

From Outcasts to Believers: Cults, Religions, and Social Perception

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ABSTRACT

Emergent faiths often materialize as modest congregations harboring unorthodox beliefs perceived as aberrant by the larger society. Initially marked with the pejorative label of "cult," these groups become consigned to the margins of society, thereby impeding their prospect of integration into the mainstream. Nevertheless, if these communities persist in their commitment to disseminating and upholding their doctrines despite persecution, the passage of time can contribute to their expansion, solidifying their place within a broader religious landscape. Hence, distinguishing between a large cult and a small religion is an exercise in semantics, as the former can be identified as an incipient stage of the latter's awaiting societal acceptance to achieve theological metamorphosis.

Introduction

The distinction between a small religion and a large cult hinges predominantly upon the ever-shifting currents of public perception rather than any inherent quality. Emergent faiths often materialize as modest congregations harboring unorthodox beliefs perceived as aberrant by the larger society. Initially, these groups are stigmatized with the pejorative epithet of a "cult," consigning them to the margins of society and impeding any prospects of integration into mainstream society. However, if these cults persist in their dedication to disseminating and upholding their doctrines despite persecution, the passage of time can contribute to their growth and cement their rightful place within the religious landscape (Stark & Bainbridge, 1996). Hence, distinguishing between a large cult and a small religion is an exercise in semantics, as the former can be identified as an incipient stage of the latter awaiting societal acceptance to achieve theological metamorphosis.

Divergence of Definitions

In the early days of the Roman Empire, the terms "religion" and cult exhibited a remarkable degree of synonymy and were positive in their connotation. Instances of their usage are traceable to the erudite musings of Marcus Tullius Cicero, a philosopher, and theologian of antiquity, who expounded upon religion using the Latin phrase *cultu deorum*, meaning "cultivation of the gods" (Cicero, 1917). A century later, another prodigal philosopher and theologian, Augustine of Hippo, reverberated Cicero's ideology affirming "religion is nothing other than the cultus of God" (Augustine of Hippo, 1475). Thereafter, the terms religion and cult enjoyed interchangeable usage, both denoting the practice of religious veneration.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a wave of intellectual inquiry swept the sociological community, causing the development of separate definitions for the terms. Catalyzing this phenomenon, German sociologist Ernst Troeltsch differentiated between primary forms of religious behavior, namely "churchly," "sectarian," and "mystical" groups (Swatos, 1976; Nelson, 1968). Expanding upon Troeltsch's framework, American soci-

ologist Howard P. Becker introduced the term cult as a sociological category, dissecting “church” into “denomination” and “ecclesia,” and “sect” into sect and cult (Swatos, 1976; Nelson, 1968). Subsequent sociologists subverted these formulations, defining cultic beliefs as those that deviated from religious and secular orthodoxies, diverging from both Troeltsch and Becker's approach as neither scholar employed deviancy as a criterion (Campbell, 1977).

The usurped term began to evoke strong negative associations, eliciting feelings of fear and hostility (Richardson, 1993), and more generally, became a “rug under which were swept the troublesome and idiosyncratic religious experiences of mystics and other religious deviants” (Richardson, 1978, cited by Richardson, 1993). This sentiment was echoed by religious scholar Catherine Wessinger: “The word cult dehumanizes the religion’s members and their children. It strongly implies that these people are deviants; they are seen as crazy, brainwashed, duped by their leader” (Wessinger, 1999, cited by Olson, 2006). In this way, the term began to be wielded as an *ad hominem* attack against groups deemed unorthodox, engendering negative stereotypical notions without any factual basis (Bromley et al.).

Furthermore, the pervasive influence of the Anti-Cult Movement (ACM) and the mass media has exacerbated the negative perception surrounding the term cult (Olson, 2006). The ACM, comprising various organizations and individuals opposed to new religious movements, has largely succeeded in persuading the general public of cultic menace, interlinking new religious groups with disconcerting activities such as kidnapping, brainwashing, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and mass suicide (Lewis, 1995; Olson, 2006). Likewise, the media has contributed in its own right to promulgating clichéd cult stereotypes. By harnessing the potent allure of sensationalism, the media nurtures a climate of suspicion within society towards new religious groups (Wessinger, 1999; Olson, 2006). While admittedly, there have been instances of extreme factions engaging in adverse behaviors, both the ACM and the media have grossly exaggerated their prevalence and indiscriminately generalized their attributes to all new religious groups, irrespective of the majority’s peaceful and law-abiding nature. Thus, the “cult” reputation has effectively preceded its name and has overshadowed its previous historically neutral meaning, rendering it virtually unrecognizable in its original context.

Religious Violence and Deviancy

Due to the current popular usage of the term, some may harbor the notion that a cult diverges from religion by virtue of its purported inherent inclination towards violence and malevolence. However, violence is not a defining criterion of cults, nor is it limited to any specific religious or ideological category.

Undoubtedly, throughout history, even the prevailing mainstream religions have had periods marked by extreme violence and aggression. During the Crusades in the eleventh century, Pope Urban II called the masses to arms to reclaim control over the “Holy Land” from its non-Christian inhabitants (Küng, 2005), with religious texts describing “[soldiers] circling the screaming, flame-tortured humanity singing 'Christ We Adore Thee!' with their Crusader crosses held high” (Rausch, 1984). A century later, the Catholic Church launched the Inquisition to combat heresy; this period remains infamous for the immense severity of its tortures and execution, resulting in 32,000 executions recorded in Spain alone (History.com Editors).

