

Mormonism as "Cult": The Limits of Lexical Polemics

As missionaries in Switzerland, we were frequently met at the door with the question, “Kommen Sie von einer Sekte?” (“Are you from a *Sekte*?”). *Sekte*, we soon learned, was the popular and even official label for our denomination, as well as for all others not recognized as *Landeskirchen*, or state churches.¹ The technical distinction between the two groups was simple: State churches could collect the “church tax” through a state tax office—somewhat like tithes being withheld by the IRS.² But the difference in the popular mind made by this distinction was far weightier. Members of a *Sekte* were effectively relegated to second-class citizenship in a land of state churches. Because of the word’s negative connotations, to be affiliated with a *Sekte* required a quality of courage, conviction, and indifference to the opinions of one’s neighbors that is hard for most Americans to imagine. Despite occasional protestations of the innocuousness of the term, the looks of horror that were elicited when we (in mock innocence) asked someone if he or she belonged to a *Sekte* suggested that the word did indeed have a strong—and strongly negative—emotional charge to it.³

Perhaps it was this use of the word *Sekte* in the service of religious polemics that has made us more keenly aware, since our missions, of a similar use of the term “cult” (particularly by fundamentalist Christians) to describe a large number of religious groups, representing a very wide range of teaching and practice from Eckankar to Mormons, from the Healthy Happy Holy Organization to Christian Scientists. In at least two important ways, the terms “cult” and “*Sekte*” are alike: both words maintain an “in-group—out-group” division, and both pack a strong negative charge. On one side are mainline Protestant churches and sometimes Catholics; on the other, groups like Jehovah’s Witnesses, The Way International, the Church Universal and Triumphant, Jonestown, the Divine Light Mission, and the Mormons. (There is no mistaking the implied guilt by association: after all, Jonestown was a cult, and look what it did!)

The powerful emotional impact of the four-letter word “cult”—carried even in its short, explosive, violent sound⁴—is illustrated by two recent letters to the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, in which the magazine is taken to task for having referred to the presumed site of Joshua’s temple as a “cultic center.” One reader objects: “Cult conjures up images of evil men deceiving people and leading them off into foolish error. When I read about the Mt. Ebal altar, I don’t want Jim Jones jumping out at me.” Complains another: “When you worship the true and the living God, you are not engaged in a cultic ritual.” (Ironically, of course, these readers protest a use of the term that goes back to at least the seventeenth century, and which is precisely that of the Latin *cultus*. It is the polemical use of the word “cult” that finds no sanction in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.)⁵ The term’s impact is further illustrated in a classified advertisement routinely appearing in the respected evangelical publication, *Christianity Today*. “Mormonism is a cult!” it proclaims. “See why.” Those curious to discover why will be sent *The Utah Evangel*, an anti-Mormon tabloid. (Would the impact of the advertisement be as great if it read, “Mormonism is a religious denomination! See why?”)⁶ A recent letter to *The Evangel* (successor to the *Utah Evangel*) leaves little doubt about the word’s connotations: “I refuse to capitalize the word, mormon, for to us, this is nothing but a cult, and not worthy of being honored in this manner.”⁷

The term “cult” often appears with other words carrying a negative connotation. Recent publications like *Walter Martin Confronts the Cults*, *Confronting the Cults*, and *Confronting Cults: Old and New* share with the French *L’Offensive des Sectes* a rhetoric of conflict.⁸ The opening lines of L. D. Streiker’s *Cults: The Continuing Threat*, recalls

Joe McCarthy: “The cults are coming to your city—to your neighborhood—to the family next door—to your family—to your life! An invasion is underway. Beachheads have already been established in communities throughout America.” (Bob Larsen imagines “the war of the cults versus Christianity”; Walter Martin conjures up “the shock troops of cultism.”)

Also to be noted is the language of dehumanization and devaluation. “A cult is a perversion,” opens one book on the subject. We read of *The Chaos of Cults*, *The Cult Explosion*, where Walter Martin grimly warns his readers that “a virulent cultic . . . revival is sweeping our country.” “Cultists” are said to “feed on” nominal Christians. The Mormon Church is a “wolf-pack.” The year 1983 saw publication of *The Lure of the Cults*, by the sociologist and devoted “cult”-watcher, Ronald Enroth, as of H. L. Bussell’s *Unholy Devotion: Why Cults Lure Christians*. Notice here the language of seduction. (Can we imagine *The Lure of the Denominations?*)

