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THE PRACTICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN LABELING  
A RELIGIOUS GROUP AS A 'CULT'

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**Abstract:** In American, the terms “schism,” “heresy,” “sect,” and “cult” have been used to describe splinter groups as they distinguish themselves from the majority religion. The term *cult* has been used in two different senses. Within the Roman Catholic Church a group’s devotion to a particular saint may earn them the title “Cult of” that particular saint. However, among contemporary American Protestants the term cult has come to be applied to religious groups that split from mainstream Christianity with regard to their beliefs and behavior to the degree that the groups are considered dangerous to themselves and society. When it comes to defining what a cult is, only about ten percent of the attention is placed on a cult’s beliefs and ninety percent is placed on a cult’s behavior. In fact, there seems to be a general squeamishness about using the term cult in the first place. There are several reasons for this malaise toward the term, but this article will argue that the term cult can and should be used in general and scholarly contexts.

**Key Words:** Cult, schism, heresy, sect, American religion, religious history, ethical considerations

## Introduction

Religious history is filled with examples of splinter groups springing from the majority religions of their day.<sup>1</sup> Some splinter groups remain within the walls of their parent religion, spurring on helpful conversations about the beliefs and/or behaviors of the denomination. Some depart altogether, forming their own separate communities. There are three types of reactions a parent religion may have toward their splinter group. First is the dead branch approach, wherein the splinter group is ignored as useless and harmless to the parent religion.<sup>2</sup> Second is the reconciliation approach, wherein the parent religion actively seeks to reclaim their prodigal sons.<sup>3</sup> Third is the destructive approach, wherein the parent religion sees the beliefs and/or behavior of the splinter group as dangerous and needing to be stopped for their own good and for the good of society.<sup>4</sup> These three types of reactions have been exercised in all contexts of religious history,

In American churches, the terms “schism,” “heresy,” “sect,” and “cult” have been used to describe these splinter groups as they distinguish themselves from the majority religion. A *schism* refers to a larger split in the church such as that between the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic branches of the early church. Historian Everett Ferguson distinguishes between *heresy* and *schism* by assigning deviant beliefs to the former and deviant behavior to the latter.<sup>5</sup> *Heretics* were generally regarded as neighbors to the true church, while those belonging to a *sect* might still have been living in the church’s back yard.<sup>6</sup> The term *cult* has been used in two different senses. Within the Roman Catholic Church a group’s devotion to a particular saint may earn them the title “Cult of” that particular saint. However, among American Protestants today, the term *cult* has come to be applied to religious groups that split from mainstream Christianity with regard to their beliefs and behavior to the degree that the groups are considered dangerous to themselves and society. The Protestant sense of this term will be the focus of this article.

Since the early work of Walter Martin nearly fifty years ago, there has been a tremendous amount of scholarly research done in the field of cults. One of the primary tasks of that research has been to define what a cult is by its deviancy from the norms of Christian belief and behavior. It may seem surprising that in this field of research, when it comes to defining what a cult is, only about ten percent of the attention is placed on a cult’s beliefs and ninety percent is placed on a cult’s behavior.<sup>7</sup> It appears that American cult scholars are more comfortable identifying the deviant *behavior* of cults than deviant *beliefs*. This may be a reflection of the theological relativism of its postmodern society.

Another imprint of postmodernism on recent cult scholarship is a squeamishness about using the term *cult* in the first place.<sup>8</sup> Some argue

that the term cult should not be used because it is negative and judgmental.<sup>9</sup> Others argue that the term cult should not be used because of the similarities between cultists and Christians with regard to beliefs and behaviors.<sup>10</sup> However, while such concerns may be helpful in a narrow context such as one Christian having an evangelistic dialog with one cult member, the use of the term cult is entirely appropriate in general contexts that impact research and society as a whole. The thesis of this article is that the term cult can and should be used in general and scholarly contexts; but wise, Spirit-led discernment may call for the use of different terms in personal contexts.

Christians ought to consider two of their most important goals when choosing when to use or not to use the term cult. One goal is to proclaim the truth clearly.<sup>11</sup> If using the term cult will help convey the truth more clearly than other terms would, then it should be used.<sup>12</sup> The use or non-use of the term cult will naturally flow from a Christian's attempt to prioritize the proclamation of truth.

Another goal is to facilitate people's pursuit of God. Truth comes from God, and therefore truth leads people to God.<sup>13</sup> Especially in personal contexts Christians ought to consider the individual's thought process when choosing to use or not use the term "cult." When presenting the Gospel to one (or just a few) cult members, it would be wise for Christians to focus on one belief or behavior at a time rather than make sweeping generalizations about cults. Each cult member is an individual, and while Christians should not ignore the tendencies of the cult when dealing with the individual, it is imperative to treat each person as an individual. The harvest is gleaned one plant at a time.

