

WHAT IS A CULT?

A cult is a group or movement that, to a significant degree:

- a) exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing,**
- b) uses a thought-reform program to persuade, control, and socialize members (i.e., to integrate them into the group's unique pattern of relationships, beliefs, values, and practices),**
- c) systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members,**
- d) exploits members to advance the leadership's goals, and**
- e) causes psychological harm to members, their families, and the community.**

This definition does not refer to beliefs because a group's belief system, although sometimes related to and supportive of the features that make the group a cult, is not necessarily nor directly related to its status as a cult. Thus, cults may be religious (with seemingly orthodox or bizarre beliefs), psychotherapeutic, political, or commercial.

The characteristics of a cult tend to produce conflict between the group and society. In order to manage this conflict, cultic groups tend to become isolated, psychologically if not physically, governed by hidden agendas, and totalistic, that is, they will dictate, sometimes with excruciating specificity, how members should think, feel, and act.

As defined here, cults differ from "new religions," "new political movements," "innovative psychotherapies," and other "new" groups in that cults make extensive use of unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control to advance the leader's goals. Of course, some groups that cause concern do not meet all of the definitional criteria, while others become more or less cultic over time.

Cults differ from merely authoritarian groups, such as boot camp or certain monastic orders, in that the latter are explicit about their goals, are contractual rather than seductive, and usually are accountable to authorities outside the group.

Langone, M.D. (Ed). (1993). ***Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse***. New York: W. Norton & Company.

Cults

The word *cult* comes from the French *culte*, and is rooted in the Latin *cultus*, which means "care" and "adoration." That idea comes from the Latin *cultus* - the past participle of *colere*, which means "to cultivate."

The word was used in the sense of "to worship or give reference to a deity." (1)

Today, the term "cult" can refer to:

1. : **formal religious veneration : worship**
2. : **a system of religious beliefs and ritual; also : its body of adherents**
3. : **a religion regarded as [unorthodox](#) or spurious; also : its body of adherents**
4. : **a system for the cure of disease based on dogma set forth by its promulgator**
<health cults>
5. **a : great devotion to a person, idea, object, movement, or work (as a film or book); especially : such devotion regarded as a literary or intellectual fad**
b : a usually small group of people characterized by such devotion

Source: [Merriam-Webster Definition](#) 

The term's ambiguity makes it necessary to determine in what sense the word is used. A sociological definition will differ from a religious one, and a Christian definition will differ from, say, the Mormon or Islamic view.

Given the fact that there's currently no universal definition of a cult, it seems best to ask one simple question whenever someone talks about cults: "Just what do you mean by the term 'cult'?" You may not agree with the way the person uses the term, but at least you'll know where he or she is coming from.

You may also want to ask yourself the same question before referring to any group as a cult. It may not be such a bad idea to begin by explaining what you mean by the term "cult" in order to avoid any potential misunderstanding. You never know. All the while you're talking about cults, the person listening may have a different concept altogether.

Source: [A Cult Recipe?](#) by Kenneth Samples, Erwin de Castro, Richard Abanes, and Robert Lyle

A Pejorative Term?

Some experts, on all sides of the debate over cults, altogether object to the use of the word "cult," considering it to be a pejorative term designed to trigger a negative response.

[Cult apologists](#), in particular, tend to accuse their opponents of using the term "cult" to convey negative images.

However, fact is that while a *few* people may indeed misuse the term that way, the vast majority of cult experts do not use "cult" in a pejorative way - even though they may well view cults in a negative light. (4)

On this issue, see the following statement at the [American Family Foundation \(AFF\)](#) site:

Even though we have each studied cults and educated people about this subject for more than 20 years, neither of us has ever felt completely comfortable with the term "cult." No other term, however, serves more effectively the linked educational and research aims of AFF (American Family Foundation), the organization that we serve as president (Rosedale) and executive director (Langone). In order to help others who have asked questions about the term "cult," we here offer some thoughts on the definition and use of this term.

[...]

Even though the term "cult" has limited utility, it is so embedded in popular culture that those of us concerned about helping people harmed by group involvements or preventing people from being so harmed cannot avoid using it. Whatever the term's limitations, it points us in a meaningful direction. And no other term relevant to group psychological manipulation (e.g., sociopsychological influence, coercive persuasion, undue influence, exploitive manipulation) has ever been able to capture and sustain public interest, which is the sine qua non of public education. If, however, we cannot realistically avoid the term, let us at least strive to use it judiciously.

