

Perspectives on ‘Cult’ Rhetoric (And Its Future)

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ABSTRACT

The ‘Cult Rhetoric in the 21st Century’ panel at the 2022 BASR conference brought together six scholars, specialising in the field of minority religion, to discuss developing trends in ‘cultic’ discourse. The panellists all argue for a nuanced, contemporary approach toward understanding the use of ‘cult’ rhetoric and have a clear focus on the lived reality of adherents and ex-members. In this article, the contributing panellists outline the dominant themes emerging in the contemporary use of ‘cult’ rhetoric, challenging scholars to move beyond the ‘cult wars’ and study of New Religious Movements to a more holistic study of everyday religion – in which ‘cult’ rhetoric is a consistent part. These reflections provide a snapshot of the discussions that were had at the BASR conference whilst simultaneously indicating what to expect from their contributions in the forthcoming volume: *Cult Rhetoric in the 21st Century: Deconstructing the Study of New Religious Movements*.

KEYWORDS

Cults, New Religious Movements, Brainwashing, Coercion, Sociology of Religion, Public Engagement, Inform, Popular Vernacular

Aled Thomas

As the ballots were counted during the 2019 UK general election, the former Labour Party Home Secretary Alan Johnson described left-wing activist group Momentum as a 'little cult' on television (Smyth, 2019). This brief, yet notable, moment of political debate highlighted two key points: firstly, that rhetoric surrounding the notion of 'cults' can act as a powerful political tool, and secondly, that popular conceptions of 'cults' and their characteristics (such as brainwashed followers, lack of 'reason', excessive devotion to the ideas of a charismatic leader) are deeply embedded in contemporary society. This incident was not unique, rather it was an example of increasing use of cult rhetoric in political discourse (such as the 'cult of Trump' or 'cult of COVID') deployed on both sides of the left-right political divide. This continuing presence of 'cultic' typologies and language in popular vernacular can be a source of frustration for scholars of minority religions, who often stress caution regarding use of the term (Thomas and Graham-Hyde, 2021). Indeed, from a critical and scholarly perspective, the term is an empty signifier, holding the potential for countless meanings in a variety of contexts for the individual(s) utilising it (Zeller, 2023). Yet, as the example of 'cult' rhetoric in political discourses demonstrates, the term can be weaponised in a hybrid fashion – combining religious, political, medicinal, and conspiracy discourses (Thomas and Graham-Hyde, forthcoming).

Language and terminology are in a constant state of flux – 'cult' rhetoric is changing and scholarly frameworks addressing the term should change in turn. This issue became a dominant theme of the 'Cult Rhetoric in the 21st Century' roundtable at the 2022 British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR) conference, resulting in a lively discussion on the 'rights' of scholars to regulate language used in everyday life, and the relationship between the academy and wider publics. Indeed, as noted during the roundtable, 'cult' as both a term and a framework can be both empowering and useful for survivors of abuse when negotiating their former experiences. Simultaneously, due to the term's status as an empty signifier, the term also continues to be used as a pejorative – not only in terms of political debate, but to stigmatise marginalised communities who 'deviate' from dominant normativity. Such troubling framing of 'deviances' often adopt arguably colonialist understandings of white Christocentric religion in contrast to movements that seem unusual and thus 'culty' (to use a popular term).

Accordingly, the vague and fluid nature of 'cults' must be approached with both caution and nuance. Indeed, from a scholarly perspective, rigorous application of the term is practically impossible – it has been used to categorise too broad a range of social processes, whilst also being laden with cultural biases. Despite its inadequacy as a scholarly term, academics must acknowledge and be prepared to work with its arguably increasing popularity. The academic study of religion, as noted by Stephen E. Gregg (2017), risks becoming a 'muted voice' in public discourse. If we are to communicate our scholarship with wider audiences, we must avoid burning bridges with those that adopt 'cult' rhetoric, but rather engage in dialogue that in turn allows us a greater understanding of how the term is used and understood in everyday life. Accordingly, the question we should ask is not whether the term should be used in public life, but *how* it is used – shining a light on the complexities of religious, political, and therapeutic discourses the term can encompass.

Edward Graham-Hyde

In recent years I stumble across ‘cult’ rhetoric almost daily in general everyday life. As I sit in a café and write this, there is someone across from me reading *The Cult and Science of Public Health* (Dew, 2012); having read reviews, I remain sceptical that I will find this contribution to be rigorous in the application of ‘cult’ when I inevitably read the book. It is exactly this development of ‘cult’ rhetoric that has captured my interest. Elsewhere, Aled Thomas and I have outlined our vision for the continued study of religion (Thomas and Graham-Hyde, 2021; forthcoming). We have argued, with others, that through having a methodological lived religion approach must include an everyday conceptualisation of terminology as understood by the user, rather than the researcher.

