‘Look, I can help you in relation to some of what you’re talking about, but I don’t know anything about cults.’ If there is one gap that I would like to fill, it would be the opportunity to offer training programs for people in the helping profession so they are able to understand, as much as is possible within that context, what actually being involved in a cult is all about. That would relieve the pressure from us, and it would make the services available far more mainstream. If there was one thing which I could see as a service gap at the moment – there are probably many others, but the one that comes to mind – would be the lack of information that psychologists, counsellors and psychiatrists have when it comes to cults, often leading to misdiagnoses. It can be really, really difficult. One of the more specific conditions which can be experienced as a result of cult involvement is a thing called DID, which is dissociative identity disorder. It used to be called multiple personality disorder. It is a very specific area where people as a result of trauma have found that their minds and their brains had to split in order to cope with the weight of what they were experiencing. It is an area which a lot of people do not know much about. It is a very, very culture-related area, as is trauma in a general sense. That is what I would like to see.

Chris COUZENS: Do you think there is a need for courses to be developed for this level of training?

Raphael ARON: I do not think it is an extensive, difficult process – even 2 or 3 hours sitting with a group of psychologists or a group of whoever they are in that profession just explaining what cults are all about. I do not think one can ask for more because people just do not have the time for this. I have definitely received a very positive response from those that I have worked with of, ‘If only we could do this on a more formal basis.’ I think that is a work in progress, but it is something which is worth considering.

Chris COUZENS: And do you think that that should have a focus on the families as well?

Raphael ARON: Well, the issue of cults is very family related, and I do not want to sound like I am coming from the previous era, but the reality is that the one most demonstrative sort of feature in relation to people belonging to cults is that word ‘belonging’. Somebody once said that the desire for human beings to belong is so great that it matters not what you belong to but rather that you belong. So there is a whole discussion over here in terms of families and the issue of belonging and social media and all the other pressures. It is a difficult one. I think what is frightening is the comment that you often get, and that is when somebody comes into my room and they say, ‘If there’s one place in the world I thought I’d never be, it’s here. This is completely out of the box.’ It is a bit like addictions; it is an area which affects everybody, and to suggest that there is any group which has quarantined itself from these sorts of social ills is simply not – it does not exist.

Chris COUZENS: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you. This has been really fascinating. I have really enjoyed the insights that you can offer us. It is really wonderful to have somebody with your experience talk to us like this. I just had a couple of questions regarding the demographics and the profiles of the people that call, the numbers that come in – I do not know if you measure them weekly, monthly, daily, annually – and whether they are nationwide or just Victoria?

Raphael ARON: Nationwide. That is the problem, because there are no services. CIFS is in Sydney, we are in Melbourne, and that is it. So if you are in Adelaide or if you are in Perth or if you are in regional Victoria or regional Australia for that matter, there are no real services, and that is why invariably you come into areas of costs as far as transport is concerned. We use Zoom all the time, but at the same time you cannot take somebody out of a cult on Zoom. That is not going to happen.

Cindy McLEISH: So do you get a sense of whether they are, say, women under 30, men over 60?

Raphael ARON: In relation to the current situation, when you talk about Shincheonji and so on, you are talking about students in the 18- to 22-year-old age group. The demographic is generally one which we would probably limit, as a general rule, to the late teens into the 30s. That is most of the people we are dealing with. But that is not to say that there are not people who are older. We are working with one person who is considerably older who has exited a cult. So there are exceptions to the rule, but generally speaking that is the demographic. But there are stories where children come along and talk about their parents becoming involved in a cult. So rather than the standard situation where parents or grandparents come along and complain or are concerned about a particular cult environment, it can work the other way.

One of the questions which is often asked is: is mental health an issue when it comes to cult involvement? I am going to say something here which is a little controversial, but I will still say it. Most of the people that we are working with come from complex family situations – they just do. That is not to in any way condemn or suggest there is anything untoward in relation to the family and the behaviour of the family, but generally speaking there is some complexity about the situation which lends itself to a sort of vulnerability which the cults can then prey on and jump into. It is not across the board, it is not in every situation, but I suppose as a general situation, as a general setting or platform, that is something which we have noticed.

