

“Cults” and Globalization: Reflections and Questions

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In my presentation today, I will give an overview of definitions for *cult*. Then I will briefly discuss harm and intervention.

Definitions for *Cult*

A couple of months ago, a media storm occurred after an American evangelical pastor referred to Mitt Romney, a front-running candidate for the leadership of the United States Republican Party, as a member of a cult because of his membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (commonly referred to as Mormons).¹ The pastor later qualified his statement by saying that he viewed the Mormons as a theological cult.

I have often heard the statement, “We all know what a cult is.” In my opinion, however, the belief that we all know what a cult is, is both a presumption and a generalization.

In fact, no one agrees on how to define a cult. For example, in France, a country that has taken an active approach to dealing with cults, the president of MIVILUDES, the French government agency that deals with this issue, recently stated, “There is no legal definition of a cult in France, not more than elsewhere in the world. I don't know any country in the world with a definition for it.”² The many government reports that have focused on cults over more than twenty years confirm this statement.³

The word *cult* may be one of the most confusing terms to use. The word is derived from the French word *culte*, which comes from the Latin noun *cultus*, meaning care, labor; cultivation, culture; worship, reverence... And so by this definition we can apply the term *cult* to any group of religious believers: Southern Baptists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Hindus, or Muslims. However, the term has since been assigned very different meanings. Whereas the original meaning of *cult* is positive, more recent definitions vary from neutral to extremely negative.⁴

In the past two decades, pejorative connotations to the word *cult* have become more common. For many, the term raises images of people lining up for their fatal drink of Kool-Aid⁵ or carrying out brutal acts at the behest of an omnipotent leader.⁶

Lists of so-called cults⁷ have been created, leading to the assumption that all such groups are similar and dangerous. By extension, because a group has not made it to a list does not necessarily imply it does not pose a problem.

At times, I have been criticized for “muddying the waters” with regard to the term *cult*. Some people have expressed frustration when I do not respond with a “yes” or “no” when asked whether or not a certain group is a cult, or whether it is a cult or a religion, or whether or not the group in question is dangerous. After all, they are directing their questions to the executive director of Info-Cult!

Info-Cult's view is that individuals can have a positive experience in a so-called “bad” group or a bad experience in a so-called “good” group. The reality is that groups in our society exist on a continuum, from groups that value the integrity and opinions of each of its members, to high-demand groups that function according to the leader's wishes and

demands. And a variety of factors may influence the experience someone might have in a group, or the impact a group may have on society. Some such factors to consider include

- the general functioning and evolution of a group;
- the relationships among its members;
- the psychological needs and personalities of the members; and
- the leader's influence on the members.

In 2006, I co-authored a book entitled *The Cult Phenomenon: How Groups Function*.⁸ This book examines how Info-Cult has evolved over the years with regard to its view on how groups function, the reasons individuals join such groups, and the nature of the relationship between groups' leaders and their members and society.⁹

I was motivated to write this book, in part, by the thousands of calls Info-cult had received since its inception in 1980. The callers usually were looking for information and used the term *cult* to refer to a wide variety of groups, including the following:

- Religious, political, psychological, and commercial groups in which the leader(s) appear(s) to exert undue influence over followers, usually to the leader's(s') benefit
- Fanatical groups, regardless of whether or not leaders exert a high level of psychological control
- Terrorist organizations, such as Bin Laden's group, which induce some members to commit horrific acts of violence
- Religious groups deemed heretical or socially deviant by the person attaching the *cult* label
- Any unorthodox religious group—benign or destructive
- Communes that may be physically isolated and socially unorthodox
- New Age, psychotherapeutic, "healing" groups that advocate beliefs in a transcendent order, or actions that may occur through mechanisms inconsistent with the laws of physics
- Any group embraced by a family member whose parents, spouses, or other relatives conclude—correctly or incorrectly—that the group is destructive to the involved family member
- Organizations that employ high-pressure sales or recruitment tactics, or both
- Authoritarian social groups in which members exhibit a high level of conformity and compliance to the expectations and demands of leaders
- Extremist organizations that advocate violence, racial separation, bigotry, or overthrow of the government
- Familial relationships in which one member exerts an unusually high and apparently harmful influence over the other member(s)—e.g., certain forms of dysfunctional families or battered women's syndrome¹⁰

If a group is labeled as a cult, we should be asking the following questions: Who labeled the group, and how has that label been designated? What criteria have been used and what research has been undertaken to evaluate the group? And, equally significant, what information does the label provide, for example, about the group's

- beliefs;

- rules and norms;
- history and evolution;
- role of leadership and members;
- views on children, women, and the elderly; and
- interactions with the community at large.

Regardless of the label that we use to describe a group, the fact remains that social dynamics of groups, of any kind, are complex; and we should observe and understand each group individually. At all costs, we should avoid the temptation to lump groups together.