An interview with Enroth in *Christianity Today* bears the sinister and inflammatory title: “The Dimensions of the Cult Conspiracy.” Jim Jones, Sun Myung Moon, and the mysterious L. Ron Hubbard are involved—of course. But there is more: “It is not unusual,” reveals Enroth, “for me to find students . . . who are surprised to learn that the Mormons are a cult.”⁹ Such naive folk are, no doubt, soon made to see the light. “Mormonism can be best understood,” according to the book, *The God Makers*, “in relation to the larger occult conspiracy, of which it is a part.”¹⁰

But if Mormons and others are to be classed as “cults,” the word must be defined. The term *Sekte* has, in Switzerland at least, a kernel of official meaning. However, in the absence of an established church in America, users of the term “cult” must provide their own definition for it. Some, following the sociologists, define a cult as a group that lives in tension with the larger community, demands a high level of commitment from its members, and tends to be authoritarian and exclusivistic.¹¹ But if, by this definition, Mormonism is a cult, other groups, too, may be so classified. Early Quakerism is a good example,¹² as are the Amish. Atwood and Flowers, in their recent study of “Early Christianity as a Cult Movement,” demonstrate that the primitive Church itself reflected the same (ostensibly “cultic”) characteristics.¹³ Early Christians lived in varying degrees of tension with both the values of Jewish society and of the wider Roman world. Origen of Alexandria exhorted third-century Christians “to despise the life that is eagerly sought after by the multitude,” and “to be earnest in living the life that resembles that of God.”¹⁴ And the costs of discipleship in early Christianity were potentially high: the prospect of rejection, persecution, and even martyrdom was real—but did not seem too great a price to pay. Indeed, to suffer for Christ was often viewed as a privilege. The whole *Epistle to the Romans* by Ignatius of Antioch is a plea that they not pray that he escape the death of a martyr, but that he endure it nobly. If he can die in Christ, writes Ignatius, he has no desire to live: “Though I am alive while I write to you, yet I am eager to die. My love (i.e., Christ) has been crucified, and there is no fire in me desiring to be fed.”¹⁵ Further, as Graham Shaw has argued forcefully and in detail, there is an emerging strain of authoritarianism already present in the New Testament—particularly in Paul.¹⁶ And as for exclusivism: To the early believer, there was no salvation outside of the Christian community, as is indicated by the *logion* ascribed to Jesus: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:16).¹⁷ (Walter Martin adds to these “cult characteristics” the lack of professional clergymen¹⁸—but here, too, he merely describes early Christianity.)¹⁹ For Latter-day Saints, at least, who view their church as a restoration of ancient patterns, any classification that places them with the primitive Church cannot be considered a slight.

More often than by sociological definition, however, “cults” are identified by their conformity to or deviation from a presumed standard of Christian orthodoxy.²⁰ It is typical of “cults,” writes Walter Martin, that they “blind their followers to the truth” and alienate them from a “saving relationship with Jesus Christ.”²¹ Earl Schipper defines a cult as a group that reinterprets or denies the divinity of Christ, offers an unbiblical basis for salvation, and claims a new revelation from God that either restores a lost biblical gospel or teaches truth in addition to the Bible.²² The anti-Mormon *Evangel* raises many of these same charges against the Latter-day Saints: thus, in their view Mormonism is a cult because it is excessively devoted to one person,²³ because it adds to the word of God,²⁴ because it requires works in addition to grace,²⁵ because it uses “unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control,”²⁶ and because it tells its members that it and they are good while the outside world is evil,²⁷ and because such usage is generally accepted: “practically everyone who writes on the American cults includes Mormonism as a cult.”²⁸

Schippers’s definition might have been crafted to describe Islam, yet he passes by the Muslims to attack only such groups as Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Science, the Unification Church, and The Way International. His title, *Cults of North America*, betrays the weakness of his definition: If mainstream Christianity is applied as the standard, all religions that deviate from or reject that standard have to be classed as “cults,” including (besides Islam) Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. Recognizing that so inclusive a definition renders it almost meaningless, many (including Schipper) arbitrarily apply the term “cult” only to groups active in the United States.²⁹ But even here, the net is cast wide. Walter Martin puts the number of “cultists” at 30 million in the United States alone!³⁰