Source: [On Using the Term "Cult"](#). Herbert L. Rosedale, Esq., Michael D. Langone, Ph.D.

Insight into how sociologists view the term "cult" can be obtained from an article by Michael York, of the Bath Archive for Contemporary Religious Affairs, Bath Spa University College, Bath, UK:

This paper traces the use of the term 'cult' by academics, the public and the mass media, from its early academic use in the sociology of religion to recent calls for the term to be abandoned by scholars of religion because it is now so overladen with negative connotations. But scholars of religion have a duty not to capitulate to popular opinion, media and governments in the arena of the 'politics of representation'. The author argues that we should continue using the term 'cult'

as a descriptive technical term. It has considerable educational value in the study of religions.

Source: Abstract, [Defending the Cult in the Politics of Representation](#), DISKUS Vol.4 No.2 (1996)

» Additional background information on the development and use of the term "cult" is found in [A Cult Recipe?](#) by Kenneth Samples, Erwin de Castro, Richard Abanes, and Robert Lyle.

Sociological vs. Theological Definitions

Note the difference between sociological and theological definitions of the term "cult:"

- **Sociological** definitions of the term ...

...**include consideration** of such factors as authoritarian leadership patterns, loyalty and commitment mechanisms, lifestyle characteristics, [and] conformity patterns (including the use of various sanctions in connection with those members who deviate).

Source: Ronald Enroth, "What Is a Cult?" in [A Guide to Cults and New Religions](#), e.d. Ronald Enroth (Downers Grove, Ill,: InterVarsity 1983), p14

- **Theological** definitions make note of the reasons why a particular group's beliefs and/or practices are considered unorthodox - that is, in conflict with the body of essential teachings of the movement the group compares itself to.

For example, Christian apologist [Robert Bowman](#) defines a cult as

A religious group originating as a [heretical](#) sect and maintaining fervent commitment to [heresy](#). Adj.: "cultic" (may be used with reference to tendencies as well as full cult status).

Source: Robert Bowman, [A Biblical Guide To Orthodoxy And Heresy](#).

[Alan Gomes](#) writes

A cult of Christianity is a group of people, which claiming to be Christian, embraces a particular doctrine system taught by an individual leader, group of leaders, or organization, which (system) denies (either explicitly or implicitly) one or more of the central doctrines of the Christian Faith as taught in the sixty-six books of the Bible.

Source: Alan Gomes, [Unmasking The Cults](#), (Zondervan, 1995). [Quoted here](#).

It should be noted that in addition to [aberrant](#), [unorthodox](#), and/or [heretical](#) doctrines, many - but not all - religious cults also have excessive or abusive sociological characteristics (e.g. authoritarian leadership patterns, strict conformity requirements, manipulative controls, etc.)

» [Extended look at the theological definition.](#)

Types of Cults

Distinctions are made between different types of cults: e.g. destructive cults (which have committed violence, or who advocate violence), vs. so-called "benign" cults (which some consider relatively harmless even though their teachings and practices may be out of step with societal and/or theological norms). There are commercial cults (e.g. the high-pressure, "fake-it-till-you-make-it" groups, the "pay-to-pray" movements, and the "pay-more-to-advance" variety), one-on-one cultic relationships, corporate cults, UFO cults, pseudo-religious cults, pseudo-political cults, etcetera.

To better understand the differences in cultic groups it is helpful to categorize them. [Enroth](#) offers the following classification scheme:

- Eastern Mystical: groups related to Hinduism, Buddhism and other pantheistic Eastern religions; examples in this category are Hare Krishnas and Self-Realization Fellowship.
- Aberrant Christian: groups that claim to be Bible-based but which deviate in practice or belief, such as The Way International, the Boston Church of Christ and the Shepherding Movement.
- Psycho spiritual or Self-Improvement: groups offering seminars or workshops providing self- improvement or personal transformation (a growing cultic trend), includes Transcendental Meditation, Lifespring and The Forum (formerly est).
- Eclectic/Syncretistic: a combination of several religious traditions, includes the Unification Church ("Moonies") and the Church Universal and Triumphant.
- Psychic/Occult/Astral: these groups offer "secret wisdom" and "lost truths;" examples include UFO cults and Edgar Cayce's Association for Research and Enlightenment.
- Established Cults: Bible-based, cultic religious movements which have achieved mainstream status; this would include Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Science.
- Extremist/Political/Social Movements: groups cultic in the psychological or social sense which include the Aryan Nation, White Aryan Resistance and the Ku Klux Klan.
[...more...]

