

Appendix 2: Definition of “Cult” and “New Religious Movement”

This Appendix presents definitions of the term “cult” and the expression “new religious movement.”

Definition of cult

Origin of the word cult

The word cult comes from the Latin word *cultus*, which is a form of the verb *colere* and the French word *culte* meaning “to worship or give reference to a deity.”

“Cult” as defined by Weber²²⁶

In a cult, members freely join the group. The rules and norms are validated by the group’s followers, rather than being imposed by a group of leaders through a power structure. The cult comes together in opposition to a religious organization.

“Cult” as defined by Troeltsch²²⁷

A cult is a group that is often created on the fringes of the Church. The cult is born out of an opposition to established ecclesiastical practices. Cults often emerge at times of reform within the Church.

“Cult” as defined by Wilson²²⁸

A cult is a group of people in opposition to another clerical group.

Individuals aspiring to join a cult must participate actively before being accepted as a member of the group.

A “destructive cult” as defined by Abgrall²²⁹

Abgrall distinguishes between “cults” and “destructive cults.”

A cult is a group of individuals that unites around a shared ideology and whose social development takes place under a veil of secrecy. It does not pose any danger to its members.

²²⁶ M. Weber, *General Economic History* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1927).

²²⁷ E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of Christian Churches*, Vol. 2 (New York: MacMillan, 1931).

²²⁸ B.R. Wilson, *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

²²⁹ J.M. Abgrall (1996), *op.cit.*

A cult becomes dangerous to an individual when it employs manipulative techniques to ensure ongoing membership. In this case, a group initially considered inoffensive can, through the course of its development, become a dangerous and coercive cult.

Historical study of the use of the term “cult” by Isser²³⁰

Isser provided an historical and comparative portrait of cults, making a distinction between sects and cults. She notes that “sects” are separate groups that exist in opposition to a majority religious group as well as to their social environment.

She argues that “cults” are groups led by a charismatic leader who often claims to be divine and omniscient. These groups generally reject a previous lifestyle by extolling the adoption of new existential principles. The group’s daily life is organized on the basis of the needs and demands of the leader. According to Isser, the leader manipulates his or her followers to satisfy his or her needs. Isser argues that this second type of group poses a greater danger to the physical or psychological well-being of its members.

American Family Foundation (AFF) and the use of the term “cult”

The AFF (presently known as the International Cultic Studies Association, ICSA), a professional organization founded over 20 years ago, argues that the public uses the term “cult,” properly or improperly, to refer to a wide variety of phenomena,²³¹ including the following:

- Religious, political, psychological or commercial groups in which the leader appears to exert undue influence over followers, usually to the leader’s benefit;
- Fanatical religious and political groups, regardless of whether or not the leaders exert a high level of psychological control;

²³⁰ N. Isser, “Why Cultic Groups Develop and Flourish: A Historian’s Perspective,” *Cultic Studies Journal*, 8, no. 2 (1991), pp. 104-121.

Note on the use of the term “sect” in English and French: In the English literature, two terms are often used when discussing the cult phenomenon, namely “sect” and “cult.” In French, the term “secte” is used to describe “an organized group of followers sharing the same elitist belief, that tends to be closed to the outside world, and led by a charismatic leader or a hierarchical, centralized and authoritarian administration, with religious, political, economic or other intentions” [translation] (*Le grand dictionnaire terminologique*, <http://www.granddictionnaire.com>). In English, however, the term “sect” is used to describe a religious splinter group, particularly one that is regarded as extreme or heretical or as a religious denomination or a group that follows a doctrine or leader. The term “cult” is used to describe 1. formal religious veneration; 2. a system of religious beliefs and ritual; 3. a religion regarded as unorthodox (www.m-w.com). In French, the term “culte” is used to describe “adoration, attachment, devotion and veneration” [translation] (*Le petit Robert*, pp 610 (2002). The term “cult” in English and the term “secte” in French are often used the same way.

²³¹ For AFF’s use of the term cult, see: http://www.csj.org/infoserv_cult101/essay_cult.htm; and for their discussion of the ambiguity of the concept of cult, see: (Accessed April 7, 2005) http://www.csj.org/infoserv_cult101/aff_termdefambiguity.htm.

- Terrorist organizations, which induce individuals to commit acts of extreme violence;
- Religious groups deemed heretical or unorthodox by an observer of this group or its members;
- Non-traditional religious groups, benign or destructive;
- Physically isolated communes;
- A group in which a relative, friend or spouse participates that is perceived (correctly or incorrectly) by loved ones as destructive to the individual;
- Groups that use aggressive sales and recruitment techniques;
- Authoritarian social groups in which members exhibit a high degree of conformity and submission to the leader’s demands;
- Extremist groups that advocate violence, racial separation bigotry or the overthrow of the government;
- Familial or dyadic relationships in which one member wields a high and apparently harmful degree of influence over the other members, for example, certain forms of dysfunctional families or battered women’s syndrome.

The AFF argues that in light of the wide range of meanings the public attributes to the term “cult,” they suggest three choices exist with respect to how the term could be used:

- Pretend that the term “cult” is more precise than it actually is, thereby inviting misuse of the concept to which the term refers;
- So narrowly define the term that it becomes useless in a practical sense;
- Strive for a practical level of precision while acknowledging the unavoidable ambiguity in our terminology.

The AFF points out that it would be difficult to eliminate the term “cult” given its frequent use in popular language. Consequently, it suggests using it judiciously while acknowledging its ambiguity.

Definition of “new religious movement”

“New religious movement” as defined by Wilson²³²

The expression new religious movement refers to all new spiritual groups that have emerged since the end of the Second World War.

²³² B. Wilson (1992); B. Wilson, “Introduction,” in B. Wilson and J. Cresswell, *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 5-21.

Three different types of religious organizations according to Melton²³³

Primary groups are small groups that allow members to have a direct relationship with the leader and with each other. It gives members an opportunity to regularly venerate the leader. This group guides members throughout their life cycle and assists them in marriage, spousal relations, childbirth, death and so on. When the number of members increases, these groups tend to create sub-groups.

Secondary groups offer a set of limited religious functions such as education, social service and social action. They do not offer the complete range of services provided by primary groups.

Tertiary groups are groups of organizations. They organize dialogue among primary groups, for example, the World Council of Churches.

²³³ J.G. Melton (1995), op.cit.