The hesitancy of our heresiographers to label major world faiths “cults” probably does not stem from principle.³¹ Gordon Lewis, it is true, defines a cult as “any religious movement that claims the backing of Christ or the Bible, but distorts the central message of Christianity.”³² But this could apply to Judaism! Further, the most recent edition of Walter Martin’s popular work, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, includes Islam, and, although unwilling to call it a cult, treats it in much the same fashion as other entries. (Also covered is something called “Eastern Religions,” which seems to mean Hinduism.) And, after labeling spiritualism the most ancient, Martin tells us that “the second oldest of all the cult systems considered in this book is . . . Zen Buddhism.”³³ Nicheren Shoshu, a Buddhist movement dating from the thirteenth century, is condemned by Martin among *The New Cults*—a title that clearly betrays his parochial North American orientation.³⁴ Such groups are included despite Martin’s own declaration that a cult is “a group of people gathered about a specific person or person’s misinterpretation of the Bible,”³⁵ and despite his statement elsewhere that cults represent “major deviations” that yet claim to be Christian.³⁶ And where in Zen Buddhism are we to find the threats of imminent Armageddon that Mr. Martin lists among the characteristics of the “cult?”³⁷ Virtually all the “experts” agree that Baha’ism, a syncretistic offspring of Shi’ite Islam, is a “cult,” and all take the International Society of Krishna Consciousness to be a model of the type.³⁸ Yet Josh McDowell and Don Stewart define a “cult” as “a perversion, a distortion of biblical Christianity”³⁹—which neither Baha’ism nor Shi’ism nor the veneration of Krishna can possibly be thought to be.

Why all the contradiction? Perhaps merely for tactical purposes. To be called a “cult,” a religion must be small. Major religions may be spared the word for reasons of decorum, while being judged just as harshly. Merrill F. Unger, a prominent evangelical scholar, is merely more explicit than most when he pronounces not only “cults” but also non-Christian world religions to be, literally, demonic.⁴⁰ (The authors of *The God Makers* argue that Mormonism is just like Hinduism—that is, it is a system of Satan worship.) “The sociological considerations of cult

activity,” asserts Bob Larson, “must mirror the standard that Christ is the source of determining error and truth. . . . Even established world religions which do not bear the sociological earmarks of a cult will be included (in my book) because of their departure from Christian theology.”⁴¹

Fritz Ridenour reserves the title of “cult” for people like Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses, but also (“biblically”) condemns Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Roman Catholicism.⁴² There is, in fact, a marked tendency to anti-Catholicism on the part of many self-proclaimed “cult” experts. J. K. van Baalen, for example, while declining to call Roman Catholicism an “unchristian cult,” declares nevertheless that “it is a corrupt and exceedingly dangerous political machine, and it is a religious body full of doctrinal error and superstition.”⁴³ Others are less hesitant. Anti-Catholic Bill Jackson writes, “It is difficult to come up with any modern definition of what is a cult and include Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, and a host of others and omit the largest false religious system of all—Roman Catholicism.”⁴⁴ Similarly, Donald Spitz asserts that Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons are cultists, as are Roman Catholics.⁴⁵ Karl Keating, a Catholic writer, has probably put his finger on the nub of the matter when he states that “a cult is any religion that is not fundamentalism.”⁴⁶ Some Roman Catholics have returned sometimes returned the favor, characterizing a variety of non-Catholic groups—including Baptists and Pentecostals—as “sectarian,” because they represent groups that set themselves “apart from the world and . . . judge everyone else who fail to conform to [their] set of beliefs.”⁴⁷ Attempting to refute Mormon belief in an ancient apostasy, *The Utah Evangel* declares that, “any objective study of Catholicism will reveal a small but courageous group of Christians who never bowed to Rome. Though perhaps 50,000,000 of these died martyr’s [sic] deaths, they never ceased to exist. . . . They rejected the papacy. . . . They rejected baptismal regeneration. They believed in salvation by grace. . . . They relied upon the Bible as their only rule of faith and practice. . . . They believed in the priesthood of every believer. . . . The church did not cease to exist.”⁴⁸

“The hallmarks of cultic conversation,” writes Ronald Enroth “usually include the abandonment of a familiar life style; severing of ties with friends and families; a radical and sometimes sudden change in personality; the relinquishing of possessions; introduction with a new set of values, goals, and beliefs; the assuming of a totally new identity, including for some a new name; the acquisition of a new ‘spiritual’ family; unquestioned submission to leaders and group priorities; isolation from the ‘outside world’ with its attendant evil; subversion of the will; thought reform; the adoption of new sociocultural and spiritual insignia; and a host of other less dramatic though equally significant characteristics.”⁴⁹ However, while the definition was undoubtedly framed with Krishna Consciousness and the “Moonies” in mind, it is quite as evocative of Catholic monasticism and religious orders, and is no less applicable to Thomas Merton and St. Francis of Assisi than to the Buddha and Jim Jones.

