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CONCEPTUALIZING THE CULT CLASSIFICATION:
THE STRUCTURAL IMPACTS OF MAINSTREAM ANTI-CULT IDEOLOGY

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I. Introduction

After European colonizers first encountered the indigenous populations of the ‘New World,’ much was documented about the perplexing cultures of these unfamiliar peoples. Accounts detailed their domestic patterns, their agricultural practices, and their societal customs. Many early accounts also mentioned the role of religion within these civilizations, or, rather, the cultures’ lack of religion.¹ This can be seen through an account made by Pedro Cieza de León who wrote that the indigenous peoples of the north Andean region “observ[ed] no religion at all, as we understand it,”² a statement that we now recognize to be a false assertion. Despite the presence of common belief systems and ritualistic practices, features that we now accept as religious, the conception of religion in the sixteenth century was founded upon Western (Christian) ideology, allowing the religious horizon at that time to look very different than today’s.

In addition to the Europeans’ failure to recognize the religious activity of foreign cultures, these civilizations, themselves, did not identify their customs as religion. In fact, phrases and concepts relating to the term religion were not used by non-Western cultures until after these cultures’ first encounters with Europeans.³ ‘Religion’ was not created as a term for self-characterization; rather, it was imposed from the outside, with Europeans hoping to identify those attributes that seemed natural to their own civilization, ultimately allowing for a better comprehension of foreign cultures.⁴

Although the modern act of identifying and categorizing religion may stem from a different set of intentions, the underlying mechanism remains similar: scholars create and impose

¹ Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” 179.

² Pedro, “Parte Primera de La Crónica Del Perú (1553),” 380.

³ Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, 2.

⁴ Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious.”

the categorization of religion as a way to foster understanding. In the words of religious studies scholar Jonathan Z. Smith,

‘Religion’ is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that ... establish[es] a disciplinary horizon ... There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon.⁵

The categorization of religion exists as a tool, allowing scholars to demarcate the bounds of their study; therefore, the way in which religion is defined is entirely up to the scholar and may vary according to the individual scholar’s “intellectual purpose.” This leads to a certain degree of flexibility when defining the word, facilitating the creation of a multitude of definitions for a single term.

Nearly fifty of these definitions are neatly organized in the appendix of James H. Leuba’s *Psychological Study of Religion*, catalogued among twenty-three pages. Categorized by Leuba with respect to the perspectives that they are founded upon—individualistic, affectivistic, and voluntaristic—and further subdivided according to the thinker who proposed each interpretation, they exemplify the diversity of proposals for how to define religion. Such an extensive, although not comprehensive, list of definitions has oftentimes been used as evidence in support of the argument that religion cannot be clearly defined.⁶ This is not the case. On the contrary, Leuba’s collection proves that religion can be clearly defined; in fact, it can be clearly defined in at least fifty different ways. Echoing the sentiments of Leuba, this list of forty-eight definitions exists as “a splendid illustration ... of the versatility” inherent in the description of religion;⁷ but while the

⁵ Ibid., 193–94.

⁶ King, *Introduction to Religion*, 63.

⁷ Leuba, *A Psychological Study of Religion: Its Origin, Function, and Future*, 339.

variation in definitions does not discount any one's validity, it does allow for a relatively high degree of difficulty in forming a singular, cohesive definition. Should certain religious attributes be prioritized over others? Does a group have to display all definitional characteristics to be considered religious, or only a subset of them? Simply put, is one definition better, or more complete, than another?

Like religion, a similar degree of difficulty is encountered when endeavoring to define 'cult' and 'New Religious Movement.' Many scholars have created their own criteria for what distinguishes a cult from other social groupings, with the degree of overlap varying. Early definitions of the term, including those proposed by Milton Yinger, Geoffrey K. Nelson, and James T. Richardson, confine cult to the religious realm, emphasizing the individualized, mystical nature of the groups, as well as the existence of a charismatic leader.⁸ Richardson also places importance upon the cult's divergence from "the predominant religious culture;"⁹ some argue, however, that the term 'cult' should not be bound within culture, allowing for the proposal of more content-oriented definitions.¹⁰ More recent definitions, many of which discard the references to religion made by their predecessors, place focus on the organizational, behavioral, and historical qualities of cults.¹¹ In addition to the objective definitional discrepancies of the term, many modern definitions are also influenced by anti-cult ideology, which will be discussed in Chapter 2.

⁸ Yinger, *Religion, Society, and the Individual: An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion*; Nelson, "The Spiritualist Movement and the Need for a Redefinition of Cult"; Richardson, "An Oppositional and General Conceptualization of Cult."

⁹ Richardson, "An Oppositional and General Conceptualization of Cult," 31.

¹⁰ Martin, *Pacifism: An Historical and Sociological Study*; Wallis, "Ideology, Authority, and the Development of Cultic Movements."

¹¹ Robbins and Anthony, "Deprogramming, Brainwashing, and the Medicalization of Deviant Religious Groups"; Ellwood, "The Several Meanings of Cult."

The classification of New Religious Movement (NRM) is often used by scholars in opposition to the cult classification; however, the NRM classification is not without problems. First, similar to the terms ‘religion’ and ‘cult,’ there is a great deal of ambiguity surrounding what defines an NRM, and different scholars may assert different meanings. For example, some see NRMs as “alternative” religions, in contrast to those religions that exist in the mainstream, while others define NRMs as “emergent” religions, with relatively recent conceptions.¹² Additionally, within the collection of groups that have attained a NRM classification, there exists much dissonance—some groups may not be new, some groups may not claim to be religions, and some groups may not be movements; nevertheless, all claim the same title as an NRM. This dissonance is not surprising, however, considering that the category of ‘New Religions’ is the second-largest in the *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, succeeding the ‘Christianity’ category.¹³ Despite the various pitfalls that accompany the NRM label, the term is still the favorite of modern scholars, largely due to the lack of a better alternative,¹⁴ allowing for its continued and increasing use within scholarship.

Because of the vast amount of variation within the definitional horizon for all three terms—religion, cult, and NRM—there exists a great deal of ambiguity in how a group may be categorized. Rather than simply classifying a group based on the attributes they possess, and how these attributes correspond to the definition of each term, the disparity in definitions allows for preexisting biases and prejudices to affect the classification. For example, if one believes a group is immoral or disagreeable, they may be inclined to assign this group the label of cult, so as to keep the religious realm pure. In making this delineation, however, one is likely to disregard or downplay other features displayed by the group, which may otherwise support a religious

¹² Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, 3.

¹³ Smith, “A Matter of Class,” 172.

¹⁴ Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, 4.

classification. Negative connotations associated with the cult classification, influenced by anti-cult ideology, ultimately have structural impacts, one of which is the exclusion of those groups deemed as cults from the educational realm. This is seen through the scholastic makeup of educational institutions, as well as their communal practices.¹⁵

¹⁵ Please note: although the study of NRMs and the existence and discrimination of cults occurs worldwide, particularly in the Western nations of the United Kingdom and Australia, this study solely focuses on those phenomena occurring within the United States. While the circumstances may be similar in other nations, no claims can be made regarding the situation in any country outside of the one in question. Additionally, although the terms of ‘cult’ and ‘NRM’ may signify different sets of groups, the terms will be used interchangeably in this work to signify the same collection of religious groups.

II. Historical Background

Rooted in the Latin term for worship, *cultus*, whose verb form means to cultivate, attend to, or respect,¹⁶ the word ‘cult,’ at its base, has no negative connotations. It has been used to describe religious groups throughout antiquity, groups that are often associated with a particular place or figure. For example, a well known cult existing during the first few centuries of the common era is the Cult of Mithras, whose religious practices centered upon the god Mithras and was spread throughout the extent of the Roman Empire. As the centuries have passed, usage of the term ‘cult’ has expanded and the term has been adapted to characterize many other groups.

