

# Defining Cults

## 1. The Problem of Definition

Different people mean different things when they use the word “cult.” Often people *hear* something other than what is intended by the speaker when the word “cult” is used.

## 2. Different Definitions of a Cult

(1) The \_\_\_\_\_ Definition—Religious groups that use a high degree of psychological coercion in making and maintaining converts, especially among youth and young adults.

(2) The \_\_\_\_\_ Definition—Religious groups that are clearly outside the mainstream of society, or that are obviously deviant from the majority beliefs and style of life within their particular community. This definition is site-specific, i.e., relative.

(3) The \_\_\_\_\_ Definition—Religious groups whose core teachings are contrary to Christian orthodoxy. This is the definition that I generally use.

## 3. Objections to the Term “Cult”

Some object to using the term *cult*. Their objections include:

(1) The term is too \_\_\_\_\_.

(2) The term is \_\_\_\_\_, i.e., any group that \_\_\_\_\_ with me is a cult.

(3) Attempts at \_\_\_\_\_ a belief system amount to \_\_\_\_\_ one's belief system—and one should \_\_\_\_\_ judge another's belief system.

## 4. Suggested Alternative Terms

(1) \_\_\_\_\_ Religion

(2) \_\_\_\_\_ Religion

(3) \_\_\_\_\_

(4) \_\_\_\_\_ Group



## for your information

**Context.** Most of these objections seem to be addressed to the issue of defining what makes a cult by its theology or its belief system. In other words, most objections are directed toward the *theological definition* of a cult. Very few object to referring to groups such as the Heaven’s Gate group or The Brethren (a.k.a. the Roberts Group or the “Garbage Eaters”) as cults.

**Historical Note.** The term “cult” was originally used as a *religious* term, to describe the worship of a deity; therefore, it seems appropriate to continue using the theological definition.

5. A group may be considered a cult by meeting \_\_\_\_\_ or merely \_\_\_\_\_ of these definitions.

### NOTES

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