DEFINITIONS OF CULT: FROM SOCIOLOGICAL- TECHNICAL TO POPULAR-NEGATIVE

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This paper examines the theoretical and historical development of the term "cult," from its inception in the work of Troeltsch to more modern delineations of the term in the work of researchers studying new religious groups. The usurpation of the term by popular usage associated with strong negative connotations is discussed, along with efforts by a few contemporary scholars to salvage the term by redefining it in ways which attempt to combine traditional and popular meanings. The futility of this approach is discussed, and the paper concludes with suggestions that scholars should avoid the term and that it should not be allowed to be used in legal proceedings because of its confused and negatively connoted meaning in contemporary society.

INTRODUCTION

The term cult has a long and revered history in the sociology of religion, deriving from the work of Troeltsch (1931) and being developed since by a number of theorists (see Richardson, 1978, and van Driel and Richardson, 1988, for fuller discussions). The concept, as Campbell (1972) has noted, is a "Cinderella term" within the sociology of religion, consistently overlooked in favor of other concepts such as sect, church and denomination. Troeltsch developed the term as something of a residual category in his theoretical scheme of religious forms in Western culture. Since then the term has served "as a 'rug' under which were swept the troublesome and idiosyncratic religious experiences of mystics and other religious deviants..." (Richardson, 1978:29).

In recent years the term cult has become a widely used popular term, usually connoting some group that is at least unfamiliar and perhaps even disliked or feared (Dillon and Richardson, 1991). This popular use of the term has gained such credence and momentum that it has virtually swallowed up the more neutral historical meaning of the term from the sociology of religion. Indeed, some would claim that the term cult is useless, and should be avoided because of the confusion between the historic meaning of the term and current pejorative use.

This paper will compare these two usages of the term cult, and make some recommendations about resolving the dilemma, especially since the new, negatively connoted usage of the term cult has invaded so many areas of life. First we will look at the traditional use of the term within the sociology of religion.

CULT IN THE SOCIOLOGICAL TRADITION

In an earlier paper (Richardson, 1978:31) I defined the term as follows:

...a cult is usually defined as a small informal group lacking a definite authority structure, somewhat spontaneous in its development (although often possessing a somewhat charismatic leader or group of leaders), transitory, somewhat mystical and individualistically oriented, and deriving its inspiration and ideology from outside the predominant religious culture.

This definition relied heavily on the work of Nelson (1969), whose work on Spiritualism had revealed serious problems with usual scholarly application of the church-sect typology. Nelson was attempting to develop and generalize the term cult so that it might be useful in describing entities not fitting usual notions of church, sect, or denomination well. He also wanted a concept useful beyond the Judeo-Christian orbit. Nelson stressed the "break with tradition" idea, and also incorporated a focus on individualism and on mystical, psychic, or ecstatic experiences.

The just-cited typical definition from Richardson (1978) is not without controversy. Wallis (1974:300) argues that to include the idea of "deriving its inspiration from outside the dominant culture" makes the term cult too culture-bound. He suggests that a more sociological approach would focus on "...changes in organizational form, modes of social control, and relations with the surrounding society." Wallis, however, goes on to develop a conceptualization of cult emphasizing Martin's (1965) notion of individualism, which is itself quite content-oriented.

In the 1978 paper I developed an "oppositional" conceptualization of cult more generalizable than usual delineations within sociology of religion. Two major dimensions were used - "individualistic-collectivistic" and "mystical-rational" to demonstrate how an oppositional approach to cult might operate (see Table 1). If a society has as dominant values individualism and rationality, then cultic responses could be individualistic-mystical, collectivistic-rational or collectivistic-mystical. More specifically (1979:38):

If dominant cultural values are individualistic-rational (as some would say about modern American society), then cultic responses could be the hippie subculture (individualistic-mystical, a communist cell (collectivistic-rational), and a religious commune, either eastern or Christian mystical (collectivistic-mystical). If one were willing to categorize the culture of a communist country as "collectivistic-rational" a mystically oriented artist group (individualistic-mystical) would illustrate a cultic response. If we consider the Catholic-dominated period prior to the Reformation as "collectivistic-mystical," then certainly the initial stages of the Protestant Reformation would be an individualistic-rational" response...

Most earlier treatments simply state that a cult develops in opposition to the dominant culture, or they only talk of cults in religious terms (Yinger, 1957; Glock and Stark, 1965). The oppositional conceptualization is derivative of traditional approaches within the sociology of religion, but adds an element of

Table 1

Relationship of dominant and counter-cultural values, using 'individualistic-collectivistic' and 'rational-mystical' as major characterizing variables.