When studies first began about alternative and emergent religious groups within the United States in the 1960s, sociologists led the front. The church/sect typology existed as the principle framework used to analyze these groups, with the church and sect representing the mainstream and oppositional communities, respectively.¹⁷ As studies of these oppositional groups progressed, however, the church/sect typology failed to meet the needs of researchers, leading to the adoption of different theories of categorization. Drawing from those aspects of church versus sect that remained helpful, several scholars began using ‘cult’ terminology to demarcate these groups of interest from the mainstream—early users of the classification include Yinger and Nelson, both of whom are discussed in the previous chapter, as well as sociologists Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark, who offered an early characterization for the term in their 1965 book, *Religion and Society in Tension*¹⁸—but, as seen in the last chapter, the definitions proposed for this cult classification varied in content.

When first introduced and developed within the field of the sociology of religion, the definitions of ‘cult’ remained relatively objective. Although they oftentimes emphasized the

¹⁶ Simpson and Weiner, “Cult,” 199.

¹⁷ Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, chap. 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

cult's place outside of the dominant culture, judgement was typically omitted. Over time, however, the leading definitions have become more subjective, imbued with society's distaste for the groups labeled with the term. Consider the popular definition proposed by Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony in "Deprogramming, Brainwashing, and the Medicalization of Deviant Religious Groups:"

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.¹⁹

The use of emotionally charged terms—such as “manipulative,” “aggressive,” and “indoctrination”—do not leave room for objective analysis of those groups deemed to carry this label; and, as stated by James T. Richardson, “this definition clearly shows the problems associated with” the modern cult classification.²⁰ This shift in definition highlights a widespread trend toward ‘cult’ becoming a pejorative marker, largely due to the groups the term has come to label, in conjunction with mainstream society’s perception of these groups.

This shift is not new. Although the exact time in which it occurred is unknown, instances in which the term was used “to judge the moral or spiritual worth of someone’s ritual activity” can be seen as early as the seventeenth century.²¹ At this point, negative connotations attached to

¹⁹ Robbins and Anthony, “Deprogramming, Brainwashing, and the Medicalization of Deviant Religious Groups,” 283.

²⁰ Richardson, “Definitions of Cult,” 352.

²¹ Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, 2.

the 'cult' label are ingrained in the psyche of society. Because of the derogatory implications of a cult classification, as noted by Philip Jenkins, "it can scarcely be used as an objective social scientific description."²² As an alternative, many scholars have now opted to use the phrase 'New Religious Movement' (NRM) to classify groups previously known as cults in a more neutral manner.²³

Beginning in the mid-to-late twentieth century, the field of NRM studies merged sociologists and religious studies scholars, as well as other historians and liberal theologians, all of whom were interested in gaining a better understanding of the groups now known as NRMs. The 1960s and 1970s "were a time of unprecedented renunciation of established religions;"²⁴ thus, the American counterculture of this time served as the backdrop to pioneering work within NRM studies. Mainly drawing from theoretical frameworks proposed in the sociology of religion, some early studies explored the place of NRMs in relation to the dominant culture, while others considered individual or small subsets of groups.²⁵ Scholars within the field asked questions relating to the motivations of NRM members, the function of NRMs, and what the proliferation of NRMs could mean for broader society.

As studies developed, NRM scholars moved from working in relative isolation to exchanging correspondence and forming conversational networks in the form of conferences, journals, and professional organizations and societies. The NRM Center, established in 1977 in Berkeley, California and directed by Jacob Needleman, was central to the development of the field of NRM studies, fostering the interaction of countless scholars in pursuit of providing impartial accounts of NRMs. Prior to the Center's closing in 1983, it had received grants from

²² Jenkins, *Mystic and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History*, 14.

²³ Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, 3; Gallagher, "'Cults' and 'New Religious Movements,'" 205.

²⁴ Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, 46.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

several secular foundations, including the National Endowment for the Humanities, hosted bi-weekly seminars led by prominent scholars from the field, and founded the NRM Resource Center, a library collection available to the public.²⁶

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, academic conferences also served as an intellectual meeting place for NRM scholars, and these conferences were hosted and sponsored by several organizations, the most peculiar of these organizations being the Unification Church (UC), a NRM that began in the United States in 1959. Although the sponsorship of the UC has led to some controversy, it is indisputable that the resulting conferences played an integral role in the foundation of NRM studies.²⁷

Professional academic societies have been and continue to be venues for the continuation of NRM scholarship. Despite the considerable amount of pushback initially encountered, the American Academy of Religion (AAR) held its first session about NRMs at the 1981 AAR annual meeting. Today, the NRM Group, a program unit composed of NRM scholars, regularly hosts at least two sessions at the AAR annual, as well as regional, meetings. NRM studies is also integrated in professional sociology of religion societies: the Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR), the Religious Research Association (RRA), and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR). These societies regularly incorporate NRM scholars and sessions into their annual meetings and in their respective peer-reviewed journals.²⁸

Through all of the aforementioned events, organizations, and societies, the field of NRM studies has been able to develop and gain credibility as a scholarly field devoted to obtaining an objective awareness of those groups deemed to be NRMs. NRM studies scholarship does not aim to disrupt NRMs, but simply to understand them. The same cannot be said about other inquisitive

²⁶ Ibid., 77–83.

²⁷ Ibid., 84–90.

²⁸ Ibid., 91–96.

groups, the Countercult Movement and the Anti-Cult Movement, who endeavor to discredit and delegitimize NRMs.

What is today recognized as the Countercult Movement first appeared with the writings of Christian Fundamentalists in the early twentieth century. Beginning as early as 1917, with the publication of *Timely Warnings* by William C. Irvine, the movement placed its attention on alternative Christian groups, such as the Mormons and the Christian Scientists.²⁹ Despite their departure from much of traditional Christian doctrine, these groups retained their claim to Christianity, and this proved displeasing—and, possibly more importantly, posed a threat—to those within the Countercult Movement.

Throughout the decades following 1917, several books expressing opposition to Christian cults were published, including *Chaos of the Cult* by Jan Karel van Baalen, who claimed that cults offered false teachings under the guise of Christianity.³⁰ Walter R. Martin, designated by Douglas Cowan as “the major ... intellectual on the modern Christian countercult horizon,”³¹ contributed much to the movement with his 1965 publication, *Kingdom of the Cults*. In addition to his writings, Martin also founded the Christian Research Institute (CRI), an organization created to gather information on American cults, in 1960. The CRI was the first of several countercult organizations, namely the Spiritual Counterfeits Project (SCP), based in the Christian World Liberation Front (CWLF), and the Evangelical Ministries to New Religions (EMNR), the organization founded most recently, in 1982.³²

Whether proposed by individual authors or accredited organizations, the arguments put forth by countercultists are polemical, attacking the position of cults rather than defending their

²⁹ Ibid., 34.

³⁰ van Baalen, *The Chaos of Cults: A Study of Present-Day Isms*.

³¹ Cowan, *Bearing False Witness?: An Introduction to the Christian Countercult*.

³² Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, 36–37.

own position.³³ These arguments are not scholarly, and they are in no way objective. In any case, the collection of resources devoted to supporting the Countercult Movement provide a straightforward expression of the movement's goal: "Countercultists find purpose in their careers as opponents of religions they believe are harmful and sinful,"³⁴ religions that endanger the salvation of those adhering to their unwarranted beliefs.

Much like the Countercult Movement, the Anti-Cult Movement exists in opposition to NRMs, regarded as cults by those within the previously mentioned movements. Unlike the Countercult Movement, however, the Anti-Cult Movement's basis for opposition is founded upon secular motivations. They assert that cults violate an individual's freedom of thought,³⁵ and this violation is mainly facilitated through the mechanism of 'brainwashing.'

After many young adults joined the alternative and emergent religious groups in the 1960s and 1970s, subsequently distancing themselves from their parents, these parents became increasingly concerned about the wellbeing of their children; thus, concerned parents, operating under the mainstream belief that cults were dangerous groups that indoctrinated their converts, became the first members of the Anti-Cult Movement.³⁶ Working with outside individuals, parents oftentimes solicited the 'deprogramming' of their children. The process of deprogramming entailed enticing a cult member into an enclosed space, many times a car, before bringing the individual to an isolated space and keeping them in seclusion until their 'true' personality returned, essentially reversing the changes made by their initial brainwashing. Deprogramming could be violent, and there exists much controversy over the legality and ethicality of the process.

³³ Ibid., 33.