### **What Distinguishes a Cult from a Non-Cult?**

Plenty of work has already been done to define the term "cult" and to distinguish cults from non-cults. Some of this work focuses on the *beliefs* of the cults, but most focuses on the *behaviors* of the cults. As one might suspect, the major academic books published in the United States on cults in general do use the term "cult." Some use the term merely to describe a certain set of religious groups; while others use the term to condemn deviant beliefs and behavior.

### ***Tendencies in the Beliefs of Cults***

There are certain tendencies which are present in most religious groups that are considered cults.<sup>14</sup> One area of theology that receives immediate notice is their view of authority and revelation. The typical cult will decrease their perception of the authority of the Bible and increase their perception of the authority of the revelations their founders and his

or her successors receive.<sup>15</sup> Cults that spring from Christianity tend to relegate the authority of the Bible to a lower position than the revelation received by their founder and his or her successors. These revelations are quickly and permanently codified in books that replace the authority of the Bible.<sup>16</sup> In doing so they take the position the Old Testament prophet once had. Other areas of theology which receive notice are their beliefs related to (1) the Person and work of Jesus Christ, (2) salvation by works, and (3) the authority of the cult founder and his or her successors.<sup>17</sup> The position of the cult founder tends to rival that of Jesus in general or to the cult in particular. Cult founders tend to receive honor, praise, and obedience that should be given to God alone. The effectiveness of the work of Jesus also tends to be minimized to make room for obedience to the founder and his or her rules. Faith in Jesus is often replaced by loyalty to the founder and to the cult. The cult's founder and his or her successors tend to exercise absolute authority over the church, and questioning their authority is tantamount to the "unpardonable sin." When these things are done, the person and work of Jesus are robbed of their dignity, and cult members' focus is turned away from Jesus toward the founder of the cult and his or her successors.

Notice that there are two themes running through these doctrinal tendencies: the founder's struggle with pride and quest for power. Notice also that falsehood is a primary means by which these two themes are actualized. These were, are, and will be the specific pitfalls of Satan himself and the tendency of the most violent of sinners throughout human history.<sup>18</sup> A person's struggle with pride and quest for power are behind a great majority of the sins of humankind.

### ***Tendencies in the Behavior of Cults***

Just as pride, power, and dishonesty run through the doctrinal tendencies of cults, so also do they run through the behavioral or social tendencies of cults. This can be seen in the rules and behavior that increase the founder's authority and decrease the critical thinking and freedom of choice among the members.

Getting a cult up and running in the first place requires tremendous zeal and strong leadership abilities. It is no small task to begin a cult in a society that is poised to reject any attempt at devious beliefs or behavior from a minority religious group. It makes sense that those who found cults would necessarily possess an extraordinary amount of zeal and leadership ability. Terms used in anti-cult resources for these founders include: "authoritarian," "antagonistic," "charismatic," "charlatan," "controlling," "corrupt," "dogmatic," "dominant," "exclusivistic," "intimidating," "intolerant," "kingly," "living godhead," "manipulative," "madman," "messianic," "overwhelming," "prophetic," "powerful," "totalitarian," and "transcendent."<sup>19</sup> While there is nothing ethically wrong in being a zealous

person with strong leadership abilities, there is well-placed concern among American Christians when such a leader pulls the crown of honor and authority away from Jesus and places it on his or her own head. Paul encouraged the Corinthian Christians to imitate him as he was an imitator of Christ.<sup>20</sup> To be sure, Christians indeed should follow the teachings and behavioral example of their godly leaders, but the ultimate purpose of this practice is to follow Jesus—not the leaders who guide people toward Jesus. Herein lies the distinction between cult leaders and those who are godly leaders in Christian churches.

In order to perpetuate the power of the founders of cults, members are strongly encouraged to follow the founders and their teachings. The founders and their teachings functionally replace the person of Jesus and the authority of the Bible respectively. Members are therefore bullied into obeying a founder's every rule.<sup>21</sup> They are discouraged from critical thinking and the exercise of their free will that would question the founder's authority or teachings.<sup>22</sup> This leads to their isolation from the outside world, spurring on communal living arrangements and fences, of the literal or non-literal type, being erected around the cult's compound.<sup>23</sup> If there is any self-perceived value among cult members, it is usually measured in terms of loyalty to the founder and the group.<sup>24</sup> In other words, cult members are taught, some might even claim brainwashed or manipulated, into a loyalty to the founder and his or her teachings that replace their loyalty to Jesus and the Bible.