The arbitrary and *ad hoc* character of such attempts at definition is clear in an article by the German Catholic authority on *Sekten*, Konrad Algermissen. Citing two Protestant theologians who describe a *Sekte* as a group accepting an extrabiblical source of authority and denying the doctrine of justification by grace alone, a description paralleled in many anti-“cult” polemics,⁵⁰ Algermissen is appalled, and notes that, by such a definition, Catholics would be categorized as a *Sekte*. So he simply reformulates the definition to apply to Mormons and Seventh-Day Adventists, but not to Catholics.⁵¹

Some, such as Walter Martin, define as a cult any group “which differs significantly in some one or more respects as to belief or practice, from those religious groups which are regarded as the normative expression of religion in our total culture.”⁵² (In a move that Kierkegaard might have appreciated, the average becomes the ideal!) However, this definition is of little use in a pluralistic society. Is cult status dependent upon statistics? Are

America's Jews a cult? Is Sikhism a cult here, but a legitimate religion in India's Punjab? Or is "Dr." Martin's norm, Western culture, the standard for all the planet? What of the growing Muslim minority in North America? A major world religion in Africa, Asia, and part of Europe, is Islam a cult here? At what numerical level will Islam—or Mormonism—cease to be a cult?

The second-century Church father Tertullian felt that many non-Christians in his day desired no closer investigation of Christianity "lest it be shown that the stories which they wish to have believed are untrue."⁵³ In the same way, one suspects that some who use the term "cult" do so to warn people away from further investigation.

"How to cope with the cults?" asks the cover of a book entitled *Know the Marks of a Cult*. "There are so many of them . . . all different. Who has time to study all their weird doctrines in order to refute them? Here is a better way. No need to get bogged down in the details of this or that cult. No need to debate fine points in the original Greek or Hebrew. No need to fight over the interpretation of obscure passages of scripture."⁵⁴ After all, as Ronald Enroth observes, there is some diversity, but "in real sense the familiar expression, once you've seen one, you've seen them all, is applicable to current cult groups."⁵⁵ (This of a category that purportedly includes Ezra Taft Benson, the Maharishi, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jonestown, and the Rajneesh commune in Oregon!) "Strange as it may seem," asserts Dave Hunt with astonishing understatement, "most cults are basically the same. Even apparent differences are generally only skin deep."⁵⁶ Bob Larson knows something called "cultic philosophy," although he acknowledges some variations.⁵⁷ Walter Martin can speak of "cultic vocabulary"⁵⁸ and the title of his most ambitious book, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, suggests a monolithic enemy.

The emotional impact and consequences of the term are implied in a story related approvingly by Ronald Enroth: "In a Midwestern suburb a religious organization called Eckankar had scheduled an information meeting for the public in the community room of a local bank. Following the publication of a story in a major local newspaper describing Eckankar as a 'religious cult,' the bank changed its mind and withdrew its approval of the use of the room by the group. 'We weren't aware they were considered a cult,' explained the bank's branch manager."⁵⁹

The mere mention of the word "cult" by the local newspaper, with no consideration of the actual teachings of the group, was enough to persuade the bank manager to rescind permission to use the bank's facilities. "Any cult," proclaims Bob Larson, "which places itself in opposition to historic Christianity should not be allowed to hide behind a cloak of religious good will or misleading terminology."⁶⁰

Jews for Jesus, a group "widely respected among evangelicals . . . was listed as a cult alongside Moonies and Hare Krishnas" on the dustjacket of *Mindbending*.⁶¹ Moishe Rosen, the national coordinator of Jews for Jesus, laments that, since his group has begun to be referred to as a "cult," many pulpits that had previously been available have been closed.⁶²

But if polemics about "cults" inhibit an understanding of groups so designated, and close doors to them, such words occasionally turn against their own masters. According to *Newsweek*, a new organization called "Fundamentalists Anonymous" now exists to aid those "struggling to shake fundamentalism's cultlike grip."⁶³ Evangelical Christians, who often describe the aggressive proselyting methods of certain "cults" as "brainwashing,"⁶⁴ have had the same charge leveled against them. Flo Conway and Jim Siegelmann, in *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*, compare evangelical conversion to joining the "Moonies."⁶⁵

According to Lawrence Foster, “the deprogrammer Ted Patrick, who refers to Billy Graham as a dangerous cultist.”⁶⁶ Likewise, while some Christians have lauded “deprogramming” as a necessary and acceptable response to the indoctrination techniques of “cults,” Jewish parents and community leaders have used and defended similar methods (which they call “counseling”) for Jewish young people who have converted to Christianity, frequently of an evangelical type. Lawrence Foster recounts: “I remember my amusement, for example, listening to a militant rabbi from the Hassidic movement (which some might characterize as a Jewish fringe or cultic group) harangue a respectable middle-aged Jewish audience about the dread dangers of the ‘cults.’ His primary concern was not with the Moonies or Hare Krishnas, but mainstream Protestant groups that he felt were attracting Jewish converts. Similarly, I was somewhat taken aback in talking with an East Asian student who expressed his repugnance at the ‘cultic’ character of Christianity, especially its periodic ‘ritual cannibalism’ of its founder. For a moment, I failed to realize that he was referring to the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper. Beliefs or rituals that appear similarly bizarre to an outsider can be found in all the major world religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism alike. In effect, the only popular meaning of the word ‘cult’ is, ‘a religious group that someone else doesn’t like.’ Such definitions are less than useful as analytical tools.”⁶⁷