³⁴ Ibid., 2.

³⁵ Ibid., 33.

³⁶ Ibid., 111.

In addition to concerned parents, the Anti-Cult Movement is also made up of intellectuals who deny the validity of cults as religious groups; these intellectuals constitute the field of Cultic studies, whose work, all of which expresses negative perspectives about cults, supports the arguments made by the movement. The “intellectual wing” of the Anti-Cult Movement,³⁷ Cultic studies prefers the cult categorization over its NRM counterpart because of its connotation of harm. Cultic studies scholars believe that cults are dangerous, both to the individuals that join them and the societies they exist within, and rather than religions, cults are “toxic social groups” that prey on and manipulate converts, representing “a profound and pervasive threat to American freedoms.”³⁸ Early leaders within Cultic studies include psychologist John G. Clark, who interpreted an individual’s involvement with a cult as a sign of “psychiatric infirmity,”³⁹ law professor Richard Delgado, religious scholar Marcia R. Rudin, and psychiatrist Margaret Singer, one of the most noteworthy Cultic studies scholars.⁴⁰

As the field grew, studies began to be published in the American Family Foundation’s (AFF) *Cultic Studies Journal (CSJ)*, with the first issue appearing in 1984. The AFF, founded in 1979 by Kay Barney, a parent of an individual who joined a cult, is now known as the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), and the *CSJ* has been renamed as the *International Journal of Cultic Studies (IJCS)*. *IJCS* currently publishes annually.⁴¹ Although the goal of this organization and this journal is to publish scientific research regarding cults, this has not necessarily been the case. Despite the increasing number of empirical studies published in the *IJCS* over the more recent years, the majority of work conducted in Cultic studies is non-scholarly.

³⁷ Ibid., 104.

³⁸ Ibid., 116.

³⁹ Shupe and Bromley, Item 61: Testimony of John G. Clark, Jr.

⁴⁰ Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, 115.

⁴¹ Ibid., 117.

Regardless of the non-scholarly, and largely subjective, nature of the work produced by Cultic studies, the ideology of the Anti-Cult Movement retains a substantial influence over the public sphere. Many legal cases working against cults have been aided by anti-cult ideology, and the portrayal of and attitude towards cults in the public sphere is incredibly antagonistic. Anti-cult ideology has far-reaching effects within mainstream society, and these effects do not favor the interests of those groups deemed to be cults.

Because of the pernicious effects of anti-cult ideology, founded upon much of the work conducted in Cultic studies, several NRM studies scholars have commented on and critiqued the prejudiced accusations. Many scholars claim that Cultic studies makes exaggerated assertions regarding the dangerous nature of cults, possibly due to the incentives they may gain from such a demonization: the more threatening cults appear, the more reason there is for the Anti-Cult Movement to continue its work.⁴² David G. Bromley and Anson D. Shupe have also put forth a three-stage model of the Anti-Cult Movement's history, which includes a proposal for what the future of the movement may look like; this model will be detailed later in this study.

In conclusion, the pejorative connotations tied to the cult identification has led many religious studies scholars to use the NRM classification instead, allowing for a more objective study of the groups. The field of NRM studies, beginning in the 1960s, has grown over time, contributing immense amounts of information about these alternative groups and allowing for a better understanding of their purpose and function. Despite these efforts toward understanding, efforts have also been made to discount and discredit the groups under study, seen within the Countercult Movement and the Anti-Cult Movement, with their motivations being of a religious and secular nature, respectively. Ultimately, the ideology expressed by these movements has

⁴² Ibid., 151.

heavily influenced the perspective of mainstream society, directly affecting the status of NRMs and cults within the dominant American culture.

III. Anti-Cult Ideology in the Public Sphere

Despite the substantial amount of work produced by the Anti-Cult Movement, the movement itself has not become widely popular within mainstream society; the ideology touted by the movement, on the other hand, has. The presence of anti-cult ideology affects the portrayal of ‘deviant’ religious groups, the most obvious of these effects being the choice in terms used to label such groups. Although most religious studies scholars have shifted to regarding these groups as NRMs, the majority of individuals within American society still identify them as cults, and this classification brings with it all of the negative biases and connotations associated with the term. As stated by Eugene V. Gallagher, “in the realm of the popular news and entertainment media the category ‘cult’ reigns supreme. It is frequently used with a robust confidence that its meaning and accuracy are both self-evident and widely shared.”⁴³ Alongside the continued use of the cult categorization, the presence of anti-cult ideology within mainstream society is evidenced in a variety of ways, including the attitudes toward and depictions of cults in news media accounts, the portrayal of cults in popular culture, and the response to cults in public opinion polls.

A. News Media Accounts

Unlike the more dominant religious traditions present in the United States, it is relatively uncommon for the average American to directly encounter individuals or groups associated or involved with cults. Instead, as cults tend to be smaller in size than many other religious groups, the general public typically learns of these groups’ beliefs and practices through outside reports of their existence and operations. In terms of real-world cults, contrasting the fictional cults created for entertainment purposes, information about the groups is mainly spread through news

⁴³ Gallagher, “‘Cults’ and ‘New Religious Movements,’” 206.

media accounts, both print and video. Unfortunately, for the groups labeled as cults, these news media accounts do not depict these groups in a favorable manner.

Conducting research in the 1970s and 1980s, Barend van Driel and James T. Richardson found “an overwhelming bias in media accounts” of cults in American news media.⁴⁴ Longitudinally analyzing some of the top periodicals of the time—including *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report*—the study revealed that print media coverage discussed groups considered to be cults very differently than groups considered to be less religiously deviant.⁴⁵ To substantiate the claims of this study, which showed that the coverage of cults or cult-like groups remained constrained to controversies without offering further insight to the history or socio-cultural circumstances of the groups, van Driel and Richardson analyzed reports pertaining to over 15 cults, including, but not limited to, the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, and Hare Krishna.⁴⁶ Unlike socially accepted religious groups, which are represented in news coverage in a more realistic, and ultimately positive, manner, news reports involving cults nearly always pertain to the controversial aspects of their existence.

In addition to studying the tangible aspect of news coverage of cults, through an analysis of the physical reports, van Driel and Richardson also endeavoured to highlight the more intangible features of news media accounts: the biases held by journalists. Distributing a questionnaire about respondents’ opinions about and past experiences with cults, van Driel and Richardson surveyed those who had previously reported about cults or were members of the Religion Newswriters Association.⁴⁷ The catalogue of cults selected as “attitude objects”

⁴⁴ Olson, “The Public Perception of ‘Cults’ and ‘New Religious Movements,’” 99.

⁴⁵ van Driel and Richardson, “Categorization of New Religious Movements in American Print Media.”

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Richardson and van Driel, “Journalists’ Attitudes toward New Religious Movements,” 121.

contained eight groups, almost all of which were included in the duo's previous study, and comparison groups were also offered.⁴⁸ The study found that the majority of journalists surveyed had negative opinions about the groups they had previously reported on, with 77.2 percent of respondents viewing Scientology in an unfavorable manner, the highest rate of discontent out of the eight groups, and 59.2 percent of respondents viewing all cults (or, NRMs, as identified in the study) in an unfavorable manner. In contrast, only an average of 19.375 percent of respondents viewed the four comparison groups unfavorably.⁴⁹

Considering the negative biases against cults held by those writing the reports about the groups, it is not entirely surprising that so many of these reports recount cults in a negative light. Although journalism is meant to be a field of objectivity, when it comes to cults, that has not been the precedent. A similar strand of subjectivity can be seen in the documentary and interview portrayal of cults, common mediums in which the groups are highlighted outside of news coverage. Instead of researching and documenting cults in an objective manner, coming from a place of unbiased curiosity and aiming to reach a place of further understanding, documentaries about cults and interviews with (most commonly, former) cult members generally appear in times of controversy and focus on the deviant—typically violent or salacious—elements of the groups under question. Normally, the overall history and the beneficial characteristics of cults are not documented; rather, the documentation of cults portrays the groups as harmful and unintelligible freakshows.