Source: [John Morehead, *What Is A Cult?*; quoting Ron Enroth, *The Lure of the Cults*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1982\), pp. 22-25](#)

Sects

The term "sect," sometimes used instead of "cult," (2) , is similarly ambiguous. It comes from the Late Latin *secta*, which means an "organized church body." That in turn is rooted in the Latin *sequi*, which means "to follow," and is used of "way of life," or "class of persons,"

"Sect" can refer to:

1. a religious denomination
2. a dissenting religious group, formed as the result of schism (division; separation). In this case, the term also borrows from the Latin *sectus*, which means "cut" or "divide."
3. a group adhering to a distinctive doctrine or leader
4. **a** : a dissenting or schismatic religious body; especially : one regarded as extreme or [heretical](#)
b : a religious denomination
5. *[Not Applicable]*
6. **a** : a group adhering to a distinctive doctrine or to a leader
b : PARTY
c : FACTION

Source: [Merriam-Webster Definition](#)

Theologically, *sect* is used of a group which has divided from a larger body or movement - generally over minor differences in doctrine and/or practice - but whose teachings and practices are generally not considered [unorthodox](#), [heretical](#) or cultic (sociologically and/or theologically). (See: [heterodox](#), [suborthodox](#)). However, true to the ambiguous nature of this term, some sects do descend into heretical teachings and/or unorthodox practices. Often sects place unusual, dogmatic emphasis on one or two doctrines or practices. Such an unbalanced (and, often, unhealthy) approach usually leads to the division from the main body in the first place.

Note that in some countries the term *sect* is used instead of - or interchangeably with - *cult*.

Alternative/New Religious Movements; Minority Religions

Some sociologists and [cult-apologists](#) claim the word *cult* has taken on too many negative connotations (for which they tend to blame [anti-cult](#) and [counter-cult](#) movements, the government, [ex-cult members](#), parents and friend of cult-members, and the media - but seldom,

if ever, the movements and people themselves). They therefore advocate replacing the word "cult" with what they consider to be the "value-neutral" (or politically-correct) term [New Religious Movement](#), "Alternative Religious Movement," or "Minority Religion."

However, as Alan Gomes points out

The word *cult* has an established history of usage, long before the secular media or social sciences got hold of it.

Note that historically *cult* has been a *religious* term, not a sociological or psychological one.

The term *cult* suggests an absolute standard of evaluation, which sociology - by its nature - can not provide. It is therefore well suited to describe theological [heterodoxy](#), which is determined by an absolute, objective and unchanging standard.

Source: Alan Gomes, [Unmasking The Cults](#) (Zondervan, 1995)

This last point is especially noxious to those who object to any religion's claims of exclusivity. Under the guise of defending [religious freedom](#), they essentially promote [religious pluralism](#) while denying Christians and non-Christians alike the freedom to critique a movement's teachings and practices.

Anticult; Countercult; "Neutral" ("Value-Free")

- *Anticult* organizations and individuals generally fight cults for reasons other than theological ones.
- *Countercult* organizations and individuals usually oppose cults for religious, doctrinal reasons.
- Self-proclaimed "*value-free*," "*neutral*," or "*non-sectarian*" organizations range from, essentially, consumer protection agencies to cult apologist organizations.

Most countercult organizations operate from an [orthodox](#), [Christian](#) perspective. Their intent is to

- educate Christians and non-Christians on the dangers of [heretical](#) movements (sometimes referred to as "boundary maintenance" - the practice of defining [which doctrines are central/essential](#) to the Christian faith, and must therefore be adhered to in order for a group, movement or person to legitimately refer to itself or himself as "Christian."),
- to help Christians counter the theological claims of such groups (for the purpose of "boundary maintenance" and/or [evangelism](#)),

- and to provide cult-members with information that may help them leave those movements (often, but not always, including a presentation of the Christian gospel) .