Cindy McLEISH: That is linked to vulnerability?

Raphael ARON: That contributes to vulnerability.

Cindy McLEISH: Yes.

Raphael ARON: Cults offer simple solutions to complex problems. They offer a haven. They are pretty cool places for some people. You go along there and everybody looks happy, everybody is enjoying themselves, everybody seems to be together – it is something we do not have in society. It is very different. You know, we deal with the real world out here, which is full of lots of issues, protests here and there and all sorts of other things which are tearing people apart and creating confrontation, whereas the cult is this happy nirvana which people can enjoy, but unfortunately it comes at a price which does not justify its existence.

Cindy McLEISH: I just want to touch on the submission that you made and particularly distinguishing between a cult and religion, and you mentioned this a little bit earlier. You gave examples like the Mormon church or the Jehovah's Witnesses, illustrating potential legal and philosophical disputes. Can you just talk me through that a little bit more?

Raphael ARON: Yes. I am glad you brought that up, and I should have brought that up in the beginning. There are certain groups which, in the minds of many people working in this area, have cult-like characteristics, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and such as the Mormons. But on the other hand, they seem to be flying below the radar when it comes to cult organisations, and really, that is a very, very difficult area to be able to monitor and a very difficult area to be able to control. It is going to be interesting to see, if this legislation does in fact eventuate, what one does with organisations like that. There are some very, very strong advocates that those organisations and the general properties of them are cult-like. Then again, looking at them from the outside, they sort of seem to be far more legitimate than perhaps the Moonies, the Children of God or Anne Hamilton-Byrne, but I think it is a very fine line, and I think it is a very difficult one.

I struggle with it because of the fact that there are so many differing views about what these organisations are, but I have concerns about Jehovah's Witnesses. I have been quite public about that; I have written about that. The main concern I have about them is the end times and the belief that the world is coming to an end. That child that I talked about before in the toy shop – their parents belong to the Jehovah's Witnesses. I have a problem with that and the element of fear that comes into life, the worries and the insecurity, and putting children to bed every night with Bible story after Bible story and that becoming their narrative. Then in school they are finding that there are differences between themselves and the other children, and the children themselves feel that maybe they need to also convince their friends that they need to join. It is very complex, and I think one needs to be mindful of that when one deals with this and to deal with it in a very sensitive and a very understanding and considered manner. But it is complicated.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thanks. John.

John LISTER: Thank you. Thank you, Raphael, for coming along and speaking to us today and for the vast amount of research that you have got in this space; it is very interesting to read through. I want to get to a similar question around this idea of a cult versus a religion. Not to go down a theological bent, but I do just want to ask: in your time working in this space, have you had much engagement with mainstream religions, and have they shared any concerns around what you have been seeing?

Raphael ARON: Sorry, have they shared concerns?

John LISTER: Concerns with you about the sorts of practices that you have been seeing in your work.

Raphael ARON: Yes, they have, certainly. I think when we talk about religions and cults, there are all sorts of things that one can bring up. For example, cults keep all your money; there is no accountability. With religions, in most situations, you would assume that there is some accountability. It is not all about money. There are lots and lots of differences that one can talk about. But to me, the most significant difference between a cult and religion is the issue of personality change. People who become more religious may become more serious, they may drop a girlfriend or boyfriend, they may drop a partner or they may give away their motorbike. They might do things a little bit differently, but essentially they are the same person.

When you join a cult, especially some of the ones we have mentioned today, you become an absolute liar. Deceit is the order of the day. You become a different person. The same person who gave the valedictory speech at school, was class captain and was going on to do tertiary studies has become a downright liar about what she is doing and what she is not doing, or what he is doing and what he is not doing. To me, that is

personality change. The most common thing you get from parents is 'We don't recognise our son anymore. We just don't recognise who he is'. Now, on that concept, one of the first books that came out in relation to cults was called *Snapping*, and the subtitle was something like 'The art of personality change', by two people, Conway and Siegelman. It came out probably in the 70s, and that has stuck with me as a model.