The BASR panel has been foundational in helping me develop my approach toward a holistic understanding of terminology within popular vernacular. During the panel, one line of discussion concerned whether the term ‘cult’ had utility. Previously, I have argued that the term has little utility and that the term is simply a social weapon that should be avoided (Graham-Hyde, 2023). Upon reflection of the BASR 2022 panel, this was perhaps an overly absolutist approach that reflects my status as an early career scholar that still tries to obtain nuance, tact and wisdom while journeying through academia. I have since come to the realisation that terms such as ‘cult’ and ‘brainwashing’ do have utility because ex-members, leave-takers and apostates often frame their experience using the very vernacular that I had argued lacked value. When considering the work of Stephen E. Gregg and George D. Chryssides (2017), and Rod Dubrow-Marshall (forthcoming), I now would argue that ‘cult’ rhetoric can be helpful for a victim of abuse, leave-taker, or ex-member in framing their lived experience – it is the role of the researcher to uncover, analyse and report on the lived reality of all those that participant in research.

Nevertheless, despite my ‘revelation’, I do remain firmly critical of the usage of ‘cult’ rhetoric within scholarly and research driven contexts. I find the consistent pejorative usage of ‘cult’ rhetoric in journalistic contexts, which I argue are and should be research-driven, deeply troubling and indicative of an industry that simply lacks rigour. The work of Sarah Ventre and Ken Chitwood (2023) is promising; they have created a toolkit for *Reporting on New Religious Movements (NRMs)*, but significant social issues remain until journalistic culture changes. In scholarly work, I argue (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, forthcoming) that scholars of religion must continue to hold our academic colleagues to account for the misguided and naïve usage of terminology. When we become aware of articles that do not robustly conceptualise ‘cult’ (and derivatives thereof) we should reach out, offer to collaborate on future research and lend our expertise. Reaching out to journals in fields we would not usually publish in to offer our services as peer-reviewers and forming multi-disciplinary research groups in our respective institutions can also be effective. When collaborative approaches yield little fruit then we should not be afraid to publish replies and write rebuttals – we must not compromise on long-term academic rigour. Ultimately, while I firmly believe that more rigour is needed around the use of ‘cult’ rhetoric, this remains a much-needed discussion that cannot lead to quick fixes – as stated in the BASR panel.

George D. Chryssides

My earliest encounter with the anticult movement (ACM) was in 1982, when I joined the United Reformed Church's Other Faiths Committee, which was then considering how new religious movements should be regarded. A visiting speaker from the anticult organisation FAIR (Family Action Information and Rescue, now renamed the Family Survival Trust) presented us with a list, which itemised a total of 107 'cults, sects, and fringe groups' consisting of an assortment of organisations, interests and practices of remarkable diversity, including Baha'i, biorhythms, Bugbrooke Jesus Fellowship, Crystal Consciousness, Gestalt, Jehovah's Witnesses, Kirlean Aura Diagnosis, Theosophical Society, and Yoga. There was no indication of which items fell into which of the three categories in the heading, or why certain items did not appear, for example Amway, astrology, Nation of Islam, neurolinguistic programming, and New Age, among others that have at times been described as 'cults'.

The composition of that list highlights an issue which Steven Sutcliffe has identified (although in a different context): it 'lacks predictable content' (Sutcliffe, 2003: 29). In other words, its scope is indeterminate, and when an organisation is mentioned, it is unclear whether the word 'cult' should be applied or not. The problem is intensified when the term "destructive cult" is used: when is a so-called cult 'destructive' (and what specifically does it destroy?), and does the expression contrast with 'benign cults', which the ACM never seems to identify?

A further problem lies in the pejorative nature of the term 'cult'. In the past it has been used within academic circles. Some historians of religion used to use the term *cultus* to describe ancient Jewish practice that centred on the Jerusalem Temple, and J. M. Yinger, building on Weber's distinction between Church and sect, added 'cult' to signify 'groups that are similar to sects, but represent a sharp break, in religious terms, from the dominant religious tradition of a society' (Yinger [1946] 1961, 152). The term can be used to denote loosely organised movements that are centred around a popular figure or object, for example, 'the cult of Mary' or 'the cult of Elvis', or a 'cult film' or 'cult book', indicating a sphere of loyalty and attachment which does not have a single organisational focus.