There is also a sense of dishonesty seen in cult founders and those who defend them. Sometimes it is overt, but sometimes it is so nuanced that it is only detectable to those who are truly discerning.<sup>25</sup> While claiming to know and defend the truth, lies are all too often used as means to this end. Secrecy can be another form of dishonesty. In the case of Jehovah's Witnesses there is a secret nature to the authorship of the works published by the Watchtower and Tract Society. Higher academic scholarship demands citation of sources especially when very specific or questionable claims are made. This guards the academic integrity of the author's work. Without the ability to interact critically with the authors of the works published by the Watchtower and Tract Society, there is a practical form of academic dishonesty involved. Sometimes dishonesty takes the form of historical revisionism wherein the cults leave out the embarrassing or logically impossible details of the lives and claims of their founders.<sup>26</sup> Many cults have secretive practices that are more available to the inner circle and less available to the outer circles of the cult and especially to those outside of the cult altogether.<sup>27</sup>

As was the case with the deviant doctrines of the cults, so it is with their deviant behavior. The founders struggle with pride, a quest for power, and a willingness to lie in more or less obvious ways. Again, these are reflective of the path Satan himself walked down and the path all too

many people follow when they let their sinful nature rule over their minds and hearts.

### **The Propriety of Using the Term “Cult”**

Historically speaking, the term “cult” has been used since the earliest recorded religious history. The modern usage of the term in the United States, however, has taken on a distinctively pejorative tone.<sup>28</sup> Those who themselves are involved in cults tend not to promote studies of the term and the applicability of its usage. Anti-cult groups, however, use the term to make people aware of a group that is dangerous to members, potential members, or society as a whole.<sup>29</sup> Once a group is identified as a cult there is as strong of a tendency among anti-cult groups to form *negative* biases against that group as there is for the cults themselves to form *positive* biases in favor of the group.<sup>30</sup> Both sides, then, are tempted to think in generalized terms that ignore particulars of each group or cult member.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Judging Others***

In recent years a controversy in the United States has developed around the modern use of the term “cult” in the first place. It has been suggested by some that the term should not be used because no one group has the right to judge another.<sup>32</sup> Religious pluralism is one of the hallmarks of postmodernism. In a theologically relativistic society, it is believed that one group should never have the right to label groups different from themselves as cults. Every group should be tolerant of others.

One thing that clearly distinguishes the true church from other groups is the church’s recognition of the Bible as the Word of God. Christians rely on the Bible’s authority supremely because they rely on God supremely as the infinitely perfect source of all truth. Throughout its pages the Bible shows examples of God and His people caring enough about the truth to teach it clearly and live it genuinely. From the narrative of the Garden of Eden to that of the Great White Throne Judgment, God is consumed with the truth and its resulting behavior. Narratives of the Old Testament demonstrate God’s blessing of truth and righteousness and His correcting and punishing of falsehood and unrighteousness. Mosaic Laws clearly outline what behavior is expected of God’s people with frequent explanations of the true doctrine that undergirds the righteous behavior. Poems, proverbs, and prophecies distinguish between true and false, between right and wrong, and between rewards and punishments in this life as well as in the life to come. The words of Jesus Himself in the Gospels teach what is true and right and condemn that which is wrong. His conversations with the scribes and Pharisees and His clearing out the sinful moneychangers from the Temple would suffice as clear examples of

His passion for truth and righteousness and confronting those who taught falsehood or practiced unrighteousness. Jesus was no pluralist, nor were His Apostles, as can be seen from their teaching the truth and proper behavior while directly and indirectly confronting falsehood and sin. Most every place one turns in the Bible, one will find God and His people upholding truth and righteousness and correcting and punishing falsehood and unrighteousness.<sup>33</sup> The suggestion by theological and moral relativists that Christians should not confront falsehood and sin—even when found in other religious groups, cults or non-cults, not only flies in the face of the clear and consistent testimony of the Bible, but non-confrontation would be exactly what Satan would want to facilitate his own attempts at building a rival kingdom on the earth.<sup>34</sup>

Those who suggest Christians should not judge others are likely thinking about Jesus' own words in Matt 7:1, where He taught, "Do not judge, so that you will not be judged" (NASB). He went on to explain that those who would judge others have their own things worthy of judgment to deal with before they would judge others (vv. 2-5). However, He was not advocating that Christians should turn a blind eye to those who would lead people toward falsehood and sin. Several verses later in the same portion of that sermon, He warned, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (v. 15). He went on to distinguish between two types of judgment (vv. 16-20). First is an earthly discernment Christians should have regarding who a person is by recognizing the fruit they bear in their behavior. In other words a false teacher will bear the fruit of false teaching. Second is a heavenly judgment that will impact the eternal destiny of those who have only a nominal relationship with Jesus Himself, the only righteous Judge of all people. He alone will recognize those who have a genuine relationship with Him and conversely, those who do not. It is not for Christians to judge in the latter sense; this task belongs to Jesus alone. It is, however, vital for Christians to judge in the former sense in order to protect the church from false teachers and the fruit they bear.