In order to see actual examples of the negative biases prevalent in news media, and how this affects the coverage of cults, consider the Unification Church (UC), a NRM founded in Korea in 1954 and brought to the United States in the mid-twentieth century. Founder of the UC,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 124.

Sun Myung Moon brought his denomination to the United States in 1959, expanding from South Korea and Japan. Moon was influenced by shamanism, Confucianism, and Protestantism, all of which were prevalent in his native land of Korea, causing him to experience mystical visions and conversations with spirits, emphasize the importance of education, and base his fundamental ideology and teachings upon the Bible and Christianity. After the UC was initially introduced to the United States in the late 1950s, Moon's group faced much pushback from already established Christian churches in the country, as many viewed the church as a heretical offshoot of the dominant American religion. After a few years of little growth, despite resistance that the group continued to experience (and still does today), the American branch of the UC began to increase in numbers in the early 1970s, corresponding with the time in which Moon moved to the United States with his family.⁵⁰

Young adults introduced to the UC responded especially well to Moon and his movement,⁵¹ and those joining the group became known across the United States as "Moonies," a term that has since been claimed to have derogatory implications. Several organizations and projects have developed beneath the umbrella of the UC, both religious and secular, including the Unification Theological Seminary, the *Washington Times*, and the Korean Folk Ballet, and members of the UC have also been known to solicit goods and advertise their beliefs in public spaces.⁵² The theology of the UC, based on Moon's interpretation of the Old and New Testament, and the resulting practices of UC adherents differ substantially from traditional Christian theology, despite their common foundation. The *Divine Principle*, a book containing the teachings of Moon, contains the publicly accessible tenets of the UC belief system.⁵³ The most

⁵⁰ Daschke and Ashcraft, "The Unification Church."

⁵¹ Mickler, "The Unification Church/Movement in the United States."

⁵² Barker, "The Unification Church."

⁵³ Ibid.

important Unification rite is the mass wedding ceremony, in which thousands of couples matched by Moon are married. In addition to the mass wedding ceremony, the numerous other rituals practiced by the UC are known as the Unification Tradition.⁵⁴

Of all the traditions observed by members of the UC, the mass wedding ceremonies are the most recent to grab the attention of the general public. Articles in *NPR*, *The Washington Post*, and *Insider* (from 2010, 2017, and 2018, respectively) all open with the details of Moon's mass wedding ceremonies, marrying upwards of 10,000 couples, some of which had minimal previous encounters.⁵⁵ Excluding the podcast and article published by *NPR*, which provides historical context and does not proclaim a value judgement regarding the group, the tone taken by the remaining two articles, both of which are penned by former UC members, is strikingly negative. Cara Jones and Lisa Kohn supply little to no history of the movement, offering no account of the positive characteristics held by the group. Readers, who likely already hold implicit or explicit negative opinions about groups like the UC, see Jones and Kohn as reliable sources of information from which to draw further conclusions. Instead, the authors' experiences with the UC facilitate biased accounts, not objective journalism, further ingraining negative sentiments about the UC. Cara Jones went on to create a documentary about the movement, and Lisa Kohn wrote a memoir about her time as a child in the church.

The negative press given to the UC is not a new phenomenon. In the words of Eileen Barker,

Since the early 1970s, but more vociferously following the Jonestown tragedy in 1978, the media and the anticult movement have publicised a

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Bradley Hagerty, "Unification Church Woos A Second Generation"; Jones, "At Age 20, I Was Married by the Unification Church. Here's How I Broke Away."; Kohn, "I Grew up in a Cult — and There Is Nothing More Intoxicating than Knowing You Have the 'Truth.'"

number of accusations about the [UC]—that it was amassing large fortunes for its leaders, that it was engaged in nefarious political activities, that it brainwashed and exploited its members, that it was breaking up families and carrying out all manner of other deceptive and sinister practices.⁵⁶

News coverage, as well as additional coverage through other informational mediums like documentaries and books, of the UC has been incredibly biased and oftentimes only occurs in situations of controversy or shock. The overwhelmingly negative nature of coverage is not entirely surprising, however, as 76.3 percent of journalists in Richardson and van Driel’s study reported viewing the UC unfavorably.⁵⁷

As seen through the news coverage given to the UC, a group brought to the United States in the late 1950s by leader Sun Myung Moon, cults are typically portrayed in a negative way by news media platforms. This occurrence has been supported with research by van Driel and Richardson, who also showed that the journalists writing such accounts harbor pre-existing biases against groups seen as cults, which likely influences the way in which these groups are portrayed. In any case, the tendency of news media accounts, as well as other informational accounts of real-world cults, to portray cults in a negative manner, without mention of the groups’ history or a comprehensive analysis of the groups, evidences one of the effects of anti-cult ideology becoming prevalent in the general American public.

B. Popular Culture

Forms of media intended for entertainment are frequently analyzed in the fields of ethnic studies, queer studies, and gender studies, but the same level of investigation is not seen within

⁵⁶ Barker, “The Unification Church,” 93.

⁵⁷ Richardson and van Driel, “Journalists’ Attitudes toward New Religious Movements,” 124.

the realm of NRM studies.⁵⁸ Although little scholarly attention has been given to the representation of cults in forms of entertainment, with the majority of analysis instead focusing on forms of news media, much can be gleaned about the public perception of these groups from a study of popular culture. Additionally, not only does popular culture display mainstream anti-cult ideology, because of the influence this ideology has on its creation, it also further affirms the general public's already existing beliefs and stereotypes about cults.⁵⁹ In essence, the damaging portrayal of cults in entertainment mediums creates a positive feedback loop, both being affected by and, in turn, affecting the development of anti-cult ideology.

As previously seen through the production and distribution of news media accounts, the general public has been provided with a large amount of misinformation regarding cults, further solidifying the negative biases held against the groups. In many cases, the individuals maintaining these negative biases have no prior history of firsthand encounters with cults or cult-like groups; thus, it is assumed that their sole education about and exposure to cults comes directly from their media consumption.⁶⁰ While the media consumed by these individuals includes news articles and broadcasts, it also comprises forms of popular entertainment such as books, films, and television shows.

Because works of entertainment are fictional creations, unlike news media, there is no restriction on the narratives they can present; thus, although these fictional works typically draw from real-world examples of cults, they tend to fabricate cults that are “more absurd or more frightening” than those actually in existence.⁶¹ The more dramatic, the better. As modern television networks—in both the news and entertainment realms—frequently compete with one

⁵⁸ Laycock, “Where Do They Get These Ideas? Changing Ideas of Cults in the Mirror of Popular Culture,” 81.

⁵⁹ Laycock, “Where Do They Get These Ideas? Changing Ideas of Cults in the Mirror of Popular Culture”; Neal, “‘They’re Freaks!’: The Cult Stereotype in Fictional Television Shows, 1958-2008.”

⁶⁰ Laycock, “Where Do They Get These Ideas? Changing Ideas of Cults in the Mirror of Popular Culture,” 82.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

another for ratings, reports made by cable news companies are becoming increasingly sensationalized, blurring the boundary between the true and the false.⁶² The dramatized nature of fictional cults, based upon actual cults, contributes to the dramatized reporting on actual cults. Once again, a positive feedback loop is formed.

The fictional portrayal of cults began in the mid-twentieth century, coinciding with the time period when these groups became worrisome to mainstream society, and over time, there has been an increasing trend in the representation of cults in popular culture.⁶³ One of the earliest pieces of evidence from American popular culture that depicts a fictional narrative of a cult is Zane Grey's 1912 novel, *Riders of the Purple Sage*. This book, which takes place in nineteenth century Utah, narrates a woman's rescue from "polygamist Mormon elders."⁶⁴ Over the decades, books have continued to exist as a medium to perpetuate anti-cult stereotypes, and trends in their themes and contents have shifted alongside the predominant worries of the general public. For example, shortly after the mass suicide at Jonestown, Flow Conway and Jim Siegelman published *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change* (1978), offering a model of religious conversion caused by mental trauma, and as fears of Satanism developed in the 1980s, psychotherapist Lawrence Pazder published *Michelle Remembers* (1980), detailing Satanic ritual abuse.⁶⁵ *Michelle Remembers* is an especially poignant example of the subjective influence anti-cult ideology has on popular culture, as many of the accounts detailed in the text, which subject, Michelle Smith, claimed to experience as a young child, seem to have been borrowed from popular horror films of the earlier decades.⁶⁶ The publication of *Michelle*

⁶² Ibid., 81–82.

