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Cult probe backlash

Security was stepped up at Hull University this week when psychologists met to discuss the growth of cults and their mind-control techniques.

Conference organiser Barry Hart admits he was not expecting the outburst he received from groups such as the Scientologists.

"They said our conference was prejudiced," Dr Hart said. "I am prejudiced against destructive and damaging cults, but I certainly didn't expect this backlash."

Liberal peer Lord McNair wrote to Hull University's vice chancellor claiming that the con-

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ference was an attempt to give "spurious academic respectability to a rather unsavoury militant tendency in society".

Lord McNair is associated with the Church of Scientology. He accused the anti-cultists of deliberately frightening families.

Dr Hart also received complaints from an organisation called the De-Programming Victim Support Group, which expressed concerns about forcible de-programming and kidnapping of cult members.

Dr Hart stresses that exit counselling is very different from forcible de-programming. "All of this flak and character assassination is about money and power," he said. "This is a free country and everyone has a right to be a member of a cult but they also have the right to be informed about what that cult really stands for. That is the real civil liberty issue."

It is estimated that 500,000 Britons are members of one of 500 different cults and yet the phenomenon is barely acknowledged here. Mind-control techniques often used by cults to brainwash

members can cause serious psychiatric disorders unlikely to be recognised by many doctors.

"Mind control is subtle. It is applied to vulnerable people searching for meaning in their lives," Dr Hart said. He stressed the importance of psychologists recognising the phenomenon and being trained properly to deal with cult-related disorders.

The conference, one of the first to address cults and counselling in this country, was conceived in the aftermath of the Waco siege in the United States last year.

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