Dominant values	Values of 'counter-cultural' response			
	Individualistic		Collectivistic	
	Rational	Mystical	Rational	Mystical
Individualistic rational	✕			
Individualistic mystical		✕		
Collectivist rational			✕	
Collectivist mystical				✕

specificity that most treatments omit. The conceptualization is also suggestive of some interesting ideas for possible research in other areas of study (Richardson, 1978:34).

> (T)here could be cultic responses to sects, denominations, churches, and even other cults (or the "cultic milieu"). And regarding other areas of life and of sociology it seems just as obvious that there could be cultic responses in art, music, politics, medicine, education, and many other areas (even sociology itself).

The oppositional conceptionalization seemed a fruitful way to proceed with research in sociology of religion and other areas as well. The so-called Jesus Movement of the later 1960s and 1970s had been used in the earlier paper as an example of a cult-like movement in which the oppositional conceptualization was developed. Such a characterization of the Jesus Movement was counter to usual application of the notion of cult in the sociology of religion (which emphasize that cults are counter to the dominant values of the society). The cult characterization of Jesus Movement beginnings was explained as follows (1978:43):

> ...much of the initial impetus for the movement did come from outside the primary religion of the culture. Interviews with the members of several different movement groups indicated that the movement developed in reaction to excesses in the counter-cultural cultic milieu, and used a form of traditional Christianity as a vehicle of rebellion against the counter-culture, while at the same time retaining some elements of counter-cultural beliefs and behavior with which to ... contrast ... its own position and that of the dominant culture.

In another paper I used the oppositional approach to develop a theory of how cult groups evolve into what sociologists would call sects. Again the Jesus Movement was used as an example of how the process might work. I had expanded the theorizing of Wallis (1974), developed in his research on Diabetics (better known as Scientology). The expansion was incorporated in a theoretical model that included several sets of analytically distinct factors: (1) group factors, (2) individual factors, (3) external factors, and (4) "bridges" or links between the cultic milieu and the Jesus Movement and other new religions (Richardson, 1979:143).

Details of this theory of cult to sect change will not be discussed here. The point of this discussion is that in the late 1970s I and other sociologists of religion were making use of the term cult in a technical sense and were developing theories incorporating that term. But these promising theoretical and empirical efforts to use the term were obliterated by growing use of the term cult as a catch-all to refer to any new and unusual groups which had engendered animosity among some interest groups in the society. This usage will now be discussed.

THE "NEW" CULT DEFINITION

Robbins and Anthony (1982:283) delineate the new, more popular definition of cult as follows:

> ...certain manipulative and authoritarian groups which allegedly employ mind control and pose a threat to mental health are universally labeled cults. These groups are usually: (1) authoritarian in their leadership; (2) communal and totalistic in their organization; (3) aggressive in their proselytizing; (4) systematic in their programs of indoctrination; (5) relatively new and unfamiliar in the United States; and (6) middle class in their clientele.

This definition clearly shows the problems associated with the new, popularized definition of cult. The emotionally charged terms used in the definition evidence the meaning of the term for those who employ it. To call a group manipulative and authoritarian, and to allege that it poses a threat to the mental health of participants shows strong feelings. Calling such groups "totalistic" and "aggressive" and saying that they systematically indoctrinate members adds to the baggage carried by popular use of the term.

Aside from the obvious negative stereotype offered by the use of such language, there are other problems with the delineation. There is little in the definition except for the "new and unfamiliar in the U.S." which resembles the traditional sociological definition of the term. Indeed, there are elements in the definition which are counter to the sociological delineation. This popular use of the term does not refer to a "small informal group lacking in a definite authority structure...spontaneous in development." The notion of communal is not part of the traditional definition, and aggressive recruitment seems at the odds with the notion of a small informal group with relatively amorphous boundaries of belief and behavior.

Thus the new definition of cult is a hodgepodge of elements which do not hang together in any logical sense, as did elements of the traditional definition. The new definition's elements are a list of things which some interest groups in our society do not like, or which they attribute to disfavored groups. If those opposing certain groups can successfully attach the label "cult" to a group, then they virtually automatically get to heap the negative baggage of the popular definition on that group. In short, the term has become a "social weapon" to use against groups which are not viewed with favor.

The new use of the term cult has become widespread. Media use it indiscriminantly (see van Driel and Richardson, 1988), which evidences the success of the Anti-Cult Movement (Shupe and Bromley, 1980) in promoting its view of the world. Professionals and lay persons who oppose the new religions use the term as frequently as possible, and in an ever-expanding way, as evidenced by the recent focus on activities of alleged "satanic cults" (Richardson, Best, and Bromley, 1991). Even more interesting is growing use of the popular term in scholarly writings about new religions and related phenomena. Some scholars attempt to avoid the term because of negative stereotyping which accompanies its use (Dillon and Richardson, 1991). The term "new religions" or "new religious movements" has been developed as a somewhat amorphous term of art by some scholars. Others, however, have, in a sense, given up to the inevitable and employ the term cult so that people who read their writings will know they are talking about phenomena popularly referred to as cults. Thus the popular usage of the term has virtually swept the more technical and historical use of the term from writings both popular and scholarly.