At the same time, it is wise to keep in mind how we use terminology related to the issue of cults and new religious movements—in particular, those terms that promote a dichotomy of good versus evil and do little to contribute to a better understanding of this issue, and to support dialogue among those with differing views.¹¹ Examples of these terms are *anti-cult movement*, *pro-cult movement*, and *cult apologist*. These divisive labels function as “thought-terminating clichés,” to use an expression from Robert Lifton’s seminal book, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*.¹²

Harm

As much as I encourage a nuanced approach to defining the term *cult* and understanding the cult phenomenon in general, I think we would all agree that there are groups that do harm. To quote Michael Langone of the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA): “Some groups may harm some people sometimes, and some groups may be more likely to harm people than other groups.”¹³ I would add that contributing factors include a group’s location, the nature of its leadership, and at what period in its history we are looking at it.

In fact, it has been observed that members of groups can be harmed in different ways, including psychologically, physically, and financially. Following are examples of each:

Psychological Harm

- Denial of affection
- Attacks on self-esteem
- Limited or restricted access to information
- Limited or restricted access to education
- Child neglect
- Dependant-adult neglect
- Elder neglect

Physical Harm

- Physical abuse
- Food and sleep deprivation
- Refusal to provide access to adequate medical treatment
- Sexual abuse

Financial Harm

- Fraud
- Financial demands by the group that threaten the individual’s financial well-being

- Nonremunerated work

Whenever there is an imbalance of power, the potential for abuse in many different relationships, such as the following, exists:

- Parent–child: child abuse
- Husband–wife: spousal abuse
- Professor–student: psychological abuse, sexual abuse
- Therapist–client: psychological abuse, sexual abuse
- Boss–employee: workplace abuse
- Pastor–parishioner: sexual abuse, financial abuse
- Government–citizens: human-rights abuse

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that people in religious, therapeutic, New Age, occult, or other types of groups can be at risk of being harmed.

We need to be prudent, however, because in some cases we can view harm subjectively and assign a meaning that is culture-bound. For example, in Russia some groups are seen as harmful and often described as cults because they are perceived as a threat to the traditional culture and religion; they view certain groups as a form of Western imperialism. Recently, extremism charges were brought against a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, whose publications were alleged to be “extremist literature”, but he was acquitted upon appeal.¹⁴ In contrast, in North America, Jehovah’s Witnesses not only are free to possess their literature, but also are permitted to hand it out on city sidewalks or by going door-to-door.

At the outset of my presentation, I noted what an American evangelical pastor had to say about Mitt Romney. That example illustrates that some groups are labeled *cults* because they deviate theologically from some other group’s(s’) beliefs.¹⁵

Intervention

In determining whether or not a group poses a risk and the nature of the risk, and in making a fair and informed assessment about an individual or a group, it is important to ask the following questions:

1. To what extent have we accepted the accusatory assessments made by certain individuals or groups, without checking the accuracy of the allegations made?
2. Do we ask for documents or other empirical facts in order to make an informed and critical evaluation?
3. Do we readily accept allegations against controversial groups because we believe they are capable of doing what they are accused of?
4. If there are reports about problems associated with a group, how prevalent are the problems?
5. Do we assume that those involved in a controversial group or the group under consideration have not changed over time?
6. Where and how was the information about the group obtained? How representative is the information, and, depending on the source, what other factors should we be considering?
7. What evidence is there for determining whether the information is accurate?

8. Did the information come from current members, former members, families with a loved one involved, or from professionals/other experts?
9. Has anyone attempted to establish a contact with the individual or group?
10. Have we informed ourselves about what is happening in the group: its origins, its doctrine, its leader(s), the leader's(s') role, and the motivations and experiences of the members?

After we have evaluated a particular group, we must be open to the possibility that there may be insufficient facts to support any intervention. This conclusion may lead to a decision either to monitor the situation or to take a wait-and-see approach. We also should consider the simple fact that it may be a case of smoke and no fire.

If an intervention by agencies of the state is warranted, the following questions can help us in coming to a decision about a suitable course of action. These questions can also be helpful for families who are dealing with a loved one involved in a group.

1. What do we hope to achieve in intervening? Have the motives and objectives been clearly and precisely established?
2. What strategies can we take to reach our goal?
3. What are the pros and cons of adopting a particular approach (with a focus on the cons)?
4. What are the criteria for evaluating whether or not an intervention is successful? For example, is the approach making things worse? And if so, how could it be modified?

There are other considerations to keep in mind:

- Laws in different countries require that certain professionals are legally and ethically bound to report to protective services when there is even a suspicion of harm to a child, a senior, or to a dependent adult.
- What appears to function in one country may not be applicable in other countries because of factors such as each country's history, culture, laws, relationship with religion, and past experience with cultic or totalistic movements.¹⁶
- Governments have at their disposition an enormous amount of power and, in dealing with any group, should be extremely cautious in wielding that power. Unless there is a serious and legal reason, the state should show restraint.
- Different situations may call for different criteria to determine whether or not an intervention is appropriate and feasible. For example, should a family intervene when they have a loved one in a group they perceive to be harmful? Should state authorities intervene to control certain cultic groups?

In closing, I have raised a number of questions in this presentation that I and others have asked over the years, and I would be very interested in what you have to say. Thank you.