However, the term has largely become debased, and applied to individual groups, such as Scientology or the Hare Krishna movement, it has decidedly pejorative connotations. It is somewhat akin to describing a person as a 'weirdo': while someone might use such a term in private, professional psychologists and psychiatrists would never consider entitling a book 'Understanding Weirdos'. Yet a plethora of literature emanating from the Christian counter-cult movement and the ACM includes the word 'cult'. A quick browse at my own shelves reveals titles like *Those Curious New Cults*, *Cults – A Practical Guide*, *Combatting Cult Mind Control*, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, *Larson's New Book of Cults*, and many more.

The problem is not finding an alternative term to 'cult'. Unfortunately, as scholars of religion we have inherited the legacy of the media and the ACM, which have lumped together a host of disparate concepts under the same umbrella. How we disentangle this muddle remains a challenge.

Sarah Harvey

Inform, as an educational charity based in a university TRS department (at King's College, London), straddles two worlds - that of academia but also the charity sector where our work revolves around providing accurate information about minority religions to the wider public. In this two-pronged approach, we take a practical engagement with the word 'cult'.

Eileen Barker founded Inform in the late 1980s as a result of her seminal work on the Unification Church and her finding that harm was caused by the misinformation that was circulating about this new movement and others. Inform was established as an alternative to 'cult awareness groups' which tended to provide lists of cults, focusing on their shared problematic characteristics, rather than on the specifics of their beliefs and practices. Inform is therefore firmly situated within the NRM Studies field. We do not use the term 'cult' in our publications because of its use as a pejorative label to categorise a religion as something bad, deviant, not a 'real' religion, as my colleagues have noted. We explain this use of the term to enquirers to Inform, particularly the media, who should have a responsibility to provide accurate information about religious movements (although in reality the majority are motivated by profit and hence often by sensationalism).

And yet, a significant proportion of our enquiries are from the family and friends of members of new religions and from former-members who may have experienced harm or abuse. Some (although not all) find a 'Cultic Studies' perspective, including the cult label and associated mechanisms of control, helpful in understanding their own experiences or those of their loved ones. Some find therapeutic value in this perspective, allowing them to understand their experiences and move forward with their lives. Of course, this is not something that we challenge.

So I suggest, as do my colleagues on the BASR panel, that we have to be practical about people's use of the term cult, not seeking to police it, but rather engaging with context-dependent questions of when and why people find it useful. I think that 'lazy' use of it by academics and journalists who use it as a quick label to designate a group as not a 'real' religion, is a different situation to people who have left a movement in which they have had a negative experience. In the project on which I am currently working, Abuse in Religious Contexts (<https://research.kent.ac.uk/airs/>), we are exploring issues of abuse across a wide range of religious traditions, 'mainstream' and 'minority', trying to understand similarities and differences. We are seeking to identify the structural and cultural factors which might enable abuse in any religious community. I suggest that rather than categorising movements as 'religions' or 'cults', we instead focus on problematic issues concerned with the circulation of power which can be common to all. These include themes of interpersonal relations, especially relationships of authority and submission, gender relations, relations between the generations, the micro-regulation of member's lives and 'blurred boundaries' between different spheres of life. We must be attentive to what Robert Orsi (2019), writing about the Catholic Church, has described as the shadow side of lived religion, its "intimate cruelties", "abuses of power" and "impulses to destroy and dominate".

Suzanne Newcombe

Scholars often define – operationalise – significant terms. This is essential for the development of theory and creating greater acumen in our powers of observation. What we can name, identify and delineate, we can better notice – or make note of its absence. Although cult has a specific lineage in academic discourse, I, along with most scholars of religion, do not find this term very helpful in creating a more subtle framework with which to observe and better understand the world (Zeller, 2023).

However, as researchers and observers of contemporary society, ‘cult rhetoric’ holds seemingly endless potential for inspiring interest. A genre of semi-documentary, semi-reconstructions of ‘cult atrocities’ (e.g. Waco (2018 and 2023), Wild Wild Country (2018), Helter Skelter (1976; 2004; 2020), etc.) overlaps slightly with the ‘cult classics’ of pop-culture fiction which touch on supernatural themes and have small, devoted communities of followers. There are now a plethora of popular podcasts covering aspects of cults, confessional tales mixed with casual advice.

