

Definitions of terms:

Cults, Sects and Denominations

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Quotation:

**"...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. A humorous quotation, but one that is uncomfortably close to reality.

Meanings of the Word *CULT*

Religious groups and individuals are notorious for assigning multiple meanings to a single word. 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-1776: A creedless, dogma-free religious organization. The Unitarian Universalist Association, (UUA) is an association of Unitarian groups.

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.

Perhaps the most confusing and dangerous religious term is "*Cult*". We have found that the word has at least 8 very different meanings. One is positive; some neutral; some negative; one is even 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.

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. ¹

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 followers. The Mormon denomination was started in the 19th century by Joseph Smith and a few followers; it later grew to become an established denomination.

Negative Meanings:

Evangelical Christian and Counter-Cult Movement usage: Any religious group which accepts most **but not all** of the historical Christian doctrines (the divinity of Jesus, virgin birth, the Trinity, salvation, 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 and Jehovah's Witnesses to be cults. But they 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 groups true church is another group's cult.

Fundamentalist Christian usage: Some Fundamentalists would accept the Evangelical definition of cult defined above. Others might brand **any** religious group which deviates from historical Protestant Christian beliefs as a cult. This definition would include the Mormon Church, Wicca, mainline and liberal Christian denominations, Islam, Hinduism, and all of the other religions of the world. Over 70% of humanity would belong to cults, by this definition.

Mental Health Groups and anti-cult movement usage: A small number of therapists, research psychologists, self-taught individuals, etc., form the anti-cult movement (ACM) They attempt to raise public consciousness about what they see as dangerous and authoritarian mind control cults and doomsday cults. Many 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: (very negative meaning) a small, evil religious group, often with a single charismatic leader, which 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. Often used as a synonym for mind control religious group or for doomsday cult. 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*" (revised and expanded in 1985).

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.

We recommend that the word be rarely used. We would recommend substituting the term *new religious movement*, *alternative religious movement*, *emergent religion* or *faith group*. These terms are more precise and have not (yet) been burdened by so many negative connotations, as has "*cult*." An even better usage is to simply refer to the group by its name. In 1998-MAY, the *Associated Press* decided to avoid the use of the word "*cult*" because it had acquired a pejorative aura; they have since given preference to the term "*sect*."

This web site normally refers only to "*doomsday faith groups*" as "*cults*." We feel that use of the word "*cult*" without careful definition in advance leads to confusion and misunderstanding. Of course, if you are an author, public speaker or teleminister who wants to direct public fear and hatred against a new religious group, then "*cult*" is an ideal word to use. But the use of the term may be irresponsible and immoral, depending upon your system of values.

Meaning of the word *DENOMINATION*

A *Denomination* is an established religious group, which has usually been in existence for many years and has geographically widespread membership. It typically unites a group of individual congregations into a single administrative body. Denominations differ greatly in the sharing of power between individual congregations and the central authority. Baptist churches have historically allowed individual churches to hold diverse beliefs. (An exception is the Southern Baptists Convention who reversed centuries of tradition and expelled some congregations over the homosexual issue.) Other denominations centralize authority, and allow congregations little freedom to deviate in beliefs or policies.

Meaning of the word *SECT*

A *Sect* is a small religious group that is an offshoot of an established religion or denomination. It holds most beliefs in common with its religion of origin, but has a number of novel concepts which differentiate them from that religion. Many religions started as Sects. One well-known example was the Nazarenes. This was a reform movement within Judaism formed by Jesus' apostles after the execution of Jesus circa 30 CE They were largely dispersed or killed some four decades later when the Romans attacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple.

Perhaps the most obvious North American example of a sect that evolved into a denomination is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormons. Their founder, Joseph Smith, had a revelation from God that the ministry of Jesus Christ continued after his crucifixion, as described in what is now called the Book of Mormon. The Mormon sect has since evolved into the Mormon denomination of Christianity with the passage of time and the gathering of increasing numbers of followers. Within a few decades, it is expected to become the dominant faith group in the American west. When statehood was being considered for Utah, a major impediment was the beliefs and practices in the Church regarding polygamy. Shortly after a new revelation from God banned the practice, statehood was granted. This caused a number of small sects to break away from the established church, in order to allow their male followers to continue to have multiple wives. Some of these sects continue to this day in the United States and Canada, although they have been excommunicated by the main Mormon Church. A similar crisis occurred in the mid 1970's when a new

revelation from God abolished the church's institutionalized discrimination against Afro-Americans. This time, the membership accepted the new ruling; there were no breakaway sects.

Sects can therefore be considered a normal mechanism by which new religious movements are generated. Most sects die out quickly; others linger; still others grow and evolve in to a new established religious movement and are properly called denominations.

There remains a negative connotation for many people to the word sect; they would much rather refer to their faith group as a denomination.

Reference:

1. An English newspaper, the **Observer** maintained a page dealing with what they call "cults". Unfortunately, they mixed together a variety of new religious groups, dangerous life threatening cults and small established faith groups. The only common factor among the faith groups that they describe is that they are all small in membership. Many of their essays were not particularly accurate. They were at:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/observer/cults/a-z-cults/index.html> Unfortunately, this link appears to now be dead. their web site was once a useful example of the misuse of a emotionally biased word to raise public fear and hatred against benign religious groups.

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