So when people come and talk to me about their child being in a cult, I ask them the sorts of questions which will help me elucidate that problem. Has their personality changed? And when you have got situations of kids talking about their parents being 'biological people in my life' but nothing more than that, and you look at where they were only maybe six months or a year earlier, and they rewrite history – that 'We never had a relationship with you; we never really cared about you; you never really cared about us' – and they pull out all the gifts they were given and the greeting cards and all the various, different occasional exchanges of words, it just does not add up. And that is the scary part. I do believe that there are those who belong to cults who do not go through personality change and people who go into religions who do get into that. But to me, that is the hallmark of what a cult really is.

John LISTER: You mentioned earlier, in your opening, about looking towards the future as well around how things are evolving in this space. You know, we have had the classic Jonestown examples, and quite often that is the shorthand we have got for these sorts of organisations at the moment in the way that we think. But how do you think the rise of these online or wellness movements not necessarily associated with a theology or any semblance of religion has complicated this identification of coercive behaviour?

Raphael ARON: It has complicated it; it really has, and I do not have an answer to where you draw the line other than what is experienced by those who join them and what we hear about them. But there is certainly an exponential growth in the area that you are referring to.

It brings me to an issue which I have mentioned in my submission – and it is only a very brief submission – and that is: you have got a lot of groups that are denying people conventional medicine or medical methods. I can tell you a story of a woman who came to see me. She had a daughter who, unfortunately, contracted cancer. She was not well for quite some time, but she was in a church which was doing the healing through the various different methods that they have. It was a fundamentalist church. Things got worse and worse and worse, and towards the end they realised that they needed to get other forms of help, so they took her to an oncologist. The oncologist said, 'Well, I wouldn't have been able to save your daughter. Your daughter was very, very ill. But had she come earlier, had I been able to intervene, then the result might have been a little bit different – not necessarily everything you would have wanted, but something else.' And this woman broke down crying, saying, 'Can you please stop this from happening? I don't want anybody else –' And she died. The girl died, and the mother was distraught and came to me: 'Can we at least, maybe, for something to come out of this tragedy, try and do something?' There are organisations which are denying people medical care. The Elizabeth Struhs story in Toowoomba was a very pronounced and terrible story of someone dying, but this is not unique.

I believe – and this is in my submission – that if we are talking about legislation, the idea of a regulatory body which would come in and check these organisations, if in fact there are complaints being made about them, would be probably one of the most productive things that we could do in terms of trying to bring some sanity into the chaos that these organisations offer. I do not know if you have watched some of the videos on our website, but the story of the four police people on the Eastern Freeway – we know what happened. We know that four people died as a result of the fact that a semitrailer careered into them and killed them. What was tendered in court in relation to this whole matter, when the guy driving the vehicle was up for criminal charges, was the fact that his boss had noticed the fact that he was affected by ice. He was quite paranoid. He was quite mentally unwell, and he himself told his boss that he should not drive. The boss said to him, 'I will take care of it,' and did some exorcism or some sort of practice and took the demons out of him and said, 'You're good to go.' Now, I will say that particular piece of evidence was contested, but if it is true, it is a frightening indictment on organisations that are not prepared to recognise the reality of what is going on in people's physical and mental health.

I had a client who was schizophrenic. She joined a cult, and she talked about hearing voices. The cult told her she was blessed, 'We don't hear those voices.' Eventually it became so horrible and she became so unmanageable, they just chucked her out, and eventually she committed suicide. Now, it should never have got to that. So the establishment of a regulatory body, which could come in on recommendation by ourselves or by any member of the public to go and look at what is going on and then take action to be able to ensure that those

practices are no longer, would in itself be something which would be a very, very positive move as far as people's wellbeing and welfare are concerned.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will hand over to Jackson now. Thanks, Jackson.

Jackson TAYLOR: Thank you, Ella. Thank you very much for your time today, Raphael. Just going on from the last point you raised, just in terms of the discouragement and refusal of medical treatment, what type of regulatory body or mechanism is needed to address this and could existing regulators such as AHPRA, consumer affairs or the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission be empowered to take action in these cases in your view?