In the recent celebrated Catherine Crowell Webb rape case, prosecutors were wary of Mrs. Webb’s withdrawal of her accusation against Gary Dotson, a withdrawal occasioned, she testified, by guilty conscience upon her being “born again.” “Sources close to the investigation,” the *Chicago Tribune* reported, “say authorities remain unconvinced because the woman is associated with a religious cult and living in an emotionally charged atmosphere.” Mrs. Webb is a Baptist.⁶⁸

J. K. van Baalen long bewailed society’s tolerance for “anti-Christian cults” such as Mormonism and Christian Science⁶⁹ More recently, certain anti-Mormons have sought to enlist the authoritarian regimes of Chile and Kenya against the Church. But the hue and cry about “cults,” “brainwashing,” and “deprogramming,” have brought in their wake a potential threat to the freedom of all religious groups. “Religious movements, and perhaps ultimately religion itself,” remarks sociologist Thomas Robbins, “are increasingly being viewed as social problems.”⁷⁰ Laws have been proposed in Germany, Great Britain, Canada, and several states in the United States that, though ostensibly designed to protect against methods of “brainwashing” used by the “Moonies,” are in fact so ambiguous that they could be construed to prohibit any sort of proselyting that might lead to a change in lifestyle.⁷¹ Predicts Prof. Robbins: “As the hostility to the ‘abuse’ of cults . . . mounts, the general privileges and tax exemptions of churches per se will likely come under the gun.”⁷² But even now, the results of the campaign against alleged “cult excesses”—led, to a large extent, by devout Christians—has been, as the evangelical scholar Irving Hexham points out, that “secularists are able to urge the acceptance of laws which replace religious freedom by a grudgingly granted religious toleration.”⁷³ Given the hazards of the term “cult,” we suggest that its pejorative use be abandoned.

Even in social science usage, notes A. W. Eister, the word remains “vague and unsatisfactory.” “Numerous variations and extensions of these concepts exist in the literature,” he writes, “many of them devised without solid empirical grounding, sometimes merely rehearsing ‘armchair definitions’ made decades ago and seldom tested against actual cases or even rigorously examined for their logical (or sociological) consistency.”⁷⁴ What, then, of those whose aim is less to understand than to condemn, whose goal is more to obscure than to illumine?

Those polemicists who use the term “cult” seem—and like to seem—to be conveying by its use hard, objective information about the groups they so designate. “Perhaps the best method of determining that Mormonism is a

cult,” asserts *The Utah Evangel*, “would be to consult recognized authorities in the field. . . . We did not let the tobacco industry determine the danger in its use. We called in experts. Mormonism is incapable of assessing whether or not it is a cult. Almost all the experts say it is.”⁷⁵ Yet it is not at all clear that the information conveyed by use of the term goes beyond telling us that the group in question is one of which these alleged “experts” disapprove. What else can yoga, Unitarians, the Esalen Institute, and the “martial arts”—all, incredibly, listed in Larson’s *Book of Cults*—possibly have in common? (If any other criterion is operative, it seems to be that the group under discussion must be small, weak, or passive enough that insults are without risk.)

“Apart from theological considerations,” writes Bob Larson, “what classifies a certain group as a ‘cult’? The designation obviously requires a subjective value judgment.”⁷⁶ Significantly, our polemical “cult experts”—with no known exception—avoid publishing on the subject for a scholarly audience, before which they might be held to rigorous account. “It is possible,” as Paul Hedengren observes, “to use language in such away as to appear superficially to be making assertions, when in fact the language use is logically equivalent to growling.”⁷⁷

Instead of the abused, and abusive, term “cult,” we propose more neutral terminology, such as “religious movement,” “religious group,” or “church.” According to Lawrence Foster, “there is no analytical substance to the popular definition of a cult as a dangerous group with bizarre religious beliefs that follows a deranged or cynically opportunistic leader. One person’s ‘cult’ is another person’s ‘true faith’ . . . In effect, the only popular meaning of the word ‘cult’ is, ‘a religious group that someone else doesn’t like.’ Such definitions are less than useful as analytical tools. . . . Since ‘cult’ is essentially a pejorative term without analytical precision, I shall henceforth refer to such groups as ‘new religious movements’ or ‘new religions.’”⁷⁸ Perhaps the best approach would be to apply to each group the name that its adherents use in referring to themselves.⁷⁹ This action alone would practically eliminate the term “cult” from religious discourse. (Further, no false uniformity would be imposed upon widely differing faiths.)⁸⁰

As Tertullian insisted, truth requests only “that she not be condemned without a hearing.”⁸¹ Latter-day Saints and doubtless others currently stigmatized as “cultists” ask little more than that their doctrines and teachings be granted a fair hearing, with the way cleared of impediments, lexical or otherwise.