A more contemporary example of religious violence can be gleaned from the emerging factions within the Islamic faith in the twenty-first century. These factions espouse radical interpretations of *jihad*, viewing it as a sacred duty to engage in battle against “disbelievers” to advance God’s will (Peters & Cook, 2014). Quranic verses such as, “Then, when the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever ye find them, and take them (captive), and besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush” (Pickthall, 1979), originally directed jihad against Muhammad's local adversaries, such as the pagans of Mecca or the Jews of Medina, have since been applied and redirected towards new adversaries (Berkey, 2002). Organizations like Al-Qaeda and the Taliban have embarked on a global *jihad*, conducting campaigns against both Muslim governments and Western nations; similarly, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad have characterized their violent conflicts

with Israel as “*jihads*” (United States Institute of Peace and Wilson Center, 2016; Turnbull, 2017). These factions assert that their respective campaigns are not only legitimate but also obligatory according to Islamic law (Izant, 2010). Throughout various cultures and across different periods, history reveals that violence can manifest within any religious or ideological group. Consequently, it would be fallacious to employ violence as the sole determinant in distinguishing religious groups as cults.

Transition to Religion

Virtually every major religious movement has encountered the hurdle of initial disparagement, labeled with the imputation of deviancy and illegitimacy due to their heterodox beliefs. These groups found themselves in direct confrontation with the prevailing social order, a perilous position that invariably invited persecution and opposition. Yet, withstanding this, over time their influence grew, their faithful multiplied, and their hallowed customs took root, gaining the coveted mantle of recognition as legitimate religious systems.

When Christianity first emerged in the Roman Empire, the religion endured periods of illegality and persecution under Roman rule, being initially branded as “nothing but a debased superstition carried to great lengths” (Pliny the Younger, AD 112). Christianity faced further disparagement from contemporary Roman historians, like Tacitus, who referred to the religion as a “mischievous superstition” (Tacitus, 1942). Vicious allegations of immoral acts, such as human sacrifice and cannibalism, further intensified the Christian out-group status, exacerbated by their refusal to worship Roman gods (Wagemakers, 2010). However, the trajectory of Christianity underwent a remarkable transformation over time, witnessing a surge in popularity that propelled it to become the official religion of the once-persecuting Roman Empire merely two centuries later. Today, Christianity stands as the world’s largest religion, boasting a population of over 2.3 billion devout adherents (Hackett & McClendon, 2017). Similarly, Siddhartha Gautama, widely known as the “Buddha,” presented teachings that challenged the dominant religious and social norms of his era, particularly the caste system and the authority of Hindu priests. Despite facing relentless resistance, Buddhism gradually attracted a following, particularly among marginalized communities, and its influence expanded throughout Asia. Presently, Buddhism ranks as the 5th-largest religion globally, with a vast community of over 488 million followers (Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, 2012). Likewise, early Muslims encountered arduous persecution as they opposed the prevailing polytheistic beliefs and social structures. Figures like John of Damascus, a prominent theologian, vehemently criticized the religion and denounced Muhammad as a “false prophet.” Nonetheless, Islam persevered, steadily amassing followers as its convictions spread across the Arabian Peninsula and beyond. Currently, Islam is the second-largest religion globally, with over 1.9 billion adherents (DeSilver & Masci, 2017). These historical examples demonstrate the recurrent paradigm wherein new religious movements confront initial opposition and widespread condemnation, only to endure and eventually flourish, amassing substantial followings and solidifying their place as established orthodox religions.

Improving Terminology

Regretfully, the linguistic burden carried by the designation cult undermines the veracity and significance of new religious groups, despite their inherent parallels with long-established faiths. This detrimental association has played a pivotal role in shaping the collective consciousness, perpetuating prejudiced preconceptions that unjustly stigmatize and marginalize specific groups. Consequently, I assert that the term cult ought to be eschewed and supplanted by a more impartial lexicon, such as “new religious movement,” as originally advocated by Eileen Barker in her book *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (Barker, 1989). To this end, the 2003 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS), illustrated the remarkable influence of terminology on public perception. The survey revealed that the general populace holds an overwhelmingly negative

view of cults, while concurrently maintaining a positive view of new religious movements (Olson, 2006). Notably, when participants were asked about their comfort levels with the prospect of their neighbors joining specific religious groups, a staggering 84.1 percent of participants expressed varying degrees of discomfort with their neighbor joining a cult, whereas only 29.1 percent indicated a similar discomfort with their neighbor joining an NRM. Thus, a simple alteration in the terminology used to describe a religious group, specifically utilizing the term new religious movement, can effectively combat the preconceived negative associations that surround the term cult.

Conclusion

The aforementioned historical patterns demonstrate the ever-changing nature of religious classification. As societal attitudes progress and cultural norms adapt, previously stigmatized beliefs and practices have the potential to undergo a metamorphosis, shedding their deviant status and ultimately attaining acceptance as a religion.

As such, I posit that the term cult, besmirched by its modern connotation and misapplication, has lost its pragmatic utility. Therefore, both scholars and non-academics should forsake this defunct label in favor of a judicious terminology that more precisely reflects a religious group's origin. Embracing the terminology of new religious movements will cultivate an environment of understanding, acceptance, and inclusivity, promoting harmony amidst the vibrant tapestry of religious experiences in our global community.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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