Raphael ARON: AHPRA cannot do it because the people who are running these organisations are not medical practitioners and therefore it does not fall under them, so that would not be an option. ACNC can, I suppose, deal with the fact that the charter which they are offering is not necessarily consistent with what is actually legally and morally correct. But I think this is a very specialised area; I do not think it is something which is covered by the existing laws.

As I said, in the case, for example, of Elizabeth Struhs, she was a young girl who was a type 1 diabetic, and insulin was withdrawn from her. They believed that by praying she would be fine – she would not need this insulin any longer. It was actually a fascinating case from a legal point of view in that the parents and another 12 people in that church were all charged with manslaughter and not with murder. I studied that case because I thought, 'This is really unusual. Why aren't they being charged with murder?' And the reason was because in order for a person to be charged with murder as against manslaughter, there needs to be an intention for the person to die. These people actually believed she was going to live, and therefore they could not be charged with murder. I mean, it sounds like a bit of a legal technicality, but it is one which saved them many years of their sentence. But my understanding is that they went off to prison smiling, saying they would do it all over again and still believe she is going to come back.

Now, what do you do in a situation like that where you are aware of this thing going on? You cannot go to the police because no crime has been committed, cannot go to AHPRA because the people are not registered as medical practitioners. So you almost have to wait until something goes wrong in order for them to come in and act and have a trial and have a coronial inquest and all the rest of it. I will tell you now, I would straightaway give you a list of organisations now which should be investigated, and some of the revivalist churches and others would certainly come under that organisation's radar. As I said – I will stand by this – if somebody came along and said that there was an organisation which was set up in order to provide this, yes, I would be on their doorstep straight away.

Jackson TAYLOR: Do you have a view as to what specific thresholds or indicators should trigger an investigation into a group's practices or leadership when it comes to this?

Raphael ARON: Any person who comes along and provides a credible report that, on entry to this organisation, they were told the sorts of things which we are being told – that is, 'We will heal you and we will look after you. You do not need to go to conventional medicine.' – that is all that you really require.

Jackson TAYLOR: You have detailed some of the tragic consequences of refusal of medical treatment. Just how widespread is this and what patterns have you observed?

Raphael ARON: Look, this is sort of a really interesting question, because I am not denying the case for some level of spiritual healing. You know, there is a role for that. We cannot come along and sort of say that prayer and other forms of spiritual intervention should be discounted or made illegal. That would be ludicrous. The question is whether those services are being offered to the exclusion of any other conventional medical services, and that is where we draw the line. It is one thing if people want to go and pray because someone is unwell – fine. I do that. That is not an issue. People can come along and seek some sort of deliverance or some sort of respite from the person's illness. But if that is done to the exclusion of any intervention from anyone else, and 'We will manage this internally rather than externally', that is the line that people should not legally be allowed to cross.

Jackson TAYLOR: Just a brief question, my last question, if that is okay, Chair. What definitional evidentiary challenges do you foresee in applying coercive control legislation to religious or spiritual groups?

Raphael ARON: First of all, the difference between a religion and a cult – people will come along and say the Catholic religion is a cult because they have got a pope and he is the guru and he is the leader and all the rest of it, and therefore why are they different? That sort of thing.

The next thing will be the informed decision issue, which we spoke about beforehand. People will come along and say, ‘Look, this person joined, they can’t now come along and sue us or have us charged with criminal offences because they’ve got ‘buyer’s regret’ and they have made a mistake. I mean, they’re adults. They’re running businesses. They are doing things which most people would strive to be able to achieve, so don’t come along and paint them as being these poor cult victims and so on and so forth.’ I think that is really, really important.

