

Is Christianity a Cult?

1 John 4:1: (NASB) Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

 $C_{\omega} t$...the very word conjures up all kinds of dark and evil images in our minds.



These images are of dominating and charismatic leaders and their lowly group of followers who are tethered to their every word, driven by their every vision and obedient to their every desire. Such images are rightfully disturbing. The question is, are there different kinds of cults - even some that can be good and wholesome, or are they all bad? Is Christianity a cult? Stay with us as we explore what cults are and how to watch our steps so we stay far away from any evil that can be associated with the dark side...

How do we define "cult"?

(Source: Bing.com Dictionary)

Cult:

- 1. religion: a system of religious or spiritual beliefs, especially an informal and transient belief system regarded by others as misguided, unorthodox, extremist, or false, and directed by a charismatic, authoritarian leader
- 2. religious group: a group of people who share religious or spiritual beliefs, especially beliefs regarded by others as misguided, unorthodox, extremist, or false
- 3. idolization of somebody or something: an extreme or excessive admiration for a person, philosophy of life, or activity

Synonyms: trendy, offbeat, alternative, out of the ordinary, unusual



- "Cult" is used two different ways and causes a lot of confusion. The media
 uses the word for socially and personally destructive groups, like the Branch
 Davidians or the Jim Jones' Cult committing suicide and these kinds of things.
 Theologians have used the word to mean a group that departs from one or
 more of the essential doctrines of Christian faith.
- So when we sometimes refer to a group like Mormons being a cult, we are often misunderstood as if we meant to say that Mormons themselves were socially and personally destructive, which is not what we are saying. Generally Mormons are conservative, family value oriented, so we don't mean to say they are are a cult in the sociological sense, but more in the theological sense.

The problem, of course, becomes whose theology are we using as the standard?

Does the following sound cult-ish? Would a Christian and a non-Christian have the same answer?

<u>Matthew 6:25-30</u>: (NASB) ²⁵For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds



them. Are you not worth much more than they? ²⁷And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? ²⁸And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, ²⁹yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!

- Douglas Atkin from the documentary, The Persuaders
 - Douglas Atkin, an expert on the relationship between consumers and brands, says he had a eureka moment one night during a focus group.
 - ATKIN: I was in a research facility watching eight people rhapsodize about a sneaker. And I thought, "Where is this coming from? This is, at the end of the day, a piece of footwear." But the terms they were using were evangelical. So I thought, if these people are expressing cult-like devotion, then why not study cults? Why not study the original? Find out why people join cults and apply that knowledge to brands.

Matthew 6:31-33: (NASB) ³¹Do not worry then, saying, What will we eat? or What will we drink? or What will we wear for clothing? ³²For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

The Jewish leaders of the time never taught this way...

How do cults gain traction?

- Propaganda, Mind Control, Brainwashing and Subliminal Subversion, www.youtube.com
 - People can be lead to believe something that is not true when that information is carefully timed and presented by an accepted and respected authority.
 - The purpose of propaganda is to direct public attention to certain facts.
 - "The whole art consists in doing this so skillfully that everyone will be convinced that the fact is real," wrote Adolf Hitler in Mein Kamph.
 - To be effective, propaganda must constantly short circuit all conscious thinking and operate on the individual subconciously.

Self-serving agendas are fertile soil for the seeds of cultish thinking:

Philippians 3:16-19: (NRSV) ¹⁶Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. ¹⁷Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.

What did Jesus gain by bringing people to him? Houses? Clothes? Possessions? Nope. That's a big clue as to whether or not Christianity is a cult. Jesus did not do this for selfish gain, regardless of his popularity.



(Source: religioustolerance.org)

Past uses of the term "cult": The original meaning of the word "cult" was to define a form or style of worship, as described above. It is still used in this way within theological circles.

During the 1920s and 1930s, sociologists who were studying religion started to use it to refer to those faith groups that were not full denominations or sects. According to J. Gordon Melton, "They were a group that just didn't fit, and they were termed cults. They were treated primarily as esoterica in American religion."

During the 1930s, the Christian counter-cult movement (CCM) used the term mainly to describe two groups of faith groups: 1) Those who were non-Christian. 2) Those who deviated from conservative Protestantism. This was the most common use of the term until the 1970s.

During the 1970s, the mostly secular anti-cult movement (ACM) used the term to refer to groups who used advanced psychological tools to manipulative their membership, capture their allegiance, and reduce them to near-zombie status.

So the definition of "cult" has changed dramatically through the years.