### ***Similarities between the Cults and the True Church***

Not every thought and action of people involved in cults will be entirely dissimilar to those of outsiders. As a matter of fact, unless cult members dress in a distinctive manner or wear signs that say "cult member" on them, society would be hard-pressed to notice any distinctions between cult members and non-cult members in their daily, public lives.

The American cults that are the focus of Christians today normally sprang out of existing Christian churches in the past. This means that there are many areas of theology that were left intact even after the cult formed its own group. While much is made of cults' claims that they, and

only they, possess the truth, evangelical Christian churches also believe they possess the truth. Both have exclusivistic truth claims—just as most major world religions throughout human history have had. There seem to be many beliefs and ways of thinking that both cults and non-cults share in common.

There is also a degree of commonality between the way that cults and (at least some) Christians behave. For example, plenty of churches have leaders who are zealous and have strong leadership capabilities. Some of these zealous, capable leaders may even struggle with pride and power. Christians do well to avoid overemphasizing their church's pastor or founder and underemphasizing Jesus. Yet some churches have this same struggle.

Another example is the similarity between the rhetoric of Christian evangelism and that of cult recruitment.<sup>35</sup> Both feature well-polished arguments of why their religious views are correct, but others' views are incorrect. Both warn of the eternal consequences of not believing what each teaches. Both are sensitive to the needs and thought process potential members go through in deciding to join a religious group. Both have also been accused by outsiders of brainwashing their members. Both have engaged in a degree of historical revisionism that paints their groups in the most positive of lights, usually ignoring any struggles along the way related to incorrect beliefs or behavior. When this type of revisionism is pointed outward, it results in exaggerations of how persecuted the group has been or how incorrect other groups' beliefs and behavior have been. Annabelle Mooney, in her *Rhetoric of Religious "Cults": Terms of Use and Abuse*, gives extensive evidence of how parallel cult rhetoric is to that of non-cult groups. She even did a case study involving a management recruitment firm that paralleled the behavior of cults in their recruitment and retention that would rival that of any cult today.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, there have been many similarities between the rhetoric of cults and non-cultic groups.

A third example of similarities between cults and non-cultic groups is the amount of self-sacrifice members must engage in, in order to be successful members of their group.<sup>37</sup> Frequent exhortations to take up their crosses daily and follow Jesus can be heard in churches around the world. Christians are asked to give sacrificially from all of their resources—not just their money. Guilt and duty are frequently employed to stretch Christians farther than had they not joined their churches. However, most businesses reflect these same ideas too. If an employee wants to succeed in the work place, they may have to relocate, take a pay cut, spend more time at work, and treat other companies like enemies. Churches and companies both ask their people to make sacrifices to succeed, which is an important feature of cults as well.

Mooney has taken the position that since there are similarities between cults and non-cultic groups, the term "cult" should stop being



used altogether and be erased from the English language.<sup>38</sup> There are a couple of things to be admired about this position. First, anti-cult groups should acknowledge that there are indeed similarities between cults and non-cultic groups with regard to beliefs and behavior. If a church is making one or more of the same mistakes that cults make, then it behooves the church to identify and rectify these mistakes. If a cult and a church both want to help feed the hungry in their neighborhood, then let them work together to do so. Painting a generally negative picture about all things related to a cult may be embarrassing if the cult responds, “But we feed the hungry too.”

A second thing to be admired about Mooney’s position is that the term “cult” can be unhelpful to use at times. When having a one-on-one evangelistic conversation with a cult member, it is usually not wise to use (or at least over-use) the term cult.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, if a Christian is on a soccer team with a cult member it would be out of place to introduce the cult member as a cult member to everyone on the field. There are times when mentioning the term seems unhelpful or out of place. It could even backfire and cause the opposite results of what the Christian intends.

While there are things to be admired about Mooney’s position, there are also things about it that should be challenged. First, it presents a logical dilemma. If one can say that the similarities between two groups require *never* using distinctive labels, then one can also say that the differences between two groups require *always* using distinctive labels. In other words, if Christians must never refer to cults as cults because of the similarities between the two groups, then logically it would follow that Christians must always refer to cults as cults because of the differences between the two groups. The suggestion that the term “cult” should never be used is equally as logically absurd as suggesting that the term “cult” should always be used.