But I think at the end of the day, one of the other major issues is: if you are seeking to prosecute, who do you prosecute? Who is there? So for example, in the Shincheonji situation, is it the leadership which is offshore? Is it the leadership of the organisation locally, which is often very, very hard to be able to determine? Or will they come along and say, ‘Well, look, when this person joined, she had a buddy and that buddy was not very good and did some bad things, but that’s really nothing to do with us as an organisation.’ Or do you sue the directors, if there are any such people in that position? You see, a lot of the people that are working in these organisations have no formal affiliation. They are just working as volunteers. They are part of the organisation. They are caught up in the euphoria of what the organisation represents. In a school, for example, if a student is abused by a teacher, then the school has to be held responsible, because there is a contractual relationship between the school and the teacher. There is no contractual relationship between anybody when it comes to cults, so who do you actually go after? It is a really difficult situation. I do not have the answer to that. That is something which I think requires further work and further research. But I do not know who you would actually sue. As I said, there is a glaring lack of contractual obligations or arrangements within the cult environment, and therefore who do you go after?

Annabelle CLEELAND: That is what the inquiry needs to answer.

Raphael ARON: Yes. They are very, very slippery, often evasive situations that you find yourself in. If you take the Shincheonji situation, which has received a lot of attention, and you decide this behaviour should be subject to prosecution, who are you going to prosecute? I am sure there are answers to these questions, but I am saying it is going to require work to come to something which is going to really appeal to the legislative order.

Annabelle CLEELAND: We will allow you to take that one on notice then.

Raphael ARON: All right. I will take it on notice.

Annabelle CLEELAND: No, for you.

Raphael ARON: I will take it on notice. I think it is something worth every moment of work, to be able to achieve some sort of an outcome in relation to that.

Jackson TAYLOR: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Rachel.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you, Chair. Raphael, thank you so much for your insights. It is fascinating and sad all at once. I am wondering if you can provide us with your insight into any international models of regulation or monitoring of cults that you have seen to be something that we could consider – regulation and monitoring but also support systems as well. Is there anything being done in the international space?

Raphael ARON: Support systems, yes, but it is actually interesting you are asking that question. When I became aware of this inquiry, I actually sent off a few emails to a number of organisations which I work with overseas, and so far I have not got any credible responses in terms of actual things that are going on overseas. But I am happy to take that question on notice, because I think it is a really good question. I think it is a really important question. My guess is that there is very little happening, but I do not want to be quoted on that. I have already initiated a process of trying to find out what actually is happening, and if I can do that, I am happy to come back with it.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you. I would be very appreciative, as I am sure my colleagues would be. That is the key question that I had. Thank you so much.

Raphael ARON: I will take that on notice. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Just a couple more from me to wrap things up. You have certainly given us a lot to think about. I am just interested in your views about the role of education and awareness campaigns and the role they could play in reducing harm.

Raphael ARON: Here we come again to a funding issue, and I am sorry that it often comes down to that, but I think there would be immense value in schools having programs almost as a mandatory part of their syllabus in relation to this. We are not talking about weekly sessions or anything but at least once or twice a year in year 11 and year 12, the final years of school, for kids to be made aware of what actually confronts them when they get into university or into any TAFE or tertiary space. I think that would be extremely helpful. I do that, but there is only a certain amount of work that you can do in relation to trying to spread the word. I do believe that if schools were made aware of the need for this particular program and if necessary received some sort of funding to be able to incorporate that into their syllabus, then it would be very, very useful.

One of the things that people who come out of cults talk about is that they were totally ill-prepared for this. They had no idea that they were going to get into this. I am happy to take a couple more questions, but as a concluding comment I do not think that we need to sort of emphasise the deleterious and frightening effects that some of these organisations have on people. It is really, really quite a serious social problem that needs to be addressed. I think schools, in terms of their responsibilities, would do well if there was some form of education or coaching in relation to this. How could one set that up? I have got no idea because there are so many schools and so few people that are capable of doing this. But that does not mean we should not start somewhere.

The CHAIR: The next question I have is just regarding research. We have had a number of stakeholders suggest that some dedicated research into coercive groups and the associated harms would be a valuable and important next step. I am just interested in your thoughts on this. Would it be valuable and, if so, which institutions organisations would be best placed to lead this?

