

What Is A Cult?

Secular Definition¹

Until recently the term “cult” in a general sense referred to groups that exhibit “*great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing,*” and in a more specific sense referred to “*a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious.*”² The public concern of the past two decades, however, demanded additional clarification of the concept. One attempt to do such came about at a conference of the American Family Foundation, The UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute, and the Johnson Foundation:

*“Cult (totalist type): a group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control (e.g., isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience, powerful group pressures, information management, suspension of individually or critical judgment, promotion or total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it, etc), designed to advance the goals of the group’s leaders to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community.”*³

What Is a Sect?⁴

Within the context of a major religion (for example: Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity), a sect is a smaller group that adheres to a particular position on a point of doctrine. Webster defines a sect as “*a faction of a larger group that follows a common leadership and a set of doctrines.*” The key to the definition of a sect is the fact that it remains within the larger group.

Christianity has its sects (usually referred to as “*denominations*”), such as Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian. The sects of Judaism include Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, etc. Within Islam, the Sunnis and the Shi’ites are the major sects. Buddhism has Theravada, Mahayana, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism. In each of these religions, the members of the different sect acknowledge that they are all part of the same religion, despite their differences on a few doctrinal points or their denominational distinctions.

Within mainline Christianity, however, there is no such acknowledgement that the “*blended beliefs*” of the cults are part of the same religion. The doctrinal differences are too far apart on too many major points.

¹ The three books I recommend by secular authors are as follows:

Captive Hearts Captive Minds: Freedom and Recovery from Cults and Abusive Relationships. By **Madeleine Landau Tobias**, M.S., R.N., C.S., is a psychotherapist and exit counselor in private practice since 1979. She is a former member of an Eastern meditation cult and a psychotherapy cult. **Janja Lalich** (co-author), a former member of a political cult, is associate editor of the *Cultic Studies Journal*.

Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse. By **Michael D. Langhorn**, Ph.D., is executive director of the American Family Foundation and editor of *Cultic Studies Journal*. His other books include Cults: What Parents Should Know (with Joan Ross).

Cults In Our Midst: The Hidden Menace In Our Everyday Lives. By **Margaret Thaler Singer**, who is a clinical psychologist and emeritus adjunct professor at the University of California, Berkley. Janja Lalich (co-author), is a former cult member and is now a writer, consultant, and cult information specialist.

² Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged, 1966.

³ Michael D. Langhorn, Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse, p.p. 4-5

⁴ Taken from, Guide to Cults, Religions, & Spiritual Beliefs, by Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz, pp. 101-105; and, Why So Many Gods, multiple.

Religious Definition of Cult?⁵

The word *cult* comes from the Latin word *cultus*. Its original definition referred to members of an organization who cared about the same things. (The English word *culture* is derived from the same Latin word.) When used in a religious context, the word *cult* defines a group that holds certain ideas and practices in common, but the specifics of its beliefs are either so new, or so different that they take it way beyond the religion from which it started.

Theologians Dr. R. C. Sproul and Tim Couch have identified ten characteristics that typically distinguish groups that fit into the category of a “*cult*.” Here is their list (with user-friendly explanations):

1. **An abrupt break with historic Christianity and its confessions.** Cults usually view historical Christianity as being off base for all of those centuries since Christ until their founder came along.
2. **Autosotericism.** This is theological lingo for “self-salvation.” Cults usually specify that salvation is obtained by following certain rules and regulations – those that are specific by the cult.
3. **A deficient Christology.** Christianity is premised on the belief that Jesus was God; if He was something less than God, then salvation by His death on the cross wouldn’t work. Cults, however, take a lesser view of Christ. They might admire him as greater than a human, but they don’t consider Him as the one true God.
4. **Syncretism.** This is more theological jargon that simple means the blending of different elements from several religions into one synthesized belief system.
5. **An emphasis on their own distinctiveness.** Rather than stressing the major doctrinal points of Christianity, a cult will put disproportionate emphasis on its distinguishing doctrines. Those things that mainline Christianity considers to be essential take a backseat to the cult’s unique characteristic.
6. **Perfectionism.** Most cults teach that it is possible for a human to be perfect (a doctrine that flies in the face of Christianity’s view that humans are sinful and can never achieve God’s standard of perfection). Moral perfection is usually attainable by following the cult’s prescribed conduct.
7. **An extra-Biblical source of authority.** While many cults recognize the Bible as a sacred piece of literature, they have additional holy books. These other writings usually take precedence over the Bible (or they at least give the authoritative interpretation of the Bible). If there is a conflict between the two, the Bible comes in second place.
8. **A belief in exclusive community salvation.** A cult teaches that it is the only true church. Unless you believe all its teachings, you won’t be saved. In contrast, a *sect* of traditional Christianity won’t claim exclusive rights to salvation; most denominations differences don’t pertain to the qualifications for salvation. According to the prevailing Christian viewpoint, joining a particular denomination is not a prerequisite to get to heaven. For most cults, however, you won’t make it unless you are one of their members.
9. **A preoccupation with eschatology.** Eschatology is the study of the end of the world (or “*the end times*,” as Christians like to call it). In the perspective of the time line of Christianity, most cults are brand-new (having been formed after Christianity had been rolling along 1800 years or so). Cults often explain that their founder brought the last word from God to prepare mankind for the end of the world. With this perspective, cults often emphasize urgency about the end of the world.
10. **Esotericism.** Something is esoteric if it is beyond the knowledge of most people and understood by only a select group of individuals. This is what separates cults from traditional Christianity. Each cult claims that its founder and/or leaders have access to special truth that was previously hidden.

⁵ Taken from, Guide to Cults, Religions, & Spiritual Beliefs, by Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz, pp. 101-105;