Douglas Atkin from the documentary, The Persuaders

• When you listen to brand managers talk, you can get quite carried away in this idea that they actually are fulfilling these needs that we have for community and narrative and transcendence. But in the end, it is, you know, a laptop and a pair of running shoes. And they might be great, but they're not actually going to fulfill those needs, but which serves them very well because, of course, that means that you have to go shopping again.

False teachers prophesied to try to influence the true Christians, both then and now:

Acts 20:27-32: (NRSV) ²⁷for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. ²⁸Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. ²⁹I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them.

False teachers simply present a "brand" that is attractive, exciting and NEW!

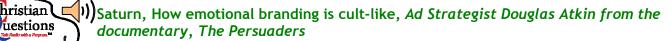
³¹Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears. ³²And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified.

We must determine to stay with the original message of truth and not the fancy and attractive traditions and additions of men. Don't get diverted to other things.

Who might be most susceptible to the attractiveness of a cult?

The most susceptible? Those with a great sensitivity to belonging, which just happen to be some of the very best followers of Christ!

Matthew 11:25, 29-30: (NASB) ²⁵At that time Jesus said, I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants...²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.



- ATKIN: And the conclusion was this, is that people, whether they're joining a cult or joining a brand, do so for exactly the same reasons. They need to belong, and they want to make meaning. We need to figure out what the world is all about, and we need the company of others. It's simply that.
- Saturn is a really good example. It's a mass cult brand. For example, 45,000 people turned up to spend their holiday vacation time at the factory in Tennessee instead of going to Disney World or the Grand Canyon. Now, why would they do that? It's because they wanted to meet other people who own Saturns. They wanted to meet the rest of the Saturn family. They wanted to meet the people who made the car. The people who made the car wanted to meet them.

(Source: religioustolerance.org) A Few Common Signs of **Destructive** Cults

Apocalyptic Beliefs:

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- The leader's preaching concentrates heavily on the impending end of the world, often at a great battle (e.g. War of Armageddon). In addition (as in the case of the Solar Temple and Heaven's Gate groups), the leader preaches that through group suicide at a particular instant, they will all be transported to a wonderful place and escape the devastation that is about to come to the earth.
- The group is expected to play a major, elite role at the end time.

Charismatic Leadership:

- They are led by a single male charismatic leader.
- The leader dominates the membership, closely controlling them physically, sexually and emotionally.

Social Encapsulation:

- They are a small religious group, not an established denomination.
- The group (or at least the core members) lives together in an intentional community which is isolated from the rest of society.
- There is often extreme paranoia within the group; they believe that they are in danger and that they are being closely monitored and heavily persecuted by governments or people outside the group. People on "the outside" are demonized.
- Information and contacts from outside the cult are severely curtailed.

Others who may be attracted to cults are those who feel unappreciated, noncontributory, unnoticed and outcast. Fortunately, the body of Christ has a place of honor and respect for them! With true Christianity described in the Scriptures, they are not exploited, they are empowered.

Christianity is completely different from a destructive cult in this way:

1 Corinthians 12:21-25:(NASB) ²¹And the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you; or again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. ²²On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; ²³ and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, ²⁴whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor



to that member which lacked, ²⁵so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

Ours is truly a family of interconnected individuals!

Galatians 6:1-2: (NASB) ¹Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. ²Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

We all need to ask - is my Christianity empowering me to be a better follower of Christ or is it discouraging me?

"...if you believe in it, it is a religion or perhaps 'the' religion; and if you do not care one way or another about it, it is a sect; but if you fear and hate it, it is a cult." - Leo Pfeffer

We get drawn into the idea that if it is what we believe, it's great. If we don't like it, then it has to be a cult. This is based on feelings and not proper judgment. We need to be careful of our attitude when we look at other parts of Christianity.

Is there a difference between a cult and a sect?

(Source: Bing.com Dictionary) **Sect:**

- 1. non-mainstream religious group: a religious group with beliefs and practices at variance with those of the more established main groups
- 2. religious denomination: a denomination of a larger religious group
- 3. close-knit group: a small close-knit group with strongly held views that are sometimes regarded as extreme by the majority

Synonyms: group, clique, faction, camp, party, cult, division, offshoot, branch

Here is the Apostle Paul using the term in Rome, defending the Gospel:

Acts 28:22-24: (NASB) ²²But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this **sect**, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere. ²³When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening. ²⁴Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.

"Different" isn't necessarily bad, but we need to investigate it. Regarding our Christian leadership today, is it cultish in a bad sense or is it true Christian leadership?