1. In certain cantons of Switzerland (e.g., Zürich), the official term for *Sekte* is *Verein* (“society, association”). In day-to-day conversation, however, this term is not used.

2. Some social services are provided through the *Landeskirchen*. This makes adoption, for example, much more difficult—and sometimes impossible—for those who are not affiliated with state churches.

3. In English, on the other hand, the progression from “sect” to “denomination” has frequently been seen as a decline. H. Richard Niebuhr provides a good example of this. For a negative evaluation of the idea, see Mullett (1984): 168–191. It is currently fashionable to recognize such a decline in Mormonism. Thomas F. O’Dea, however, saw Mormonism as having avoided “sectarian stagnation”; see O’Dea (1954): 285–293. O’Dea rejects the label “sect” for Mormonism, and questions the church-sect distinction in any case.

4. Wesley Walters, in the title of his article, “From Occult to Cult with Joseph Smith, Jr.,” uses the word only for the sound and the bad overtones that it shares with “occult”; it plays little if any role in the article proper; see Walters

(1977): 121–37.

5. Cf. the more traditional use of the term “cult” and “cultic” in J. Neusner, ed. *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty* (1975); and J. Milgrom, *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology* (1983).

6. More recently, however, *Christianity Today* made UMI (the publisher of the *Utah Evangel* (now *The Evangel*) change its ad on Mormonism to read “false religion” instead of “cult.” Perhaps *Christianity Today* recognized the unalloyedly pejorative—and potentially actionable—connotations of the term.

7. *The Evangel* 38 (November 1991): 2.

8. G. R. Lewis (1966); Starkes (1984); Chéry (1954): 31: “Offensive actuelle des sectes? Le mot n’est pas trop fort.” (“A current offensive by the cults? The word is not too strong.”)

9. “The Dimensions of the Cult Conspiracy” (1981): 27; cf. Matrisciana (1985). On the cover of Matrisciana’s book can be found the statement: “There is an unparalleled mystical conspiracy threatening today’s world.” (This strange use of mysticism as a hobgoblin is surprisingly common among anti-“cultists.”)

10. Decker and Hunt (1984): 254.

11. This description is most applicable to the “cult movement”, which is distinguished by Stark and Bainbridge from the “audience cult” (a group that has almost no organization or structure, such as astrology or Theosophy) and the “client cult” (where there is only slightly greater organization than in the audience cult), Stark and Bainbridge (1979): 127–28. It should be stressed that the work of sociologists in defining the terms “Church,” “Sect,” and “Cult”—quite unlike the usage of most of the writers considered in this paper—is descriptive, and not evaluative.

12. See Mullet (1984): 168–91.

13. Atwood and Flowers (1983): 245–61. This would come as a shock to “Ex-Mormons for Jesus” and their like. An advertisement that their Los Angeles area chapter used to run in local newspapers asked, rhetorically, “Is Mormonism Christian or Cult?”—mistakenly assuming the two categories to be mutually exclusive, as do McKay and Smith (1985): 9, 10, 23, 29.

14. Origen, *Contra Celsum* II, 45. English translation in Roberts and Donaldson (1979): 4:449. Interestingly, Catholics since the Second Vatican Council have begun to reapply to themselves names such as “das wandernde Gottesvolk” (“the wandering people of God”), an epithet that echoes Hebrews 11 in suggesting conflict with the values of society.

15. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans*. English translation in Roberts and Donaldson (1981): 1:766; on this desire to achieve a “martyr’s crown” among the early Christians see Nibley (1987b): 172–81; Droge and Tabor (1992): 128–65.