Ellwood (1986) attempts to develop a definition of cult that combines some traditional concerns from the sociology of religion with the newer meaning of the term. He admits (1986:217) to "approaching the job phenomenologically...seek(ing) only to give a name to that which has already appeared and...defined itself by exhibiting special features or constellations of features." Ellwood adds:

...the word cult is so intimately intertwined with the popular connotations the word has acquired as to make it, in my view, ultimately undesirable. The label has too often been used to isolate groups in a priori theological or social grounds and then endow them with a wide range of characteristics associated in the user's mind with cults.

Ellwood's efforts to salvage the term is laudatory. In reasonably neutral language he offers (1986:218-222) a delineation which includes the following elements:

1. A group that "presents a distinct alternative to dominant patterns within the society in fundamental areas of religious life." This includes a small size with "distinctly different" forms of belief and practice, carried on by a uniquely organized group (see p. 219 for details).
2. Possessing "strong authoritarian and charismatic leadership."
3. Oriented toward "inducing powerful subjective experiences and meeting personal needs."
4. Is "separatist in that it strives to maintain distinct boundaries between it and the 'outside,'" and "requiring a high degree of conformity and commitment."
5. A tendency "to see itself as legitimated by a long tradition of wisdom or practice of which it is the current manifestation."

This integrative effort is defended by Ellwood, who says the definition will not apply to some groups being referred to popularly (and by some professionals) as cults. He states (1986:221) that it will apply more to newer religious movements "in their first generation and subsequently become less applicable as they, through routinization of charisma and institutionalization, become something else sociologically, even if still small and alternative."

Ellwood also attempted to distinguish his delineation from the term sect (1986:22):

[o]ur definition allows the customary sociological distinction between cult and sect, unless the sect is quite heterodox, for though many characteristics would obtain in both instances - separatism or relation to a legitimating tradition for example - the sect, as a particularly intense version of the dominant religion with withdrawal features, is usually said to possess more legalistic that charismatic authority and to represent a spiritual alternative only in a much narrower sense than the cult.

Ellwood has made a valiant effort to define the term cult in a useful, non-stereotypical way. He apparently is not satisfied with his efforts, however, as he proceeds (1986:23) to recommend use of the alterative term "emergent religion" in place of the term cult. I share his concerns, based on personal experiences with trying to use the term in a technical sense with newer religious phenomena. Indeed, I would take the regrettable position that the term should be abandoned by scholars as currently being misleading and not very useful. For scholars to attempt to make use of a term with such strong and negative popular meanings seems to be folly, and it plays into the hands of those who would oppose the development of new religious forms in our society.

USE OF THE TERM CULT IN OTHER SETTINGS

As problematic as the term cult is for scholars, its use in other settings may be worse. For instance, the term has such negative connotations that for it to be allowed in court proceedings is a major victory for those opposing groups being referred to as cults. If a group being sued is referred to with impunity as a cult, many of those hearing the term can be expected to assume the "baggage" which often accompanies the term in its popular usage. There is suggestive evidence that this attribution process may occur with regularity. For example, Tyner (1991) notes that custody disputes involving minority or deviant religious groups nearly always result in custody awards to the parent involved in a traditional religious group. Richardson (1991) discusses tort actions involving groups often referred to as cults, and notes the difficulty such groups have in defending themselves. Bromley and Breschel (1992) find strong support among the general public and institutional elites for social control of groups referred to as cults.

Jeffrey Pfeiffer, a psychologist, has done research relevant to the question (Pfeiffer, 1992). His research, grounded in psychological framing theory as developed by Tversky and Kahneman (1981), offers some empirical test of the claim that the term "cult" carries significant "baggage." Pfeiffer states (1992:533) that "when an individual is asked to evaluate an object, person, or event, his or her judgment may be based upon a previously developed cognitive representation such as a schema." He adds, "there is a negativity bias...[That] has been illustrated by a number of studies which suggest that negative information often carries more weight than positive information in terms of biasing judgments."