- (N) Marks of a cult isolationism, Richard Howe, oneminuteapologist.com
 - Cults are often brainwashed by an ultra-authoritarian leader...These leaders create a sociological wedge between their followers and the world, thereby promoting isolationism. Cult leaders often dictate what their followers are to believe, think, speak, feel and even wear. Some cults are easy to identify while others are more difficult to detect to the less discerning.

Hmmm....Jesus told his followers what to believe, what to think, what to speak, etc. So we have to carefully look at the situation. There can be good admonitions or destructive, oppressive behaviors.



Does Christianity isolate or admonish?

1 John 2:15-16: (NASB) ¹⁵Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.

Romans 12:13-14: (NASB) ¹³contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

One can't do this if you are isolated. This is an admonishment and anti-cult-like in its approach.

Is this a command or a lesson on proper living and perspective?

<u>1 Timothy 2:9-10</u>: (NASB) ⁹Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, ¹⁰but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness.

The message is: How you live on the inside is what makes you beautiful. It is very empowering. It is guidance as to how we should be living that puts us into a God-honoring perspective.

How do we protect ourselves from any cult-like influence?

Theme context:

<u>1 John 4:1-3</u>: (NASB) ¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.

"Anti-Christ" doesn't mean "against Christ;" it literally means "in the place of Christ," like a counterfeit. We need to look around at the world of Christianity and say, are we seeing an influence of replacing Jesus with men?

As Christians we are instructed to think critically, independently and objectively and to base our perspective on the sure word of God.

- Trust, repetition and acceptance, Mind Control, Brainwashing and Subliminal Subversion, www.youtube.com
 - Trust in the source of the information induces acceptance of the message as true, even if it is not understood. Repetition of the message embeds it in the subconscious so that acceptance of its truth and accuracy becomes a conditioned response. Thus this information will be accepted as true without thinking about it whenever it is presented again.

<u>2 Peter 2:1-3</u>: (NRSV) But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them bringing swift destruction on themselves.

How do they deny the Master and yet keep followers? Powerful cult leaders draw people to them and get people to rely on them. Anything they say is believed as truth. You can change the Gospel to anything you want it to be and people will fall in line right behind you.



²Even so, many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned. ³And in their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words. Their condemnation, pronounced against them long ago, has not been idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

We have to discern if our leaders are of Christ. How do we do this?

2 Timothy 2:14-16: (NASB) ¹⁴Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless and leads to the ruin of the hearers. ¹⁵Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. ¹⁶But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness...

The Apostle Paul is writing to Timothy, telling him specifically to accurately handle the word of truth. We do that by immersing ourselves in it and making it our textbook for living. It must be a part of our everyday life. We need to keep going back to the Scriptures on a personal level. We could just go to church, listen to a sermon and walk out feeling good. But that is just the beginning! How do we apply what we hear? The application must come from the Scriptures.

Is it dangerous to label others as "non-Christian" cults because their doctrinal view is different than ours? See the Full Edition CQ Bonus Material for more.

If the "correct" theology is Protestantism, does that mean that Catholicism is a cult? Vice versa? What about the smaller fringe sects of Christianity? We don't want to label something a cult just because someone disagrees with us. The word is too powerful and we need to be careful how it is used.

Is our own Christian leadership exploiting us or is it building us up to stand on our own two feet with the Spirit and word of God? By trying to add to the secular definition of "cult" we enter an area that is truly subject to our own opinion, observation and experience, and may even make *us* cultish...

<u>Matthew 7:1-5</u>: (KJV) ¹Judge not, that ye be not judged. ²For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. ³And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? ⁴Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? ⁵Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

We need to be able to make judgments. They need to be made with the same parameters with which we want to be judged. We want to be judged on the facts of who and what we are. We should be honest and full of integrity when dealing with others.

How do we live our Christianity out loud without giving cause for offense?

- (1)) iPod, How emotional branding is cult-like, Keith Reinhard, Chairman, DDB Worldwide, from the documentary, The Persuaders
 - The campaign for iPod is remarkable. When I see the poster as I'm passing by, when I go on the website and it comes to life and I hear the music track going, and then when I put my little iPod earpods on and I see the white cords against my black jacket, I'm in that poster, and the poster is me! And then the music, my music, comes over my iPod, and it's a brand experience.



There is freedom in Christ. There is a personal connection but we are free to live within our conscience in Christ.

How to Live a Colt-Free Christian Life



1st step: Live humbly

Romans 12:3-21: (NASB) ³For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. ⁴For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function,

2nd step: Live with the conviction to play your role in the body

⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; ⁷if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

3rd step: Be true to the HIGHEST principles

⁹Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.