⁶³ Neal, "'They're Freaks!': The Cult Stereotype in Fictional Television Shows, 1958-2008," 96.

⁶⁴ Laycock, "Where Do They Get These Ideas? Changing Ideas of Cults in the Mirror of Popular Culture," 83.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 90.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 91.

Remembers exemplifies the way in which anti-cult ideology allows for the portrayal of fiction as fact, further cementing negative biases into the minds of the general public.

Like books, videographic media has also evidenced, and influenced, the existence of mainstream anti-cult ideology. Films such as *Serial* and *Airplane*, both of which were released in 1980, exemplify the stereotypical depiction of cults in movies. More recent films, such as *Road Trip* (2000), continue to perpetuate anti-cult biases; in the case of *Road Trip*, the notion that suicide is an essential component of cults is perpetuated.⁶⁷ Aside from blockbuster films, however, television shows play an incredibly important role in the dispersion and continuation of anti-cult ideology through American popular culture. As stated by Lynn S. Neal, “television remains one of the most influential vehicles in American culture for the reification and proliferation of stereotypical imagery.”⁶⁸ In essence, television shows are a hotbed for anti-cult stereotypes.

The stereotypical elements of cults perpetuated by television narrations are numerous, with a common few being separation from the “normal” world, charismatic leaders, exploitations and brainwashing, and sexual deviation.⁶⁹ The inclusion of such stereotypes has taken place in television shows since the mid-twentieth century, much like the books and films discussed earlier. Consider *Get Smart*, a 1960s American sitcom directed by Mel Brooks, which aired a 1968 episode entitled “The Groovy Guru,” depicting brainwashed teenagers. This particular episode was voted one of the top 100 television shows of all time by *TV Guide*.⁷⁰ Through the decades, the number of television episodes depicting cults has only increased, with many of these depictions occurring on comedies and dramas, particularly crime dramas. Neal highlights more

⁶⁷ Ibid., 96.

⁶⁸ Neal, ““They’re Freaks!”: The Cult Stereotype in Fictional Television Shows, 1958-2008,” 85.

⁶⁹ Jenkins, *Mystic and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History*, 4.

⁷⁰ Birkmeyer, “Get Smart Episode File.”

recent occurrences, analyzing two comedic episodes—“The Joy of the Sect” on *The Simpsons* and “The Cult” on *Everybody Loves Raymond*—and three dramatic episodes—“Charisma” on *Law and Order: SVU*, “Shooting Stars” on *CSI*, and “Minimal Loss” on *Criminal Minds*. In all episodes mentioned, stereotypical elements of cults were used to advance the episode’s plot; for example, four of the five episodes depict exploitative actions, and all five episodes either explicitly or implicitly acknowledge the act of brainwashing.⁷¹ Additionally, especially in the crime dramas, “horrific acts of violence” are featured, sustaining the stereotype that associates cults with violence.⁷²

Whether through books, films, or television shows, the depiction of cults in popular culture heavily depends on the negative stereotypes associated with such groups. Such a phenomenon has occurred since cults became a worry to the public conscience, and its prevalence has only continued to grow over time. The persistent negative portrayal of cults in entertainment not only evidences the existence of anti-cult ideology within mainstream society, it also further ingrains the biases and prejudices into the minds of the general public.

C. Public Opinion Polls

The negative portrayal of cults in the media, both news and entertainment, has been seen to be both a product of and a cause of anti-cult ideology. On top of that, as depictions of cults in media accounts, laden with stereotypes and based upon biases about the groups, generally encompass the only form of exposure the majority of the general public has to cults, public opinion about the groups tends to align with their unfavorable media presentations, and belief in the stereotypes and biases displayed is a common occurrence.

⁷¹ Neal, “‘They’re Freaks!’: The Cult Stereotype in Fictional Television Shows, 1958-2008,” 86–88.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 88.

Outside of simply analyzing the ways in which the media depicts and influences public anti-cult ideology, several scholars have also surveyed different subsets of the American population to quantify the ideology's pervasiveness. The earliest of these surveys dates back to 1978, and they have continued to be conducted as recently as 2006.

The first of many surveys to include responses regarding opinions about cults was The Civil Liberties Survey, conducted in 1978 and 1979, which contained samples from both the "mass public" and "community leaders and activists." Those surveyed responded to two statements pertaining to the activity of cults. Firstly, 18 percent and 11 percent of the samples, respectively, agreed that "freedom of religion was never meant to apply to religious cults that the majority of people consider 'strange,' 'fanatical,' or 'weird;'" and secondly, 51 percent and 55 percent of the samples agreed that the parents of a young woman should legally be able to "force [their daughter] to leave an offbeat cult ... and be deprogrammed."⁷³ Shortly after The Civil Liberties Survey, responses from Gallup polls taking place in 1981, 1987, and 1989 indicated an increasingly negative viewpoint of cults, with 62 percent of respondents revealing that they would not like members of cults to be their neighbors.⁷⁴

In addition to providing evidence of an increase in negative perspective regarding cults, several early surveys also evidence the belief in stereotypes about cults. For example, from the longitudinal surveys of residents in Washoe County, Nevada, conducted by James T. Richardson and partners in 1984 and 1988, 77 percent of 1988 respondents believe that those who form cults are interested in personal power and wealth.⁷⁵ An Oregon survey conducted in 1985 and 1986 shows the public belief in brainwashing by cults, as 69 percent of respondents indicated that

⁷³ McClosky and Brill, *Dimensions of Tolerance: What Americans Believe about Civil Liberties*, 309.

⁷⁴ Richardson, "Public Opinion and the Tax Evasion Trial of Reverend Moon: Research Data and Fundamental Questions."

⁷⁵ Bromley and Breschel, "General Population and Institutional Elite Support for Social Control of New Religious Movements: Evidence from National Survey Data," 43.

members of the Rajneesh movement, categorized as a cult by 80 percent of respondents, had been brainwashed.⁷⁶

Despite the “obvious conclusion” of early surveys, that there exists a negative image of cults in the public consciousness, the large degree of variability within the people surveyed and the lack of consensus in the terms used in each survey makes it difficult to form large-scale conclusions regarding the implications of such results.⁷⁷ In an effort to assuage this difficulty, David G. Bromley and Edward F. Breschel conducted two 1987 surveys to determine the level of support for the social control of cults, surveying the general public and institutional elites individually, with 1,708 and 863 respondents in each sample, respectively. From these surveys, Bromley and Breschel found that the majority of the general public, over 60 percent, and a substantial minority of institutional elites, about 25 percent, supported the creation of measures of control over cults, including social legislation prohibiting cults from public solicitation and the conversion of teenagers, as well as FBI surveillance of cults.⁷⁸ Overall, the research conducted by Bromley and Breschel established the low opinion of cults held by the general American public.

A 1992 survey conducted by Jeffrey E. Pfeifer, in which 98 undergraduate students were surveyed, also established the overarching negative view of cults, as roughly 75 percent of respondents described cults in a negative manner and more than 82 percent described the typical cult member in a negative way.⁷⁹ Despite the firmness with which they provided the prior responses, the overwhelming majority of respondents had never had previous contact with a cult

⁷⁶ Latkin, “Seeing Red: A Social-Psychological Analysis of the Rajneeshpuram Conflict,” 261.

⁷⁷ Bromley and Breschel, “General Population and Institutional Elite Support for Social Control of New Religious Movements: Evidence from National Survey Data,” 43.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷⁹ Pfeifer, “The Psychological Framing of Cults: Schematic Representations and Cult Evaluations,” 538.

member, admitting that their perceptions were based upon “some form of media presentation.”⁸⁰ Not only did Pfeifer’s study illuminate the negative conceptions of cults held by undergraduate students, as well as the media’s influence upon these conceptions, it also highlighted the differences in how cults and other organized groups, both religious and secular, are viewed.