Pfeiffer then points out the general negative coverage of cults in the media and suggests that inundating people with the negative images from the media may result in the formation of "negative schemata regarding the indoctrination processes employed by cults" (1992:533-534). He refers to Tversky and Kahneman's (1981) point that when a person is asked to make a judgment about something unfamiliar they may "anchor the response to any piece of relevant information the person has...and subsequently frame their decision around this anchor" (1992:534). Pfeiffer thinks the term cult is a significant anchor which frames interpretations given to anything referred to by that term.

Pfeiffer's research is supportive of our point. He developed a scenario of someone joining a group and going through its indoctrination process. He had 100 subjects read a scenario, similar in all respects except changed so that subjects thought the person was being recruited by a cult, identified as the Unification Church or "Moonies", by a Catholic seminary, or by the Marines.

The results of this research show an overwhelming bias against groups such as the Unification Church, and those who join them. For instance, subjects defined the person who joined the Unification Church as significantly less happy, less intelligent, and less responsible than those who joined the Marines or the seminary. They also thought the person may have been coerced and treated less fairly by the Unification Church.

In a survey administered to subjects afterward, they were asked to describe their feelings about cults. Seventy-four percent offered a negative interpretation,
and 82% described the average cult member in negative terms. Of note, 92% said their perceptions were based on news media accounts, and 78% said they have had no personal contact with cult members. Pfeiffer's conclusion included the following statement (1992:541): "(S)ubjects tend to rate both the group, and the individual joining the group, in more negative terms if they are led to believe the group is a cult."

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the obvious negative connotations of the term cult, as shown by a number of surveys and by Pfeiffer's research, it seems reasonable to suggest that the term "cult" should be severely limited in scholarly and other writings about religious groups. To do otherwise promotes the agenda of those deliberately using the term as a social weapon against new and exotic religious groups and experiences, even if those using the term do so more or less innocent of such intentions (Dillon and Richardson, 1991). Scholars should abandon the term cult, in favor of terms which have not been so taken over with popular negative usage. Perhaps Ellwood's term "emergent religion" will be found to be useful. But if it does not, then some other should be tried, so that dispassionate discussion and research can proceed.

The term cult should also be disallowed in legal proceedings where involvement in an exotic religious group is an issue. Those defending in actions against new religions popularly referred to as cults should consider making pre-trial motions to suppress the use of that term in the court room. The term simply carries too much baggage to allow its casual use in proceedings designed to have rational judgments made about important issues.

Some years ago I co-authored a somewhat tongue-in-cheek piece entitled "Cultphobia" (Kilbourne and Richardson, 1986), in which we described a new mental disorder involving phobia about cults. I would now close with the suggestion, somewhat more seriously, that those concerned with the misuse of the term cult should themselves become literally "cultphobic" and develop a strong aversion to using the misleading term. To make any use of the term "cult" offers solace to those promoting the new, negatively-loaded definition of the term, and such use should be stopped.

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THE ROLE OF EXPECTATIONS IN RELIGIOUS CONVERSIONS: THE CASE OF HISPANIC CATHOLICS

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A random sample of 269 Hispanics (Catholics and Non-Catholics) were interviewed over the telephone to study their expectations toward their church and the possible reasons for conversions away from Catholicism. Our study supported a number of hypotheses regarding conversions of Hispanic Catholics. Of particular importance seems to be the role of social situations and the search of converts for spirituality and for a more significant involvement with their faith and with scripture. Also important seems to be the search for interesting and relevant worship services, for committed and understanding pastors, and for a laity that shows equal concern for worship, spiritual growth, and concern for others. Expectations differed by faith and by the acculturation level of the respondents.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, various authors (e.g., Deck, 1988, 1989; Greeley, 1988) have suggested that Hispanics are leaving the Catholic Church at surprising and alarming rates. Andrew Greeley (1988) for example, estimates that approximately 60,000 Hispanic Catholics a year are converting to Protestant denominations. Generalizing from data collected between 1972 and 1987 on 790 "Spanish Origin" respondents from the General Social Surveys, Greeley further estimates that over the past 15 years, almost one million Hispanic men and women (8% of the total Hispanic Catholic population) have left the Catholic Church.

The large numbers of Hispanic Catholics assumed to be converting to Protestant denominations has prompted Hispanic community leaders as well as the Catholic Church to explore this phenomenon and search for solutions. Greeley (1988) indicated that the Catholic Church has failed to reach low income Hispanics and that Protestant and Evangelical "sects" use their enthusiasm, "grass-roots" ministry, and "native" married clergy to appeal to the problems of Hispanics. Greeley (1988) also stated that these sects are appealing to a Hispanic middle class that is searching to break with tradition and to become "responsible and respectable members of the American middle class" (p. 62).

Deck (1985) has pointed out that a variety of fundamentalist religions are in a "missionary mode" which includes walking through Hispanic neighborhoods,