Notes

1. *Anderson Cooper 360°*, CNN, October 8, 2011 (<http://www.mediaite.com/tv/anti-mormon-pastor-to-anderson-cooper-romney-may-belong-to-a-cult-but-he-is-better-than-obama/>).

2. *France 3*, Sun, July 3, 2011, with guest George Fenech, English translation (<http://www.sott.net/articles/show/235545-Georges-Fenech-of-MIVILUDES-Nemesis-of-the-Scientific-Method>).

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3. Mike Kropveld and Marie-Andrée Pelland, *The Cult Phenomenon: How Groups Function*, Info-Cult (2006). See Appendix 6: Governments and the Cult Phenomenon, p. 165–168 (<http://infosect.freeshell.org/infocult/phenomene/English/HTML/doc0018.htm#R248>).
 4. Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance (<http://www.religioustolerance.org/cults.htm>).
 5. Refers to the manner in which the members of Peoples Temple died in a mass murder/suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, November 18, 1978. Marshall Kilduff and Ron Javers, *The Suicide Cult: The Inside Story of the Peoples Temple Sect and the Massacre in Guyana*, Bantam Books (1978). Mary McCormick Maaga, *Hearing The Voices of Jonestown*, Syracuse University Press (1998).
 6. Two examples that are especially significant in the province of Quebec where I reside are 1) The Order of the Solar Temple, in which more than seventy people died in three countries, in murder and ritual collective suicides operated in the province of Quebec. The murder/suicides were precipitated by the murder in September 1994 in Morin Heights, a village outside of Montreal, of a husband and wife and their three-month-old baby, who had tried to escape from group. 2) The group led by Roch "Moses" Theriault had a history of physical and sexual abuse of its members, including the murder by Roch Theriault of one of its members.
 7. For example, see the following: 1) France—"Les Sectes en France" Rapport Fait au Nom de la Commission D'Enquête sur les Sectes (le 22 décembre 1995) (<http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/rap-enq/r2468.asp>). 2) Belgium—Chambre des Représentants de Belgique: *ENQUETE PARLEMENTAIRE visant à élaborer une politique en vue de lutter contre les pratiques illégales des sectes et le danger qu'elles représentent pour la société et pour les personnes, particulièrement les mineurs d'âge*. (28 avril 1997); Partie I (<http://www.lachambre.be/FLWB/pdf/49/0313/49K0313007.pdf>); Partie II (<http://www.lachambre.be/FLWB/pdf/49/0313/49K0313008.pdf>).
 8. Mike Kropveld and Marie-Andrée Pelland (see Note 3).
 9. See Note 3. See also Mike Kropveld, "Governments and Cults." Presentation given at the INFORM/CESNUR conference, *Twenty Years and More: Research into Minority Religions, New Religious Movements and 'the New Spirituality.'* London, England (2008) (http://infosect.freeshell.org/infocult/kropveld_inform2008.pdf).
 10. Adapted from "The Definitional Ambiguity of "Cult" and ICSA's Mission," Michael D. Langone, PhD (http://cultmediation.com/infoserv_articles/langone_michael_definitional_ambiguityofcult.asp).
 11. Michael Kropveld, "An Example for Controversy: Creating a Model for Reconciliation," *Cultic Studies Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2003, p. 130–150. Accessible at <http://infosect.freeshell.org/infocult/ControversyCSR.doc>
 12. Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China*, W. W. Norton and Company (1961).
 13. Michael Langone, *Cultic Studies Journal*, Vol. 18, 2001, p. 1.
 14. A previous version of this paper, presented in Bangkok, indicated that the arrested member was sentenced to 2 years in prison. This information came from the article in *Asia News*, "Jehovah's Witness gets two years in prison for possession of 'extremist literature'" (<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Jehovah%E2%80%99s-Witness-gets-two-years-in-prison-for-possession-of-%E2%80%9Cextremist-literature%E2%80%9D-19529.html>). I could find no other reference to that information, and other reports indicate that the arrested member was sentenced to 100 hours of community service. Sophia Kishkovsky, "Russian Terror Law Has Unlikely Targets," *The New York Times*, November 3, 2011 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/04/world/europe/russian-terror-law-has-unlikely-targets.html>). "Russian court finds Jehovah's Witness guilty of inciting hatred," Amnesty International, 3 November 2011 (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/russian-court-finds-jehovahs-witness-guilty-inciting-hatred-2011-11-03>). "RUSSIA: One acquittal, but the same day trial of two more begins", Forum 18 (http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1653).
 15. "Counter-cult" groups are composed primarily of conservative Protestant Christians who label groups as cults for having unorthodox or heretical beliefs according to their interpretation of the Bible. Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance (<http://www.religioustolerance.org/ccm.htm>).

16. For more details, see the following: 1) Mike Kropveld and Marie-Andrée Pelland (see Note 3), and 2) Mike Kropveld, "A Comparison of Different Countries' Approaches to Cult-Related Issues." Paper presented at the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sectarianism (FECRIS) Conference, *Cults and Esotericism: New Challenges for Civil Societies in Europe* (Hamburg, April 28, 2007) (<http://infosect.freeshell.org/infocult/HamburgpresentationFECRISFinal-web.pdf>).

About the Author

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