

Religion in Five Minutes

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What is the difference between a religion and a cult?

Jason N. Blum

Once upon a time, 'cult' was a legitimate term in the academic study of religion. Originally it referred to the rituals or the organized system of worship within a religion, and as such was perfectly acceptable. These days, however, the term has fallen largely out of use, and with good reason. By the end of the nineteenth century, the term 'cult' began to be applied to a number of diverse, new groups appearing in the landscape of American religions. This trend of the development of new religions continued through the twentieth century, reaching something of a crescendo during the 1960s and 1970s, partially due to the increasing presence of other, 'Eastern' religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism (during roughly the same period, Japan also witnessed a profusion of new religions).

Because these groups—such as the Transcendental Meditation movement, Wicca, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness ('Hare Krishnas'), and the Unification Church—were new, unfamiliar, and stood outside the cultural mainstream of the United States, they were often viewed with varying degrees of suspicion and fear. The presumption that these groups (many of which could be seen as part of the 1960s counterculture) were somehow dangerous was exacerbated by the disapproval of parents

who saw their children adopting unusual customs, clothing, and beliefs when they joined. A number of 'cult awareness' groups formed, sometimes supported by law enforcement officials and psychologists who also viewed these groups as suspect (much of the psychological research that labelled such groups as dangerous has since been discredited). And the media, of course, tended to focus on those groups—such as Jim Jones's People's Temple and Aum Shinrikyo in Japan—that actually did engage in violence. These factors coalesced, resulting in a wide array of innocent groups and individuals being tarnished through association with the minority of 'cults' that actually were dangerous.

It was under these circumstances that the term 'cult' came to be associated in the public imagination with a negative stereotype: that of a small, relatively unknown religious group that was somehow illegitimate (i.e., not a 'real religion') or dangerous. A variety of specific negative associations came to be connected with the word 'cult': the image of a nefarious and manipulative charismatic leader; the 'brainwashing' of members whose individual will and sense of personal identity were erased; illicit sexual and/or financial practices; ominous predictions of an imminent 'doomsday,' etc.

Although some of these groups were involved in illicit practices or sometimes even horrific acts of violence, the majority of 'cults' were harmless; they simply looked 'weird' to non-members because they were marginal or unfamiliar. 'Cult' came to be a four-letter word in more than the literal sense; it was a term of judgment and disapproval, marking a group as at least suspicious and at worst dangerous, while also implying that the group was not a 'real' or 'legitimate' religion. It is because of this negative stereotype that the term has been abandoned by scholars of religion. Scholars of religion study religions as historical phenomena; we do not make judgments about their 'legitimacy' (it is entirely unclear how such judgments could be made, anyway).

Further, consider some of the traits typically associated with 'cults' in the public consciousness: they are often new (although typically drawing on existing religions in multiple ways) and

relatively small in terms of membership; they are socially marginal (i.e., they look 'weird' or 'unusual' from the perspective of mainstream society and established religions); they are led by charismatic individuals who claim some sort of special religious authority or knowledge; they offer a different way of life to their members. Described thus, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism all arguably began as 'cults.' The only difference between today's mainstream religions and those groups that used to be called cults is their relative age, size, and familiarity. Given sufficient time, yesterday's 'cult' could be tomorrow's run-of-the-mill mainstream religion.

Scholars today prefer terms such as 'new religious movement' (NRMs) or 'alternative religious movement' to describe small, new or marginal religions, as they are not freighted with the negative stereotypes attached to the term 'cult.' NRMs are studied with the same techniques and research methods used to study larger, more familiar religions, and scholars do not view NRMs as essentially different in kind from other religions; NRMs are merely smaller and/or newer versions of the same phenomenon.

About the author

Jason N. Blum teaches at Davidson College. His research focuses on theory and method in religious studies, and topics at the intersection of philosophy and religion, particularly the relationship between science and religion, religious experience, and religion, society and ethics.

Suggestions for further reading

In this book

See also Chapters 1 (ubiquity of religion) and 4 (sports as religion).

Elsewhere

Barker, Eileen. *Revisionism and Diversification in New Religious Movement*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.

Bromley, David G. and J. Gordon Melton (editors). *Cults, Religion, and Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Dawson, Lorne L. *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (2nd edition). New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

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