By having the students read three scenarios of indoctrination, with the only difference between each scenario being the group that the person joined, Pfeifer’s study reveals how preexisting partisanship affects an individual’s response to the actions of communities. Of the three groups documented in the survey, the Moonies (a colloquial term for the Unification Church), the Marines, and the Catholic Church, the Unification Church was judged most harshly by respondents—70.9 percent categorized the indoctrination as “brainwashing” when describing the Moonies, compared to 44.1 and 29.4 percent for the other two groups, respectively, and respondents believed the individual joining the Moonies to be less happy, less intelligent, and less responsible than the other two individuals.⁸¹

As seen through Pfeifer’s study, even when the method and situation of indoctrination is identical, the group allegedly performing the indoctrination greatly affects the way in which the individuals being indoctrinated, as well as the overall process of indoctrination, is viewed. Groups that are recognized as cults by the general public, like the Unification Church, are much more likely to be viewed in a negative manner. Using the same sort of methodology, asking three samples of respondents the same two questions other than a minor change in terminology, the work of Paul J. Olson evidences the changes in opinion that occur when the ‘cult’ label is employed. With sample sizes of 814, 831, and 769, Olson asked respondents how comfortable they would be if their neighbor chose to join a cult, a NRM, or a new Christian church,

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Pfeifer, “The Psychological Framing of Cults: Schematic Representations and Cult Evaluations.”

respectively. Drastically different opinions were recorded, with 81.6 percent of people indicating their uncomfortability with the scenario of their neighbor joining a cult, while only 29.1 percent were uncomfortable with a neighbor in an NRM and 6.1 percent uncomfortable with a neighbor in a new Christian church.⁸² Respondents were also asked if the government should have the right to regulate the practices of the group in question, and 56.2 percent, 25.6 percent, and 12.4 percent of each of the respective samples agreed with government regulation.⁸³ Overall, Olson's study reveals the overwhelmingly negative opinion of cults held by Nebraskans, as well as the relatively positive opinion Nebraskans have of NRMs and new Christian churches. Even though the sets of groups claiming these labels largely intersect, public opinion of each collection differs immensely; although this study solely surveyed Nebraska residents, similar results would likely be found throughout the entire United States population.

As seen through the many public opinion polls and surveys discussed in this section, the general public does not view cults in a positive manner. Instead, built upon the numerous stereotypes and biases ingrained in the psyche of society, cults are viewed as fundamentally negative entities, groups that need to be avoided and controlled, groups that are unlike 'normal' religions. Furthermore, the actual beliefs and the practices of these groups does not matter, as Olson shows that "simply changing the terminology used to describe a group does ... make a very large difference."⁸⁴ Anti-cult ideology runs rampant through nearly all subsets of American society, established in the mindsets of ranging demographics and populations, and this state of affairs began decades ago.

⁸² Olson, "The Public Perception of 'Cults' and 'New Religious Movements,'" 100.

⁸³ Ibid., 101.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 104.

D. Conclusion

Typically, members of the general public have never interacted with cults, or members of cults. Instead, the majority of Americans become exposed to cults through their representation in the media, with news media accounts of real-world cults and popular culture depictions of fictional cults, which rely on and perpetuate the stereotypes about and biases against such ‘deviant’ groups. By only sharing portrayals of cults that support negative opinions, news media and entertainment media fundamentally affect the way cults are viewed by the general public. This is evidenced through public opinion polls, several of which have been conducted with samples of varying demographics. Both the people creating and the people consuming media about cults harbor anti-cult beliefs and tendencies.

In addition to the triad discussed above, anti-cult ideology is also evidenced through the way in which these groups are labeled. Instead of being regarded as NRMs by the general public, as they are by most religious studies scholars, alternative or emergent religious groups are categorized as cults. By assigning these groups with this classification, as well as through the representation of these groups in media, anti-cult ideology is reinforced, facilitating the segregation of cults from the religious realm and the relegation of cults to a position of inferiority. In essence, the dramatized and restricted representations of cults, and the way in which they are labeled, contributes to their “marginalization and oppression,”⁸⁵ ultimately aligning with the goals of the anti-cult movement.

⁸⁵ Neal, “‘They’re Freaks!’: The Cult Stereotype in Fictional Television Shows, 1958-2008,” 100.

IV. Theoretical Reasoning

As previously stated, alternative or emergent religious groups tend to be classified as NRMs by modern religious studies scholars; despite this scholarly classification, the general public still regards many of these groups as cults, a categorization that has largely been discarded by scholars due to the pejorative connotations associated with the term. This difference in classification, evidenced through the representation of such groups in news and popular media, both contributes to and evolves from anti-cult ideology. Typically, a religious group obtains a cult classification, instead of an acceptably religious classification, in the public sphere due to its possession of one or more characteristics deemed objectionable or troublesome according to social norms.

The list of possible characteristics that may persuade the general public to utilize a cult classification is extensive, with entries based upon both religious and secular motivations, mirroring the opinions introduced and actions performed by the Countercult and the Anti-Cult Movements. While some may disapprove of the religious beliefs held by the groups in question, due to the dissident nature of such beliefs when compared to dominant credence, others may condemn the rituals and practices undertaken by the groups, due to the impermissibility of such actions based upon regulations imposed by dominant society. In any case, the general public offers a multitude of justifications for bracketing these groups away from the religious realm and relegating them to the inferior cult status.

Many times, occurrences and accusations of a serious nature serve as unquestionable grounds for employing the cult label and bracketing groups away from religion. Although it is not always the case, a large majority of these happenings are related to acts of violence. Consider the People's Temple and the Branch Davidians, two of the most notorious American cults in

recent history. Both of these groups based their teachings and ideologies upon Christianity, but they are not seen as religious groups by the general public. Instead, largely due to the deadly gunfights and mass suicides undertaken by both groups, known as the 1978 Jonestown massacre and the 1993 Waco siege, respectively, they have attained the cult classification. Additionally, in many instances, acts of violence within groups with a cult label are of a sexual nature.

Accusations of sexual abuse, both against young women and children within the groups, abound for many cults, including the Branch Davidians and the Children of God.⁸⁶

While acts of violence such as the ones mentioned above do not take away from the substantial amount of religious characteristics displayed by NRMs with a mainstream cult classification, when viewed from the perspective of the general public, they ultimately invalidate the groups' religious nature. Despite the religious features of groups given the cult label, through their use of the cult classification, the general public claims that cults cannot be religious groups. The reasoning behind such a delimitation is what religious studies scholar Robert Orsi calls "the moralizing imperative."⁸⁷ In short, the moralizing imperative ascertains that there exists a tendency to view religion as a phenomenon that can only be good, pure, or moralistic. As a consequence, since religions must be necessitated by goodness and purity, the religious titles of groups that are violent, dangerous, or otherwise troublesome in nature, despite the religious characteristics those groups may also hold, are oftentimes ignored or denied.⁸⁸ Rather than simply obtaining a label of difference, such groups are completely excluded from the religious realm, marked as a cult.

Orsi is not the only scholar to recognize the widespread intersection between religion and positive attributes. In studying the evolution of the term itself, Jonathan Z. Smith also

⁸⁶ Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, 200.

⁸⁷ Orsi, "Snakes Alive," 205.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

acknowledges that “most frequently, the religious is identified with rationality, morality, or feeling.”⁸⁹ As Western nations, such as the United States, tend to favor the enlightenment ideals of rationality and morality, they consequently tend to identify the dominant religious traditions practiced within their nations as aligning with these qualities; thus, when a group deviates from this template of acceptability by being immoral in any way, society fails to recognize the group as religious and brackets them away from religion. Despite the supposed correlation between religion and morality, however, the association is not necessarily warranted. On the contrary, “religion has rarely been a positive, liberal force. Religion is not nice; it has been responsible for more death and suffering than any other human activity.”⁹⁰ Regardless of this fact, the notion that religion is a positive phenomenon remains deeply established within society.