16. Shaw (1983): 1–23.

17. There has been considerable discussion lately as to whether this saying originates with Jesus. But whether it does or not, it certainly reflects the exclusivistic tendencies that characterized the early Christian community.
18. Martin (1984): 17–21. Unfortunately, “Dr.” Martin’s definitions cannot be treated here in their entirety. They are most instructive. In *The New Cults*, 17–21, he offers ten characteristics: (1) strong leaders; (2) additional scriptures; (3) rigid standards for membership; (4) transient membership; (5) active proselyting; (6) no professional clergy; (7) claims of exclusive truth; and (8) “cultic vocabulary.” Martin (1983): 25 yields only nine signs of culthood: (1) exclusivism; (2) blinding of followers to the truth; (3) threats of imminent Armageddon; (4) false promises of instant spiritual, emotional, and material help; (5) boasts of exclusive revelations; (6) claims of extrabiblical authority; (7) demands of complete obedience to leaders; (8) deceptive terminology that insulates them from the Bible; and (9) alienation of followers from the rest of the world and from Christ.
19. And early Quakers; see Mullett (1984): 174–75, for some rather strong Quaker language on the issue.
20. See, for example, McKay and Smith (1985): 13–28. Oswald Eggenberger admits the utility of sociological analysis, but he insists that theological considerations come first in identifying *Sekten*; see Eggenberger (1969): 4. “If the world only knew the Mormon doctrine of a God-Mother,” asserts *The Utah Evangel* (July 1985), “there would be no question but that Mormonism is a cult.”
21. Martin (1983): 25.
22. Schipper (1982): 14–18.
23. *The Evangel* 38 (September 1991): 4.
24. *The Evangel* 38 (December 1991): 5.
25. Ibid.
26. *The Evangel* 38 (September 1991): 4. This unusually literate comment is actually quoted from *PTA Today* (November 1989): 24, which evidently makes no reference whatever to Mormonism.
27. Ibid.
28. *The Evangel* 37 (November 1990): 1. Of course, virtually every expert on the Bermuda Triangle believes in it. People who devote their lives or careers to illusory crusades are likely to be true believers! (“Don Quixote, the acknowledged expert on such giants, certainly counts that windmill among them.”)
29. Compare, for example, the attempted definition of Starkes (1984): 4.
30. See Martin (1981): 1; also Martin (1983): 15.
31. Ed Decker and Dave Hunt equate Hinduism with the occult, and can speak of “Hindu-Buddhist occultism”; see Decker and Hunt (1984): 29, 254.
32. G. R. Lewis (1966): 4. Islam would probably fit this definition. Persistent medieval legends made of Muhammad a renegade cardinal, disappointed in his bid for the papacy. Thus, to medieval minds not altogether

unlike those of our own heresiographers, Islam was simply an unusually obnoxious schism.

33. Martin (1985): 261. In 1985 *Kingdom of the Cults* was fourth on the bestseller list of the Christian Booksellers Association; see also Lyons (1985): 65–66.

34. Martin (1984).

35. Martin (1985): 11.

36. Martin (1983): 17.

37. Martin (1983): 25.

38. On the Baha'is, see, for example, Larson (1983); McElveen, (1979): 169; Robertson (1983); Starkes (1984). Walter Martin's one-year program in "Christian Apologetics" recently awarded a master's degree for a thesis refuting Baha'ism. This represents a remarkable achievement, for the student apparently knows neither Arabic nor Persian.

39. McDowell and Stewart (1983): 17. H. F. Beck generously offers to consider as a cult any twisting of any major world religion (his is a different kind of voice, quasi-officially Lutheran); see Beck (1977). But do Christian scholars really have any competence to referee disputes in Buddhist doctrine or Islamic law? None of the usual anti-"cult" specialists seems to be interested in following Beck's lead. They have little if any concern, say, for Hindu orthodoxy.

40. Unger (1984). J. K. van Baalen—an unecumenical mind, to put it mildly—refused to acknowledge any significant areas of commonalty shared by Christianity with other religions; see van Baalen (1983).

41. Larson (1983): 26–27. Floyd McElveen approvingly cites a division of the religions of the world into two groups: Christian fundamentalists (good), and everyone else (bad). But only "bad" groups are specifically named—including Atheists, Mormons, Spiritualists, and Baha'is; see McElveen (1979): 169–70; cf. 132–33.

42. Ridenour (1979).

43. Van Baalen (1983): 5.

44. Keating (1988): 83.

45. Keating (1988): 105. The anti-Catholic writer Keith Green says much the same thing: Catholics are not Christians, but cultists; see Keating (1988): 101.

46. Keating (1988): 81.

47. According to Raymond K. DeHainaut (1987): 33–34, "The Roman Catholic book on sects [*Las Sectas en America Latina*, published by the Conference of the Latin American Episcopacy of the Roman Catholic Church, or CELAM] defines a sect as a group that sets itself apart from the world and tends to judge everyone else who fails to conform to its narrow set of beliefs. . . . Protestants and Roman Catholics differ somewhat as to which groups they would label sectarian. The Catholic book places Baptists, as well as Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Theosophy, and Masonry in its list of sects. . . . Some Protestant theologians contend that the Roman

Catholic Church itself functions like a sect because of the disproportionate emphasis it places on the veneration of the Virgin Mary. José Miguez Bonino, a Methodist theologian in Buenos Aires, argues in a 1960 article, *Iglesia y Secta: revision de un vocabulario*, that the cult of Mary contains all the characteristics of a sect.”