4th step: Truly live your brotherly devotion

¹⁰Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; ¹¹not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; ¹²rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, ¹³contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

5th step: Don't play the games of those out to get you

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

6th step: Enter into the lives of those around you

¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.



7th step: Push those people around you up as you remain humble

¹⁶Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.

8th step: Keep vengeance in the hands of God where it belongs

¹⁷Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. ¹⁹Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

9th step: Truly love your enemy in an obvious way

²⁰But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.

10th step: In doing all these things, you will overcome evil with good ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

We need to make sure the people we are involved with and the groups we are following don't fall into categories of a cult. Our Christianity should abide in the freedom and love of Christ and the Scriptures.

So is Christianity a cult?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions,
Think about it...!

And now <u>even more</u> to think about... only in the Full Edition of CQ Rewind!

All uses of the New Testament word for "Sect":

Acts 5:17: Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect <139> of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation,

Acts 15:5: But there rose up certain of the **sect** <139> of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.

<u>Acts 24:5</u>: For we have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the **sect <139>** of the Nazarenes:

Acts 24:14: But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy <139>, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets:

Acts 26:5: Which knew me from the beginning, if they would testify, that after the most straightest sect <139> of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

Acts 28:22: But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect <139>, we know that every where it is spoken against.



<u>1 Corinthians 11:19</u>: For there must be also heresies <139> among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.

<u>Galatians 5:20</u>: Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies <139>,

<u>2 Peter 2:1</u>: But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies <139>, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.



Observations:

- Some uses simply show diversity in thought;
- Some show a falling away from that which is accepted;
- Some show a very negative result.

Is it dangerous to label others as "non-Christian" cults?

1. By trying to add to the secular definition of "cult" we enter an area that is truly subject to our own opinion, observation and experience.

Text and this point already discussed - repeated here for continuity...

<u>Matthew 7:1-5</u>: (KJV) 1Judge not, that ye be not judged. 2For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. 3And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? 4Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? 5Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

2. Would not all non-Catholics have to label all Catholics as cultists?

(Source: <u>Christianity Today</u>, July 12, 1999, pg. 23) Anglicans and Roman Catholic leaders in May released a consensus statement on the papacy, saying it is "a gift to be received by all churches"...

- 3. Would not all Catholics have to label all non-Catholics as cultists? After all, they don't hold the papacy in high respect spiritually.
- 4. Aren't we being cultist by pointing the finger elsewhere? After all, we are adding meaning to a word and judging based on our view of traditional Christianity.

<u>Luke 9:46-50</u>: (NRSV) ⁴⁶An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, ⁴⁸and said to them, Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest. ⁴⁹John answered, Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us. ⁵⁰But Jesus said to him, Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.

Are we suggesting that "anything goes"? Absolutely not! We are suggesting that instead of pointing fingers of accusation, we apply the principles of proper Bible interpretation.



For example: The appearance of false Christs and prophets that could deceive the very Elect:

The proclamation of false saviors and remedies:

Matthew 24:23-27: (NRSV) ²³Then if anyone says to you, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'There he is!'--do not believe it. ²⁴For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵Take note, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶So, if they say to you, Look! He is in the wilderness, do not go out. If they say, Look! He is in the inner rooms, do not believe it. ²⁷For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

(Source: religioustolerance.org) Meanings of the word "cult":

Many common religious terms lack a generally accepted, single, current definition. This leads to confusion over the meanings of certain religious terms, such as *Christian*, *cult*, *hell*, *heaven*, *occult*, *Paganism*, *salvation*, *witch*, *witchcraft*, *Unitarian*, *Universalist*, *Voodoo*, etc. A reader must often look at the context in which the word is used in order to guess at the intent of the writer.

In the newsgroup *alt.usage.english*, terms like this one are often called "*skunk words*." They have diverse meanings to different people. They have so many meanings that they often cause misunderstandings wherever they are used. Unfortunately, most people do not know this, and naturally assume that the meaning that they have been taught is the universally accepted definition of the term.

The term "Unitarian" is a good example:

- Pre-1776 CE: Belief in a single God and the rejection of the Christian concept of the Trinity.
- Post-1775: A creedless and dogma-free religious organization. The *Unitarian Universalist Association*, (UUA) is an association of Unitarian congregations.

Utter confusion reigns when an author is using one definition of "Unitarian," while a reader assumes the other meaning. Misunderstandings also happen when an author assumes that both definitions refer to the same organization or belief.