As seen with this supposed correlation between goodness and religion in Western societies, religions tend to be classified according to “cultural indicators we associate with ourselves;”⁹¹ therefore, the exclusion of select groups from the realm of the religious according to arguments of morality is not surprising. The immoral beliefs upheld by or the immoral actions committed by groups outside of the dominant religious scene are not the only reason these groups become separated from other religious communities. Any deviance from what is socially or culturally accepted within dominant society, from groups’ economic practices to their communal rituals, can result in the disallowance of a religious title and the consignment to the inferior position of the ‘other.’ In the particular cases analyzed in this study, the ‘other’ is the cult.

Unlike the People’s Temple and the Branch Davidians, the Unification Church has not engaged in any widely recognized events of mass violence to facilitate the group’s exclusion

⁸⁹ Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” 186.

⁹⁰ Smith, “The Devil in Mr. Jones,” 110.

⁹¹ Smith, “A Matter of Class,” 173.

from the religious realm. Despite their avoidance of physically destructive actions, however, several features of the UC, while they may not be as shocking as acts of violence, can easily be identified as contributing to the general public's basis for labeling the group as a cult. Supported by members of the dominant Christian church, as well as those without religious affiliation, a number of these characteristics deal with the beliefs and doctrines professed by members of the UC. As stated in the previous chapter, UC theology is based upon founder Moon's interpretation of the Old and New Testament, leading to unorthodox doctrinal perspectives. For example, rather than believing that Adam and Eve sinned by eating the forbidden fruit, Moon holds that Eve committed the original sin by "having a spiritual sexual relationship" with Lucifer prior to her subsequent "illicit physical relationship" with Adam.⁹² Not only does this stray from traditional Christian belief, as many other UC beliefs do, it also diverges from conventional societal observances, as sexuality is typically viewed as a private affair in American society, rarely explored in open conversation, much less religious ones.

In addition to objections to the religious characteristics of the UC, the general public also finds issue with the group according to secular norms. One of the most striking customs of the UC is the mass wedding ceremonies, detailed in Chapter 3, which substantially diverge from the typical wedding rituals observed throughout the United States. Because of the stark contrast between UC wedding rites and 'normal' American wedding ceremonies, the confusion held by the general public about the ritual is understandable. It is beyond comprehension, outside of the realm of religion known to the general public. In conjunction with the other abnormalities seen within the UC, such as economic practices differing from many other religious organizations, Moon's mass wedding ceremonies solidify the difference between the UC and other (already

⁹² Barker, "The Unification Church."

accepted) religious groups in the United States; thus, in the eyes of the general public, the UC must not be religion, but something else entirely.

Although they may not be as egregious as the acts of mass violence committed by other cults, the atypical beliefs and practices upheld by the UC are still seen as reasons to bracket the group away from the domain of acceptable religion. Many other religious groups in the United States, labeled as cults in the mainstream, have experienced similar processes of exclusion based upon deviance from societal norms. Just because the norms of society are widely accepted, however, does not make them any less curious or any more natural than those of the excluded groups. The idea of certain customs being ‘normal,’ with those of a different nature being abnormal, mirrors the notion that certain manners, meaning those social behaviors that are polite or civilized, are standard. On the contrary, systems of manners, like systems of customs, are oftentimes unique to the civilizations that practice them and can differ greatly from one population to the next.

Twentieth century sociologist Norbert Elias, especially well-known for his 1939 book *The Civilizing Process*, contributes a great deal to this concept of differing manners. Specifically recounting the existence and development of manners in the Middle Ages, Elias analyzes primary documents detailing those behaviors that were considered proper and others that were considered improper. One such type of document are the *Tischzuchten*, also known as table disciplines, which exist as “reflections of what ... was customary in [specific] societ[ies].”⁹³ When looking back at the manners of medieval societies, which today may seem uncivilized and lacking in knowledge, Elias illuminates the way in which these systems of behaviors “fitted the needs of these people and ... seemed meaningful and necessary to them,”⁹⁴ which is further

⁹³ Elias, “On Medieval Manners,” 49.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

supported through his exploration of the changes in conventional manners throughout the Renaissance. Entirely dependent on the needs of the civilization imposing the manners, there exists a great “divergence between what [is] regarded at different times as good and bad manners.”⁹⁵ Much like the discrepancies between a single civilization at different time periods, two distinct civilizations existing at the same time may also maintain disparate systems of accepted behaviors, both in terms of manners and customs.

Extending Elias’s work from the realm of manners to the domain of customs evidences that, although one culture may not understand or accept the practices of another culture, one set of practices are not any more valid than another. Systems of behavior are born as a result of the needs and fundamental beliefs of a population and, thus, cannot be analogous throughout all cultures. Consider the rituals associated with marriage in different populations. The marriage rites performed by Roman Catholics vary greatly from those performed by Hindus, and the same can be said of many other religious traditions. Each population has adopted unique rituals to satisfy their individual needs, and this does not make the rituals of one group more or less normal or natural than the rituals of another. The same can also be said about the marriage rituals of the Unification Church. Although these rites vary greatly from those observed by the majority of Americans, they are not invalid or unnatural. Rather, just as is the case with more mainstream religious rituals, they remain standard in their ability to satisfy the spiritual needs of UC members.

The typical American Christian may not understand the mass wedding ceremonies of the UC, leading to the UC’s exclusion from the religious realm; however, the typical American Christian is also likely to lack an understanding of Hindu wedding ceremonies, but Hinduism is still permitted to exist within the American Christian’s religious cosmos. Why, then, is the UC

⁹⁵ Elias, “The Problem of the Change in Behavior during the Renaissance,” 67.

(as well as other alternative and emergent religious groups) bracketed away from religion, instead of joining Christianity and Hinduism in the religious realm?

In addition to offering theoretical musings regarding the associations between morality and religion, detailed above, Jonathan Z. Smith offers an exceptionally strong theory regarding the conception and creation of the ‘other.’ The transition from simply existing within a state of difference to fully becoming the ‘other,’ as argued by Smith, only occurs when “a complex and intact world-view” is challenged.⁹⁶ As it pertains to groups that are denied a religious existence, relegated to the inferior status of cult, this complex and intact world-view is the web of deeply entrenched notions regarding what defines religion and what religion encompasses. Whether these preconceived notions are derived from secular tenets of morality or deeply held religious beliefs based upon one’s own religious traditions, the widely held conception of the true meaning of religion is challenged when the general public encounters religious groups that deviate from those groups already holding a religious label. Additionally, the numerous religious attributes held by these alternative groups, while they may initially seem to buttress the argument supporting the group’s obtainment of a religious title, actually further influence the general public to bracket the groups away from those that are acceptably religious. In the words of Smith:

Rather than the remote ‘other’ being perceived as problematic and/or dangerous, it is the proximate ‘other,’ the near neighbor, who is most troublesome. That is to say, while difference or ‘otherness’ may be perceived as being either LIKE-US or NOT-LIKE-US, it becomes the most problematic when it is TOO-MUCH-LIKE-US or when it claims to BE-US. It is here that the real urgency of theories of the ‘other’ emerges,

⁹⁶ Smith, “What a Difference a Difference Makes,” 269.

called forth not so much by a requirement to place difference, but rather by an effort to situate ourselves. This, then, is not a matter of the ‘far’ but preeminently of the ‘near.’⁹⁷

Religious groups given a mainstream cult classification are not of concern because of their lack of religious attributes; instead, they are of concern entirely because of their abundance of religious attributes. Just as emergent sects of Christianity, such as Christian Science and Mormonism, pose an issue to the more traditional denominations of Christianity, because of their use (and accused misuse) of Christian doctrine and their alteration of traditional Christian belief, NRMs pose an issue to the broad category of religion because of the extensive similarities shared between the two groupings, as well as the subsequent deviations from the mainstream made by NRMs. To remedy this issue, like the traditional Christians who label emergent Christian sects as heretical groups, the general public has relegated NRMs to the inferior cult position.

This refusal to accept cults into the realm of the religious serves to solidify the mainstream regard of religion. In other words, cults are too much like those groups of an acceptable religious nature; therefore, to refrain from challenging the already-held notions of what religion can be and to ensure the realm of religion remains in its current state, cults are denied entry altogether and deemed to be the ‘other.’ In creating the ‘other,’ through the cult classification, the general public defines, subsequently bounding, the religious; thus, rather than solely making statements about those groups excluded from the mainstream, the general public also conceptualizes and solidifies their own position—more specifically, their own religions’ positions—within society. This is because “a theory of difference, when applied to the proximate

⁹⁷ Smith, “Differential Equations,” 245.