Second, it is impractical not to use distinctive labels when discussing the differences between two groups—even when the distinction is a moral one. When a moral distinction is made between abusive religious leaders and non-abusive religious leaders, the term “abusive religious leaders” is helpful and appropriate. When a moral distinction is made between a group guilty of brainwashing and a group that is not guilty of brainwashing, the term “brainwashing” is helpful and appropriate. The same is true of theological distinctions. When a theological distinction is made between Trinitarians and non-Trinitarians, the term “non-Trinitarian” is helpful and appropriate. When a theological distinction is made between theists and atheists, the term “atheist” is helpful and appropriate. In the same manner of thinking, when a distinction is made between one group normally labeled as a cult because of their beliefs and behaviors and another group normally not labeled as a cult because of their difference with respect to these beliefs and behaviors, the term “cult” is helpful and appropriate. There are contexts in which the use of

the term “cult” seems helpful and appropriate. For example, even Mooney, who advocates the erasure of the term, uses it extensively in her academic treatment of the subject.<sup>40</sup>

### **Alternative Terms**

A handful of terms have been suggested to replace the term cult in modern treatments of these groups. One term is “non-orthodox.”<sup>41</sup> The term “orthodox” carries with it the idea that there is a certain standard of beliefs and behaviors, and anyone who departs from the standard has engaged in deviant beliefs or behaviors. When the eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire split, churches on the eastern half of the empire began referring to themselves as the Orthodox Church, stating that departure from the agreed-upon standards of faith and practice placed one outside of the boundaries of the church. While the term “non-orthodox” does imply a departure from understood norms, it does not effectively communicate the idea of falsehood enough, and it does not communicate the idea of danger at all.

Another term is “pseudo-Christian.”<sup>42</sup> Kenneth Boa feels comfortable using the term “cult,” but he also offers this alternative. The term “pseudo-Christian” does well to imply the Christian heritage of cults. It also accurately reflects the fact that cults frequently try to represent themselves as the true heirs of the Christian church despite orthodox claims to the contrary. While this is probably the best candidate among the alternative terms available, there is one thing it lacks. The term “cult” seems to imply an almost addictive character. Cults are often accused of brainwashing and manipulation—even when used outside of the religious context.<sup>43</sup> However, the term “pseudo-Christian” does not seem to carry this connotation as well as does the term “cult” in modern American parlance.

A trendy new term among sociologists is “new religious movements” or “NRMs.”<sup>44</sup> On the one hand this term sounds likeable because it identifies a key argument anti-cult groups use against many cults—that something new is to be feared, whereas that which has passed the test of time is more reliable.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, this term suggests that NRMs are necessarily new. While many cults are new, many are not. The use of this term echoes a desire among sociologists to find new categories for cults that have endured a generation or more beyond their founder’s death. Cults that have continued to grow rapidly in the United States well into the twenty-first century, such as Mormonism and Jehovah’s Witnesses have bent the ear of sociologists to plead the case of being considered among the majority world religions.<sup>46</sup> They do present an interesting dilemma, especially when they point to examples such as Islam, which bears many similarities to modern cults.<sup>47</sup> This seems to pressure Americans either to refer to Roman Catholicism as a cult or to

refer to older, larger cults as religions.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, religious groups need not be new to fit the description of a cult. There may be wisdom in using these alternative terms or a handful of others when the situation warrants, but the term cult is better suited to refer to a specific religious group with the belief and behavioral tendencies mentioned throughout this article.

## Conclusion

In the final analysis, the idea that *there are no contexts in which it would be appropriate to use the term “cult”* should be rejected.<sup>49</sup> There are many different terms that can be used to distinguish one set of religious groups from another. Consider, as an example, Lutherans and Baptists. Although they bear many similarities to one another, they are also different in certain ways. The terms “Lutheran” and “Baptist” are helpful and appropriate when addressing these distinctions. If a Lutheran believes Baptists to be wrong in matters that distinguish the two, then the term “Baptist” would have a somewhat pejorative meaning. When Christians wish to distinguish between themselves and cults, they also use the pejorative term “cult.” The biblical example of standing *for* what is right about beliefs and behaviors and *against* what is wrong allows for the use of pejorative terms. Jesus Himself referred to a certain group of scribes and Pharisees as “hypocrites,” “blind guides,” “whitewashed tombs,” “murderers,” and a “brood of vipers.”<sup>50</sup> The term “cult” is not nearly as offensive to our politically-correct culture as the terms Jesus used when He confronted that group of scribes and Pharisees.<sup>51</sup> It would seem, therefore, that if “cult” is the best term to use to highlight distinctions between cults and non-cults, it can be used—even if it has a pejorative tone.

Those who caution Christians and others about using the term too frequently or frivolously, however, have raised legitimate concerns. For example, when it comes to one-on-one evangelism with a cult member, it would be wiser to focus on the person as an individual, specific beliefs that are incorrect, and specific behaviors that are improper or even dangerous.<sup>52</sup> When Jesus met with Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee, Jesus corrected Nicodemus’s incorrect and sub-par understanding of the doctrine of salvation.<sup>53</sup> He did not use the terms employed in Matt 23 against those Pharisees; rather, the tone of His conversation with Nicodemus was more personalized to suit the needs of the moment. American Christians are faced with a semantic dilemma, but it extends beyond the mere matter of semantics. While different languages will have different words for or similar to the English word “cult,” and those discussions will take their own directions accordingly, the American dilemma of when to use or withhold the term “cult” results in valuable

lessons for the churches in every nation. Christians should be careful not to overuse the term “cult,” to underuse it, or to misapply it. It is helpful and appropriate to use in various general and academic contexts, but it is less helpful and appropriate to use in personal contexts.