Since they operate from different perspectives, anticult and countercult professionals do not always agree on what constitutes a cult. The former evaluate movements using [sociological criteria](#), while the latter do so using [theological standards](#).

Not surprisingly, this sometimes leads to different conclusions. For example, some anti-cultists see [Mormonism](#) as just another form of [Christianity](#), while Christians consider it a [heretical cult of Christianity](#).

Often, though, concerns overlap. For instance, a movement like the [International Churches of Christ](#) is considered cultic by those who evaluate it sociologically, as well as by those who consider theology only.

Note that Christian countercultists are more apt to *also* look at a movement's sociological aspects, whereas non-Christian anticultists are - understandably - not nearly as willing to include theological considerations.

A third group of organizations or individuals claims to provide "value-free," "neutral," or "non-sectarian" information. This is a mixed bag. It includes

- organizations run by [cult apologists](#), who seldom - if ever - acknowledge the sociological and/or theological problems with the movements they study. (If and when they do make note of them, those problems generally are glossed over or minimized). Often, these type of organizations appeal to "academic" standing.
- organizations that attempt to act like "consumer information agencies." They let people know what's available, but tend to refrain from making value judgements. Thus they claim they are as likely to send someone to a cult, as they are to refer someone to an [exit counselor](#).
- [interfaith](#) organizations that affirm the legitimacy and equality of all religions.
- [government task forces](#), or organizations set up on the recommendation of such task forces. Having acknowledged and studied the cult problem, these organizations act much like "consumer protection agencies."

Cult apologist organizations divide the latter into two categories, of which they consider one to be more neutral than the other. They rail against those government task forces that include information from anticult- or countercult organizations in their evaluations, and reluctantly "praise" the ones whose evaluations are, or appear to be, more in line with those of the cult apologists themselves.

Cult Apologists; Anti-Anticult

[Cult apologists](#) are people who defend the teachings and/or actions of one or more movements which many Christian and non-Christian [apologists](#), anti-cult and counter-cult professionals consider to be cults (theologically and/or sociologically). Some are members of the movements they defend. Others claim to promote [religious pluralism](#) or [religious freedom](#). Yet others appear to be opportunists interested in financial benefits. (3)

Cults and cult apologists alike try to bill their cause as a fight for "religious freedom," while failing to acknowledge the spiritual, mental, financial and/or physical slavery cult members are subjected to.

Academic [dishonesty](#) is common among cult apologists. See, for example, their misrepresentation of the controversial - but unsettled - issue of [brainwashing](#), or their vilification of [apostates](#).

Individuals and organizations that oppose the doctrines, methods, and/or goals of [anti-cult](#) and [counter-cult](#) organizations are sometimes called *anti-anticult*. These are not necessarily cult apologists (many are, indeed, also opposed to cults). They simply object to certain practices (e.g. involuntary [deprogramming](#), even though it has long been abandoned in favor of voluntary [exit-counseling](#) or [thought reform counseling](#)), and/or theories (e.g. brainwashing, or - in the case of, for example, Christian ministries - claims of exclusivity).

» [More information on Cult Apologists and their Tactics.](#)

Footnotes

1. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, A Latin Dictionary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1879, impression of 1984), p.370
2. e.g. Many European countries use the term "sect" instead of "cult." Some media outlets also make the substitution.
3. See [Benjamin Zablocki on the funding of NRM research](#)
4. It should be noted that a primary reason why the term "cult" has taken on a negative image is the behavior of various groups identified as "cults." Mass murder and/or suicide (e.g. the [Peoples Temple](#), [Solar Temple](#), [Branch Davidians](#), and [Heaven's Gate](#)), collection of weapons (e.g. [Church Universal and Triumphant](#)), murder (e.g. the murders and gas attacks committed by [Aum Shinrikyo](#)), unethical behavior (such as the hate and harassments activities promoted and committed by the [Scientology](#) organization), coercive tactics such as those known as "[brainwashing](#)" (for which the [Unification Church](#), among others, became known), etcetera, all have contributed to the negative image the term "cult" conveys.

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