Raphael ARON: I absolutely agree. I am not sure who would be best placed to do it. It would have to be people who have a knowledge of cults and an understanding of them. As I said, we have a part-time research person. Essentially what happens is people talk to us about groups we have not heard about – groups which perhaps have been hiding for many years – and we check them out. There are lots of protocols that are used in order to check out that group. But I think that research would be important. Putting this in perspective, we are still going to be facing definitional issues in relation to whether this is a cult or not a cult. And that comes back to what a cult really is. But I think, yes, the idea of something which is some sort of a body set up to help research this would be certainly welcome. We would welcome it as an organisation.

The CHAIR: And do you have a sense of what the research priorities should be? For example, should they be looking at how people are recruited? Should they be looking at the impacts of cults? Do you have any thoughts around research priorities?

Raphael ARON: Yes, I believe the research person should be actually trying to establish what this organisation is. Who are they? What do they do? What are their credentials? Are they denying people medicine, for example? Who are they and what are they and what level of responsibility are they taking? So I think more than looking at demographics and so on, it would be a question of saying, 'Is this organisation one which requires further scrutiny?' – something in that order.

The CHAIR: Rachel, you had one more question.

Rachel WESTAWAY: I do. Thank you so much. Raphael, you mentioned that COVID was a period of time when you saw an uptake in involvement in cults, which is an interesting comment, because we have also heard people mention that COVID was a time when some cults or some organisations lost control of their membership because they were closed off and did not have as much engagement with their membership, so they were not able to control them as much. Are you able to be a little bit more specific about COVID and its impact in regard to what you were saying? I know obviously you alluded to a feeling of loneliness and people

wanting to belong. But given the nature of cults and their modus operandi to try and control people, it was a lot harder during COVID.

Raphael ARON: I am only judging on the numbers of people that have called us in relation to cults. Post COVID it was considerably higher than it was before COVID. I am not familiar with the fact that –

I am happy to research this issue, in terms of cults losing control of the people because they were not able to attend sessions. I know a lot of cults, like all of us, went to the online sort of space in order to be able to do what we wanted to do and perform our responsibilities. But the overriding factors that I have noticed in relation to COVID have been this issue of a sense of alienation, a sense of vulnerability, where people felt disconnected, felt unsure about their future and as a result of that cults became more attractive.

But I am interested to hear more about that because that has not been our experience. I am sure it is certainly true, but it is not something that we have come across.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Just one final question from me, Raphael. What key message do you want the committee to take away regarding the scale and seriousness of cult-related harm in Victoria today?

Raphael ARON: I think there is a need for something to be done. This is why this is such an important inquiry. The situation continues to spiral. The most concerning area that I have in relation to cults involvement is the students in university and the number of families that are becoming completely and totally alienated from their own loved ones as a result of that. I think that the universities have a responsibility to be able to address that. There are those who sort of come along with a more drastic sort of solution, suggesting that visas and all sorts of other things should be revoked where it is shown that people have not followed through with what their conditions of entry were, and I think there is something to be said about that. But I believe that the most important thing that we need to recognise is that we are all vulnerable, but people in university in particular, because of the very change from the high school into the university and the completely different orientation that they are now facing, puts them into a situation where they are really fodder for the people that are trying to best recruit them.

The scale of this is really quite exceptional, and that is why we come back to what the universities can do to be able to prepare students once they are there, and we come back to what schools can do in order to be able to let people know what lies ahead of them and what the risks might be. It also comes back to this idea of people who are seeking professional help from people who have been trained or been given some sort of education about what this is really all about. Looking at it from the school point of view, looking at it from the university point of view and looking at it from a professional point of view, if there was some sort of movement in that area – and I would be quite happy to furnish further information on this – then I think we would be far better off. There is only a certain amount we can do, but we are not doing that at this point.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee today and for your contribution to this inquiry. We are greatly appreciative of the time and effort that you have taken to prepare your evidence. You will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript to check together with any questions taken on notice. Verified transcripts and responses to questions taken on notice will then be published on the committee's website. Once again, thank you very much and I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witness withdrew.