## Appendix

### Similarities between Cults and Other Major World Religions Associated with Christianity

#### CULTS

- **Beliefs**
  - Exclusivist truth claims
  - Special revelation from God supersedes previous scripture
  - Distorted view of God, especially diminishing the role of Jesus Christ
  - Works-based salvation
- **Behavior**
  - Zealous and capable leaders struggling with pride and power
  - Poor treatment of members including isolation and manipulation
  - Fear-mongering often associated with Satan, the outside world, and Hell

#### ISLAM (from a Christian perspective)

- **Beliefs**
  - Exclusivistic truth claims
  - Koran supersedes the Bible
  - Non-Trinitarian God; Jesus Christ diminished to the level of a great prophet
  - Works-based salvation; jihad
- **Behavior**
  - Mohammed and his successors
  - Strict behavior enforced, death to infidels, eternal punishment for non-Muslims

#### ROMAN CATHOLICISM (from a Protestant perspective)

- **Beliefs**
  - Exclusivistic truth claims
  - Tradition and/or the teaching of the popes supersedes the Bible
  - Jesus Christ’s work on the cross diminished and in need of human merits

- Works-based salvation; sacramentalism
- **Behavior**
  - Peter and his successors, the “Vicar of Christ”
  - Examples of Roman and clerical opulence at the expense of the laity
  - “No salvation outside of the Roman Catholic Church,” violence toward others

#### CHRISTIANITY (from a Jewish perspective)

- **Beliefs**
  - Exclusivistic truth claims
  - The New Testament superseded the Old Testament
  - Jesus Christ’s role diminished the role of the Mosaic Law
- **Behavior**
  - Jesus Christ and His Apostles
  - Anti-semitism
  - “Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.”

#### JUDAISM (from an ancient Sumerian perspective)

- **Beliefs**
  - Exclusivistic truth claims
  - The Mosaic Law replaced the Code of Hammurabi
  - Monotheism, diminished the role of the other gods
  - Works-based salvation instead of the fate of the fickle gods
- **Behavior**
  - Moses, Joshua, and the prophets
  - Unfaithful Jews punished by the law, “acts of God,” or Sheol
  - Plagues upon the Egypt and the genocide of the Canaanites

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article took the form of a paper verbally presented at a national Evangelical Theological Society meeting in 2009. The ETS version of the paper was listed as Cleaver, Kenneth. “The Practical and Ethical Considerations in Labeling a Religious Group as a ‘Cult.’” A paper presented at the 61st Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in New Orleans, Louisiana. November 18, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> This is the approach of Gamaliel in Acts 5:38-9. See Walter Martin’s connection in this regard in: Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 15:11-32.

<sup>4</sup> One must be careful what to cite for an idea like this. There are plenty of examples in the historical and prophetic books of the Old Testament wherein God

called for the destruction of those whose beliefs and behavior were dangerous to themselves and society in general. Descriptions of Hell in the New Testament, especially from Jesus' own lips, reveal certain groups' complete and eternal separation from God and His people. Although this is a valid, biblically-based approach in extreme situations, it should not be the first or only alternative when groups depart from their denominations.

<sup>5</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation, The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 86.

<sup>6</sup> "Heresy, a cynic might say, is an opinion held by a minority of men which the majority declares unacceptable and is powerful enough to punish." David Christie-Murray, *A History of Heresy* (New York: Oxford, 1976), 1. Dave Breese refers to cults and "organized heresies" in *Know the Marks of Cults: A Guide to Enable You to Quickly Detect the Basic Errors of False Religion*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Victor, 1985), 16. See also Gerstner and Galantner's use of the term "sect" in John H. Gerstner, *The Theology of the Major Sects* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), 9; and Marc Galanter, *Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 2.

<sup>7</sup> I personally arrived at this percentage (willing to concede a five percent margin of error in either direction) as a result of my survey of the major scholarly writings (in English) on cults. See this paper's bibliography to see which sources I included in this group.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, as an example of postmodern thought, spoke against the ability of language to convey precise truths. He claimed that since the speaker and receiver have different concepts of terms used in communication, words cannot be a totally reliable means of communicating truth. This was part of the destructionist view he held on reading history. His conclusion was that one can know little or nothing about the past because the terms used to convey ideas about the past are too contaminated by the subjectivism of sender and receiver. Three of his 1967 works (*Of Grammatology, Writing and Difference, and Speech and Phenomena*) demonstrate this tendency of thought.

