

Is it a cult, or a new religious movement?

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A trend in pop culture is a mix of current affairs and anniversaries, and saturating the media landscape is documentary storytelling about cults in popular culture. Last year was the 40th anniversary of Jonestown, and this summer marks 50 years since the Manson Family murders. 2019 saw the trial of NXIVM members, and Netflix's "Wild Wild Country"

piqued interest in a peculiar unfolding of events in the 1980s of a group called the Rajneeshpuram. Popular podcasts include a series on Heaven's Gate, along with a host of explorations of cult groups and religious sects, both heterodox and not.

But what differentiates a cult from a religion? Followers see themselves as believers, even disciples—not cult members. Families, law enforcement, media, and other religious leaders, however, rely on the word "cult" to discredit, call out, or accuse these groups. Who has the final word, and what is behind the word itself?

Cult is a term that doesn't refer to religion at all, but is applied to a social movement. People have intuitive feelings about how the word cult should be used, even when an organization or movement meets the criteria of a new religion. Take, for example, Scientology and Mormonism. Both were new religious movements that have evolved into a general understanding or definition of a religion. However, according to Pew Research, non-Mormons in the U.S. are more likely to label Mormonism as a cult.

Scientology and Mormonism have outlived their charismatic leaders. They have openly published their beliefs as scripture. Both religions seek truth by offering its followers a roadmap for their place in the universe, along with a moral code. Those who accept the beliefs and rituals are members of the religion. But many outside consider the movement, and its followers, to be a cult. How have the two been conflated?

"The word 'cult' originally designates a practice of religious veneration and the religious system based around such veneration—for example, the cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe," says Robin Clark, a linguistics professor in the School of Arts and Sciences. "However, the word was co-opted in the first half of the 20th century by sociology, and has come to denote a social group with 'socially deviant' beliefs and practices, like a

UFO cult."

Cults versus new religions is a matter of perspective, says Ori Tavor, a senior lecturer in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, who teaches a class on new religious movements. "New religious movement" is a new term from academic discourse, and is applied to religious movements from the 19th century onwards.

"Remember," says Tavor, "that the religious landscape of the U.S. was about freedom of religion. Anyone can create a new religion, and can appeal to the government for new religion status and get protections and recognition from the government."

What they have in common may be reason to conflate the two: a charismatic leader. Buddhism and Christianity are both named after a charismatic leader. Islam, originally called Mohammedanism, is also named after its leader. Religions and cults often follow a leader who claims divine, or at least special, access to different models of knowledge and revelations. Many are martyred. Jesus of Nazareth was famously crucified. Joseph Smith, Mormonism's founder, was lynched, leaving Brigham Young to lead followers west.

End days is another consistent theme in cults and religions, both new and old. Nirvana, heaven, Zion, or outer space are a guiding principle in their scriptures. "In the middle of the 19th century, economic desperation led to new religious movements" explains Tavor. "'Life on earth is awful,' they said, 'the world is going to end.'" In the 19th century, new religious movements were Christian in origin. The 20th century saw a shift as translated Buddhist and Islamic texts from the East became available amidst a new religious landscape.

"People were disillusioned with Christianity, and their parents, and moved to the suburbs and became more secular. In the mid-20th century, people left their birth communities, or lost touch with their original

congregations and looked for more modern worship" Tavor says. "A capitalist, consumer society was also growing."

The charismatic leader to tap into the capitalist, consumer society was L. Ron Hubbard.

In the 1950s, Hubbard established the self-help group based on reincarnation of the self, called Dianetics. When Dianetics dropped out of popularity, Hubbard repackaged it as a religious movement, with esoteric writings—for example, you have to become an operating thetan to have access to Hubbard's handwritten texts. "Scientology doesn't follow an old-fashioned model of a congregation," says Tavor.

The mid-to-late 20th century introduced transcendental meditation and Hare Krishnas to the spiritual landscape, catering to a set of believers looking for something spiritual that wasn't Christianity. The Maharishi even used modern terminology—he called his philosophy the "science of happiness."

A large part of what fueled people's distrust in new religious movements was their popularity. "What freaked people out was that these Eastern religions were successful. Look at Rajneeshpuram and its leader, Osho. He was popular in India, then came to the U.S., and because people were exposed to, and afraid of, Hare Krishnas and transcendental meditation, people freaked out about Rajneeshpuram," explains Tavor.