But cult is not necessarily negative in popular contemporary discourse. One might aspire to have a ‘cult following’ if one is a musician or would-be ‘influencer’, or if one wants to attract loyal consumers to a commercial brand (e.g. Raynsford, 2021). In fact, the clothing brand ‘Cult’ claims to have been ‘creating stylistic synergies’ and ‘captivating volumes for a timeless and transgressive style’ since 1987 (CultOfficial.com, 2023). There is an energy and intrinsic interest in all that is ‘cultish’ (i.e. Montell, 2021 and ‘The Cultish Show’, 2023) that scholars can and should channel as a teaching opportunity for the academic study of religion. Course titles which promise discussion on the weird and wonderful of religion are likely to draw students; moreover, students increasingly want to see issues of harm within religious contexts explicitly covered.

Cult is also a word which in other contexts is powerful, emotionally charged and negative. It is still used to describe anxiety about groups who are associated with harm and suffering – for those who belong to the community, for those who love those who might have had contact with such a community (e.g. ICSA, 2023). It is used by former members to help unpack and understand forms of socialisation and power games that were played in groups. It can help ‘survivors’ better understand the mechanisms which pressured them to say and do things about which they now feel ashamed. It is important to treat these uses of the word cult with sensitivity and compassion for trying to understand traumatic and abusive experiences.

Yet, just as the boundaries between the religious and the secular are blurred in contemporary contexts, the cultural distinctions ‘good’ and ‘bad’ religion are no longer clear. Child sexual abuse scandals have rocked the pinnacles of respectability that were once the Catholic Church and the Church of England. Thankfully, we are getting much more specific language in contemporary society that more accurately articulates the behaviours which are used to gain abusive power over others, e.g. coercive control (Serious Crime Act 2015 Section 76) and gaslighting (Sweet, 2019) allow for better analysis of both intimate partner violence and some religious contexts. The concept of ‘spiritual abuse’ is gaining traction to describe the unique harm that happens when an individual’s sense of ontological certainty is ruptured. This happens religious or spiritual authorities harm those in inferior social positions, and is an increasingly

recognised occurrence both within new and 'mainstream' religions (e.g. Oakley and Humphreys, 2019).

Famously, the religious studies scholar J.Z. Smith declared that religion was 'not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define' (1993: 283). In contrast cult is a term which richly reveals the processes of change in culture and society (Williams, 1976). As scholars, I don't think we should be particularly keen to define the word cult. We can learn so much more by studying the radical changes of meaning dependent on context, by exploring resonances of continuity over time, and unpicking the detailed contours of the conflicts that arise when word cult is invoked.

Donald A. Westbrook

In the United States, certainly, and I assume also in the UK and elsewhere, a rise in rhetoric about so-called 'cults' may be linked to polarisation in politics, culture, and society. I can point to books such as Steven Hassan's *The Cult of Trump* (2019), John McWhorter's *Woke Racism* (2021), or the ways in which groups, religious or not, may be regarded as 'cultish', to borrow from Amanda Montell's 2021 book (not to mention her and Isabela Medina-Maté's podcast 'Sounds like a Cult'). Those of us who research new religious movements are sometimes labelled and dismissed as 'cult apologists'. Even members of new religions can make use of cultic language for their own counter-offensive and public relations purposes. One example that comes to mind is the way in which Scientologists have dismissed some of their critics as part of an 'anti-Scientology cult' (ASC). My own view remains that the word 'cult', at least as it is used in popular discourse, is little more than a slur – regarded as the 'C-word' – and indeed perhaps one of the last remaining (somewhat) acceptable slurs of our time, all depending on who is using it and when. In the end, the term 'cult', divorced from some of its more sophisticated sociological origins, is, I think, pejorative, imprecise, and subjective to the verge of meaninglessness. But, and this is key, perhaps these are the very qualities that make it so attractive, potent, and malleable in our 'post-truth' world that is too often characterised by ideological echo chambers, misinformation and disinformation, and monologue over dialogue. Perhaps, then, the popular persistence of 'cult' will remain something of a Rorschach test, left in the eye of the beholder, a stinging signifier on which to project visions of the deviant Other, in the process revealing as much about the people who employ such language as it does about those on the receiving end. At the same time, scholars of religion should continue to investigate the ways in which individuals, groups, and societies appeal to 'cult' rhetoric and *why*. For instance, it is important to recognize and respect some of the ways in which cultic language may be claimed by some ex-members and critics for therapeutic purposes. Also, we should not be dismissive, preachy, or condescending toward students who may use such language, but make use of such opportunities to encourage critical thinking about terms and put them in their proper historical and sociological contexts. Better understanding of the 'how' and 'why' of cultic language may also lead NRM and other scholars to re-evaluate the ways in which we make use of sources about particular groups, including the perspectives offered by current as well as former members.

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