<sup>9</sup> Ron Rhodes, *The Challenge of the Cults and New Religions: The Essential Guide to Their History, Their Doctrine, and Our Response* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 20.

<sup>10</sup> Hubert Beck, *How to Respond: The Cults*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995), 37-39. Perhaps the most extensive example of this objection is found in the work of Annabelle Mooney, *The Rhetoric of Religious "Cults": Terms of Use and Abuse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> John 8:44; Rom 9:1; 2 Cor 13:8; Eph 4:25.

<sup>12</sup> "The cults' perversion of the timeless truths of God challenge the church to be faithful in presenting its message to the world more clearly and aggressively." Beck, *How to Respond*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> John 1:14, 17, 4:23-4, 14:6, 15:13, 16:13, 17:17, 18:37; 1 Tim 2:3-4, 3:15; 2 Tim 2:15; 1 John 4:6; 2 John 1:4.

<sup>14</sup> Rhodes, *Challenge of the Cults and New Religions*, 22-3. Another significant treatment on the doctrines of cults in general is that of H. Wayne House and Gordon Carle, *Doctrine Twisting: How Core Biblical Truths are Distorted* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003). See also Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Handbook of Today's Religions* (San Bernardino: Here's Life Publishers, 1983), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Rhodes, *Challenge of the Cults and New Religions*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Rhodes, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Rhodes, 25-9.

<sup>18</sup> Isa 14:12-17; Ezek 28:12-19; John 8:44; 1 Tim 3:6.

<sup>19</sup> Carroll Stoner and Jo Anne Parke, *All Gods Children: The Cult Experience—Salvation or Slavery?* (Radnor, PA: Chilton Book Company, 1977), xvii, 4. Ronald Enroth, *Youth, Brainwashing, and the Extremist Cults* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 182. Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, 26-8. Beck, *How to Respond*, 29-31. Galanter, *Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion*, ix, 2, 4. Rhodes, *Challenge of the Cults*, 20, 31. Margaret Thaler Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), xxiv, 4. Annabelle Mooney, *The Rhetoric of Religious “Cults”: Terms of Use and Abuse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1.

<sup>20</sup> 1 Cor 11:1.

<sup>21</sup> Stoner, *All God’s Children*, xvii. Enroth, *Youth, Brainwashing, and the Extremist Cults*, 12. Jan Groenveld, “Identifying a Cult,” *Cult Information and Awareness Center*. [http://www.culthelp.info/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=5](http://www.culthelp.info/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=5) (accessed November 2, 2009; copyrighted 1985).

<sup>22</sup> Stoner and Park make an excellent observation on this point that the daily work of nearly all cult members is demeaning and utilizes little of their potential, in terms of intelligence, training, or education: Stoner, *All God’s Children*, 4. Enroth, *Youth, Brainwashing, and the Extremist Cults*, 12. Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, 26. Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*, xviii. Mooney, *Rhetoric of Religious “Cults,”* 1, 168.

<sup>23</sup> Enroth, *Youth, Brainwashing, and the Extremist Cults*, 12, 170-2. Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, 28. Rhodes, *Challenge of the Cults and New Religions*, 20, 31. Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*, xviii.

<sup>24</sup> Stoner, *All God’s Children*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Hubert Beck wrote, “Original words and thoughts are constantly filled with new and different understandings. A sort of double-talk has evolved which is very confusing.” Beck, *How to Respond*, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Rhodes, *Challenge of the Cults and New Religions*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> The secret rites practiced inside the walls of the Mormon Tabernacle or in religiously-oriented Masonic Lodges in their initiations and ordinations suffice as examples of this tendency among cults.

<sup>28</sup> Mooney, *The Rhetoric of Religious “Cults,”* 1. Singer disagrees, suggesting that it is not a pejorative term but merely descriptive: Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*, xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>29</sup> Galanter, *Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion*, ix. Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*, xviii.

<sup>30</sup> Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, 26.

<sup>31</sup> Beck tries to strike a balance when he writes, “There is . . . no one umbrella under which all cults may be placed, and we must avoid overgeneralization. Yet some marks of the cults are common enough that a ‘mentality of the cults’ can be identified.” Beck, *How to Respond*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Rhodes, *Challenge of the Cults and New Religions*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Rhodes, 119.

<sup>34</sup> From the very first conversation Satan had with Eve in the Garden of Eden to his very last act of rebellion at the Battle of Gog and Magog, Satan seems consumed with imitating the power and plan of God. It is as if he could find no better way to be like God than to set up a rival kingdom using God’s tendencies. He fell in the first place because he wanted to be like God (Isa 14:13-14), and he consistently tried to lure others into the same sin (Gen 3:5; Isa 14:4-17). He even had the audacity to ask Jesus Christ to bow down to him (Matt 4:9; Luke 4:7). In the future, in a move that imitates the Trinity Himself, Satan will manifest himself in three

characters: a dragon, the Anti-Christ, and a false prophet (Rev 11-20). He will do this in an attempt to set up a kingdom on the earth that controls government and commerce. An effective way of establishing his kingdom today is to marginalize the effectiveness of the church by subduing attempts of Christians to stand up for what is right against what is wrong.