Around this time, deprogramming and anti-cult movements sprouted. "The Manchurian Candidate" brought the concept of brainwashing and deprogramming to mainstream popular culture, and the conflation of the word cult with fringe movements outside of religion (like doomsday cults, polygamist cults, and terrorist cults) fueled anti-cult movements.

To differentiate the two, Clark proposes a straightforward exercise: Find

texts containing the word "cult" and look for the accompanying words in the texts. "If we have a time series of such texts, we should see a shift in the semantic associates, probably starting in the 1930s, to include a variety of nonreligious terms like 'personality,' 'UFO,' 'racist,' and so forth. This would be diagnostic of a semantic change." Tavor narrows the semantic change to a sharp point—Jonestown.

Jim Jones was an anti-segregationist Christian preacher from Indiana who envisioned a mixed-race church. Jones and his followers left Indiana for California in search of a utopian community. While in San Francisco, Jones' friction with lawmakers and pressure from the families of members of the People's Temple looking to free their relatives and their children sent Jones to seek a utopian community in the jungles of Guyana, in South America. When those family members discovered the move overseas, they appealed to the government for intervention. A delegation went to Jonestown—Congressperson Leo Ryan, his aid Jackie Speier, journalists, and cameramen from network news. What started as a fact-finding mission ended with five dead on the tarmac at Port Kaituma airfield, when Ryan and his delegates fled Jonestown along with a handful of defectors. Ryan was shot and killed, along with three members of the press and one defector, and the rest of the delegation were attacked. Back at Jonestown, Jim Jones broadcast his final message: "I've tried my best to give you a good life. In spite of all that I've tried, a handful of our people, with their lies, have made our life impossible. There's no way to detach ourselves from what's happened today." Within hours, everyone drank cyanide-laced Kool-Aid in mass suicide. Jones died of a gunshot wound to the head.

"That makes Jonestown the quintessential cult. Pictures of the dead bodies were on the cover of Time magazine." says Tavor. "Jonestown is a seminal moment in U.S. history to popularize the term 'cult.'"

In Waco, Texas in 1992, the Branch Davidians were attacked by law

enforcement in their compound. They were Adventists, but their community was a polygamous one, and easy to earn the designation as a cult— their beliefs were heterodox to Christianity.

Heaven's Gate gained notoriety in the late 90s as a doomsday cult, committing mass suicide in 1997 to access what they believed would be an extraterrestrial spacecraft following Comet Hale-Bopp. End days scripture is Christian in origin—the last book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelations, is the source. But not all apocalyptic religious movements end in death or waiting for spaceships. Seventh Day Adventists come from a tradition from the 1840s that predicted an apocalypse in 1843, based on calculations from the Book of Daniel. When the world didn't end, the movement disbanded, and its followers reorganized as Seventh Day Adventists.

If one factor can determine the difference between a cult and a religion, according to Tavor, it would be time. Scientology is now recognized by the state as a religion, with tax-exempt status. Mormonism was considered such a deviant form of heterodoxy its founder was lynched. Now the Mormon Church has more than 14 million members worldwide.

"It takes time for a movement to establish itself as a legitimate part of the religious landscape," says Tavor. "A cult doesn't have anything to do with the content of its religious ideology. It is a term to demonize a movement that is controversial. It is considered a threat to mainstream society." NXIVM, for example, is labeled a cult of personality because, like Jonestown, it is a group that has followed a charismatic leader to its detriment.

But sometimes the state determines whether a group is a cult, and not popular culture. Falun Gong, for example, was an extremely popular Chinese religion that was labeled a cult abruptly by the Chinese government when it became so popular that its followers exceeded the

number of Communist Party members. Nearly overnight, Falun Gong was designated as a cult, and something to be feared. In the U.S., [religious leaders](#) and mainstream culture act as arbiters in designating a cult, and violent acts like suicide, murder, and bodily harm drastically influence whether a group is labeled a cult.

As long as there is orthodoxy, there will be heterodoxy, and there will continue to be gospels of the end of days that could be rooted in science or scripture, people seeking answers, and leaders will emerge who claim to have them. Whether their followers are cult members or parishioners will largely be a matter of time.

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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