One of the most confusing and dangerous religious terms is "cult." The word is derived from the French word "culte" which came from Latin noun "cultus." The latter is related to the Latin verb "colere" which means "to worship or give reverence to a deity." Thus, in its original meaning, the term "cult" can be applied to any group of religious believers: Southern Baptists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Hindus or Muslims. However, the term has since been assigned at least eight new and very different meanings. The original meaning of "cult" remains positive; more recent definitions are neutral, negative, or extremely negative:

- Positive Meaning:
 - Theological usage: Oxford English Dictionary defined "cult" as:
 - worship; reverential homage rendered to a divine being or beings
 - a particular form or system of religious worship; especially in reference to its external rites and ceremonies
 - devotion or homage to a particular person or thing

This is the historical meaning of the word, but is rarely today heard outside of religious circles. A reference to the "Cult of Mary" appeared in a newspaper report on the Pope's 1999 visit to the Americas. It simply means that the Pope devotes special attention to the Virgin Mary.

 Cultural usage: The word is often associated with cult films, cult bands, or cult TV programs. Here, the term "cult" refers to a small but devoted following of a movie, entertainment group or television program. Avid supporters of Star Trek may be referred to as devoted cultists.



Neutral Meanings:

- Sociological usage: A small religious group that exists in a state of tension with the predominant religion. Hinduism might be considered a cult in North America; Christianity might be considered a cult in India.
- Additional sociological usage: An innovative, fervent religious group, as contrasted with more established and conventional sects and denominations.
- The Observer: An English newspaper seemed to use the term to refer to any small religious group, no matter what its age or teachings.
- General religious usage: A small, recently created, religious organization which is often headed by a single charismatic leader and is viewed as an spiritually innovative group. A cult in this sense may simply be a new religious movement on its way to becoming a denomination. The Christian religion as it existed in 30 CE might be considered a cult involving one leader and 12 or 70 devoted disciples as followers. The Mormon denomination was started in the 19th century by Joseph Smith and a few followers; it met this definition of "cult" but has since grown to become an established denomination of about 15 million members.

Negative Meanings:

- Evangelical Christians and Counter-Cult Movement (CCM) usage: They define a cult as any religious group which accepts most but not all of the key historical Christian doctrines (e.g. the divinity of Jesus, virgin birth, the Trinity, salvation by faith, not works, etc.). The implication is that the cult's theology is invalid; they teach heresy. Under this definition, *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (the Mormons), Unification Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and many others would be cults. But the CCM would not classify Wicca as such, because it is not associated with Christianity. The earliest use of this meaning of the word "Cult" is believed to be a 1938 book "*The Chaos of the Cults*" by J.K. VanBaalen. On the other hand, new religious groups such as the Mormons, Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses generally regard themselves to be the true Christian church. They view all other denominations as being in error. Thus, one group's true church is another group's cult. One group's heresy is the other group's orthodoxy.
- Fundamentalist Christian usage: Some Fundamentalists would accept the Evangelical definition of cult defined above. Others brand any religious group which deviates from historical Protestant Christian beliefs as a cult. This definition would include the LDS Church, Wicca, mainline and liberal Christian denominations, Islam, Hinduism, and all of the other religions of the world. The vast majority of humanity would belong to cults, by this definition.
- Anti-cult movement usage: The anti-cult movement (ACM) attempts to raise public consciousness about what they see as dangerous and authoritarian mind control cults and doomsday cults. Most do not care about the faith group's theology. They target only what they see as deceptive practices, and dangerous psychological pressure techniques, such as brainwashing. The ACM appears to hold opinions about the effectiveness of brainwashing that are not shared by the mental-health community generally. They see mind control/doomsday cults as a widespread social problem.

Very negative meaning:

Popular, media usage: A cult is considered a small, evil religious group, often with a single charismatic leader, that engages in brainwashing and other mind control techniques, believes that the end of the world is imminent, and collects large amounts of weaponry in preparation for a massive war. The earliest use of this meaning of the word is believed to have been in a 1965 book by Walter Martin "The Kingdom of the Cults."



We have seen "cult" used to refer to Evangelical denominations, the Roman Catholic Church, Unification Church, Church of Scientology, United Church of Christ, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Wiccans, other Neopagans and many other faith groups. The term is essentially meaningless.

The main opposition to the CCM and ACM have been:

- Academics who study the emergence of new religions. They have shown that new religious movements have been continually created for millennia. Some grow into unique religions or denominations within existing religions.
- Mental health professionals specializing in the study of psychological manipulation.
 They have studied new religious movements and found that the vast majority are
 harmless. People join these small faith groups because they feel that the group offers
 something of value at that stage in their life. Members typically leave after a few
 years.

Individuals in the ACM and CCM sometimes refer to these academics and professionals by the derogatory term "cult apologists."