<sup>35</sup> Mooney, *Rhetoric of Religious "Cults,"* 2-3.

<sup>36</sup> Mooney, 169-79.

<sup>37</sup> Mooney, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Mooney, 2-3.

<sup>39</sup> "The term 'new religious movement' is not so much a replacement term for cult or sect as a new direction for work about religious groups altogether." In other words, maybe a less accusatory term will function better as a means of personal evangelism or, in a larger context, reconciliation. It gives the cults and cult members a place to which they might migrate, which keeps them from being regarded as an extremist group. Mooney, *Rhetoric of Religious "Cults,"* 160.

<sup>40</sup> Mooney, *Rhetoric of Religious "Cults,"* 155.

<sup>41</sup> House and Carle prefer this term or even "heterodox" in *Doctrine Twisting: How Core Biblical Truths are Distorted*, 9-10.

<sup>42</sup> Kenneth Boa, *Cults, World Religions, and You* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977), 6.

<sup>43</sup> Some would disagree with the idea that brainwashing is even possible and would suggest it is merely a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of a person's willingness to submit themselves to the teaching and leadership of cults. Mooney, *Rhetoric of Religious "Cults,"* 168, 180.

<sup>44</sup> Irving Hexham suggested that it is the *press and religious groups* that prefer the term "cult," while *sociologists and scholars of religion* prefer the term "NRMs." It would appear that he meant to tap into a cynical view of the press (that they are looking for stories to sensationalize) and religious groups (that they are less educated), and he meant to suggest that those who are more educated have a more scholarly or non-judgmental view. What he overlooks in this presumption is that members of each of these four groups (press, religious groups, sociologists, and scholars of religion) may belong to one or more of the other groups. For example, I personally would consider myself both a member of a religious group and a scholar of religion. Despite this obvious prejudice against the press and religious groups, he does correctly observe that sociologists prefer the term "NRM" to "cult." Irving Hexham, *Pocket Dictionary of New Religious Movements* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> Christopher Partridge generally prefers the term "new religions" to "cults," but he makes a distinction between new religions that are world-affirming, world-accommodating, and world-renouncing. The third of these would be more in line with what anti-cult groups refer to as "cults." Christopher Partridge, *New Religions: A Guide* (New York: Oxford, 2004), 22.

<sup>46</sup> Mooney, *Rhetoric of Religious "Cults,"* 11.

<sup>47</sup> See the appendix for one possible way in which notable characteristics of a cult have been seen in more established religious groups such as Islam, Roman Catholicism, Christianity, and Judaism.

<sup>48</sup> The investigation which gave rise to this article was the frequent question I received in my theology classes from students wanting to know if Roman Catholicism should be considered a cult because of their tendency (a) to treat the Pope in ways which only Jesus should be treated, (b) to treat tradition in ways



that only Scripture should be treated, (c) to treat human works in ways that only Jesus' atonement should be treated, and (d) to require members' loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church in ways that only loyalty to God should be required. While the similarities between the Roman Catholic Church and the American idea of a "cult" are indeed stunning, it is impractical for Protestants to refer to the Roman Catholic Church as a cult primarily because Protestant denominations split off from the Roman Catholic Church during the Reformation. Protestants would do better to refer to the Roman Catholic Church in ways that God referred to His people in the Old Testament when they strayed from truth and righteousness. Protestants may indeed consider themselves to be like the faithful remnant in the Old Testament, but they should not consider it helpful to refer to the Roman Catholic Church as a cult.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Martin wrote, "The problem . . . is complex. There is no simple panacea, but it constitutes a real challenge to Christianity which cannot be ignored nor neglected . . ." Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Matt 23:13-33.

<sup>51</sup> "The Biblical perspective . . . where false teachers and false teachings are concerned, is that we are to have compassion and love for those who are enmeshed in the teachings of the false prophets, but we are to vigorously oppose the teachings with our primary objective the winning of the soul, and not so much the argument." Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, 16.

<sup>52</sup> "Only when we realize how the individual member is tied to the cult group can we begin to understand how the cult group can influence the individual's behavior." Andrew J. Pavlos, *The Cult Experience* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 9. "If the church fails to carefully and seriously provide spiritual warmth and a true exposition of the Word of God, those with spiritual needs will find other avenues of fulfillment." McDowell, *Handbook of Today's Religions*, 17. "Treating members as individuals differs substantially from the wholesale persecution of movements." Mooney, *Rhetoric of Religious "Cults,"* 5.

<sup>53</sup> John 3:1-15.

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