48. *The Utah Evangel* 31 (November 1984); cf. McElveen (1979): 127–129. Not surprisingly, they sound just like born-again Protestants. After interrogation by an author of this paper, one dedicated anti-Mormon reluctantly conceded that a person could not be a Catholic and a Christian at the same time. This is perhaps not the majority view; it is unlikely in any event to be given much publicity during campaigns to convince the general populace—which is comprised of Catholic as well as Protestant—that Mormonism is a “non-Christian cult”. The question seems to be one of tactics; the mindset is the same as that nineteenth-century one treated by Davis (1960): 205–24. (Martin Marty and others have studied the present Protestant dream of a “Christian America.”) After Salt Lake City is disposed of, do we move on to Rome?

49. Enroth (1977): 12. Some of this definitely applies to early Quakers.

50. See McKay and Smith (1985): 23–27.

51. Algermissen (1964): 735–36. H.-Ch. Chéry responds in precisely the same way to the charge of one “Pastor Hoff” that the Roman Catholic Church is “sectaire”; see Chéry (1954): 37. The sarcasm of Prof. Dr. Algermissen’s prose is characteristic of this genre in German; see especially Algermissen (1964): 741–47. No pretense of value neutrality here! Mormonism is discussed at some length, as “Der Typ einer neuzeitlichen Sekte,” Algermissen (1964): 744–747. The two Protestant theologians are Kurt Hutten and F. Blanke. A. A. Hoekema’s standard treatment is also dependent upon Hutten’s definition, given in *Die Glaubenswelt der Sektierer*; see Hoekema (1984): 377–88. (Mormons will not be surprised to learn they are among the four “major cults.”)

52. Martin (1985): 11. Martin has taken this particular definition—one of several not always compatible ones, which occur in his books—from Charles Braden, a liberal Protestant historian of religions.

53. Tertullian, *Apologeticus adversus Gentes pro Christianis* II, 19. English translation in Glover (1966): 17.

54. Breese (1984).

55. Enroth (1977): 12.

56. Hunt (1980): 19.

57. Larson (1983): 27.

58. Martin (1984): 17–21.

59. Enroth (1981): 1.

60. Larson (1983): 26.

61. “Jewish Leaders Attempt to Fight Effects of Evangelism,” (1984): 40.

62. *Ibid.*, 42.

63. See the fascinating article by Woodward, Anderson, and Springen (1985): 63.
64. Cf., e.g., Enroth (1977).
65. Conway and Siegelmann (1978).
66. Foster (1987): 186.
67. Foster (1987): 187–88.
68. Cited by O’Sullivan (1985): 22.
69. See, for example, van Baalen (1983): 6.
70. Robbins (1985): 2:172. Robbins fears that the “era of detente” in religious studies may be coming to an end, and that value-neutrality is on its way out.
71. Cf. the Lasher Amendment, State of New York in Assembly 11122-A (25 March 1980); cited in Irving Hexham, “Cults,” in Elwell (1983): 289.
72. Robbins (1985): 177.
73. Robbins (1985): 177.
74. Eister (1972): 320.
75. *The Utah Evangel* 31 (March 1984). It’s all as straightforward as a chemical test; cf. McKay and Smith (1985): 41. “We believe ‘Why Mormonism Is a Cult’ has proven without a doubt that Mormonism is a cult. Little more need be said. Our arguments are conclusive. . . . Facts speak for themselves,” McKay and Smith (1985): 43.
76. Larson (1983): 27.
77. Hedengren (1985): 41.
78. Foster (1987): 187, 188, 189. Among the “Guidelines and Suggestions for Writing Critical Notes for *Religious Studies Review*,” handed out to all reviewers for this publication of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion—currently headquartered at Mercer University, in Macon, Georgia—is the advice to “avoid pejorative terminology.” The first example given of such “pejorative terminology” is the word “cults.”
79. This is unlikely to happen, alas. As W. C. Smith has pointed out, religions are rarely known by names that they themselves have chosen; cf. Smith (1963): 80, 273.
80. Paul Heclas has shown that even a threefold classification of just those religious groups stemming from the 1960s and 1970s fails adequately to represent their variety; see Heclas (1985): 81–97; Chéry (1954): 31–35. What value, then, can reside in a classification that puts not only these groups, but also Mormonism, a thirteenth-century faction of Japanese Buddhism, and a nineteenth century offshoot of Iranian Shi’ism, into one catch-all category?

81. Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 1, 2.