‘other,’ is but another way of phrasing a theory of ‘self.’”⁹⁸ Not only does the process of othering emphasize the marginal position of the ‘other,’ it also delineates and accentuates the superior position of one’s self.

When separating one’s self from another, as the general public does when utilizing the cult classification, one forms value judgements about both one’s self and those in opposition. Emphasized by Smith, “difference is seldom a comparison between entities judged to be equivalent. Difference most frequently entails a hierarchy of prestige and the concomitant political ranking of superordinate and subordinate.”⁹⁹ Through the act of othering, the general public is affirming their superior position—socially, culturally, and morally—while simultaneously asserting the inferiority of groups given the label of cult. Eugene V. Gallagher analyzes specific cases of this phenomenon through the exploration of Oprah Winfrey’s 1993 interview with Jeanine and Robyn Bunds, former members of the Branch Davidians, and the brief examination of comments made by Dr. Joseph R. Chambers, a North Carolina minister, in his 1994 sermon.

Noting the rhetorics of Winfrey throughout her interview, revolving around distinctions of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ Gallagher highlights the intended effects of her comparisons: Winfrey “strives simultaneously to create a virtual moral community, define and defend its boundaries, identify the substantial threat it faces, and effect the rescue of a community member who has been (temporarily, she hopes) lost to the other side.”¹⁰⁰ By creating and reinforcing the boundaries of her “moral community,” the community she shares with the general public, Winfrey solidifies her position within the superior, authoritative group and reasserts the set of acceptable societal behaviors, which do not include the practices of cults. Chambers makes use

⁹⁸ Ibid., 246.

⁹⁹ Smith, “What a Difference a Difference Makes,” 253.

¹⁰⁰ Gallagher, “‘Cults’ and ‘New Religious Movements,’” 209.

of similar tactics in his sermon, in which he speaks against the impending detrimental effects of Barney, utilizing unifying diction to identify his own community, meanwhile signifying their supremacy over the cult being created by Barney.¹⁰¹ In both Winfrey's broadcast and Chambers's sermon, the figures' act of othering not only brackets cults away from the religious realm, it also reasserts the superiority of the religious groups accepted by the general public, as well as the individuals who remain outside of the alternative religious sphere.

Through this affirmation of mainstream supremacy, and the concurrent assertion of alternative subordination, the general public makes it admissible to reduce cults to their negative and divergent characteristics. Rather than fully viewing these groups as dynamic entities with ranging attributes, as typical religious groups are seen, mainstream society pays sole attention to the violent, salacious, or otherwise unusual features of cults, completely disregarding any neutral or positive aspects of the groups. Consider the People's Temple, for example, mainly known today because of the Jonestown massacre. In the public sphere, the People's Temple is characterized by nonconformity and violence. References to and discussions of the People's Temple revolve around the group's move from California to private land in Guyana following public accusations of abuse and mistreatment, as well as the infamous events of the 'White Night,' in which over 900 members committed suicide by ingesting a fruit drink containing cyanide and tranquilizers. Hours before the mass suicide, members of the People's Temple also murdered California Congressman Leo Ryan and four of his companions. In bracketing the People's Temple away from the religious realm, using the objectionable beliefs and actions of the group as support for the delineation, the general public is able to maintain their superiority over the radical group and reassert the inferior position of the cult.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 211.

Despite the destructive actions committed by and the accusations made against the group, however, the People's Temple did not originate from a place of violence. On the contrary, the group, founded by James Warren Jones (following his leadership in several other congregations), was created from a vision of equality. Established in 1956, a time of vast racial discrimination and prejudice, the People's Temple was one of the few integrated congregations of the time.¹⁰² The success and popularity experienced by Jones's congregation, allowing for its expansion from Indianapolis to greater California, can be largely attributed to the church's devotion to and belief of racial equality and harmony.

Much like many of the popular religious traditions currently followed in the United States, the People's Temple was founded on a vision of fellowship and balance. With such attractive foundational qualities, it is not surprising that there was much appeal to joining the group; however, due to its identification with the cult classification, the group has been reduced to its unattractive and atypical characteristics. The cult label automatically relegates the People's Temple to an inferior position, subordinate to those 'normal' religious groups, and invalidates the cult's claim to a religious title by narrowing its existence to only its abnormal and unattractive qualities.

Just as with the People's Temple, when engaging in the process of 'othering,' labeling deviant religious groups as cults and reducing them in order to affirm their inferior positions, the general public inhibits the opportunity for comprehension and facilitates ignorance. Had mainstream society opted to allow cults into the religious realm, these groups could exist in a state of difference, which "invites negotiation and intellection;" the mainstream has instead opted for 'otherness,' "which blocks language and conceptualization."¹⁰³ The process of 'differing'

¹⁰² Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," 104.

¹⁰³ Smith, "Differential Equations," 241.

allows for and invites a recognition of similarities (as well as dissimilarities). The process of ‘othering,’ on the other hand, obstructs the acknowledgement of resemblance. The ‘other’ becomes the alien, unlike anything already in existence and unable to be understood.

Because of this process, and because cults are labeled as the ‘other’ instead of the ‘different,’ the cult classification blocks understanding and conceptualization. Once a religious group attains a cult label, the general public has no interest in them outside of their deviant beliefs and practices. Evidence of this abounds in news media and popular entertainment, and examples can be seen throughout Chapter 3. Aligning with the goals of the Anti-Cult Movement, rather than endeavoring to learn about cults for the sake of objective understanding, the sole interest of the general public is devoted to the deviant qualities of cults, many times fostering the invalidation and disbanding of the groups. If mainstream society were to recognize the multifaceted character of cults, addressing their positive features alongside the negative, true comprehension may be attained. Until that point, which requires the admittance of cults into the religious realm, these groups will remain incomprehensible.

Smith recognizes these circumstances of incomprehensibility and, using the case study of the People’s Temple, proposes a method for reintegration and understanding. Because of the People’s Temple’s cult classification, a product of the process of ‘othering,’ the group has been reduced to its unfavorable qualities, detailed above. In failing to recognize the complete set of characteristics held by the group, mainstream society (as well as many scholars) obstructs its opportunity for understanding. To remedy this obstruction and allow for comprehension, Smith advocates for the reduction of the People’s Temple, and the Jonestown massacre, “to the category of the known and knowable,” offering two already understood models of comparison that may be used to interpret and analyze the group and its actions.¹⁰⁴ While Smith’s proposal may only offer

¹⁰⁴ Smith, “The Devil in Mr. Jones,” 112.

a possible framework with which to reconceptualize and study cults, it all the while evidences the issues resulting from the negative reduction and ‘othering’ that accompanies the cult classification.

Within the scholarly domain, proposals such as Smith’s have been made for how to fairly study groups that have been left outside of the religious realm; however, these proposals fall to deaf ears with the general public, who sees these groups through the lens of anti-cult ideology. Because of this biased perspective, rather than simply existing as a different type of religious group, these communities are given a cult classification, becoming the ‘other,’ and while there are a variety of factors that may initially lead to a group’s attainment of a cult label—including moral, social, cultural, or even economic deviance—once a group obtains this quality of ‘otherness,’ they are fully bracketed away from the religious realm, completely alien and unable to be understood. In addition, through the process of ‘othering,’ mainstream society is able to supplement their superior position and amplify the inferiority of these outside groups. This process not only affects the way in which cults are viewed by the general public, it also has several tangible effects in the institutional domain, which will be explored in the upcoming chapter.

V. Institutional Effects of Mainstream Anti-Cult Ideology

In 1987, following the emergence and development of the Anti-Cult Movement, NRM studies scholars David G. Bromley and Anson D. Shupe, proposed a three-stage model of the historical evolution of the Anti-Cult Movement, also offering a proposal regarding its possible future progressions. The first of the three stages, the *formative stage*, was characterized by “organizational fluidity.”¹⁰⁵ While individual anti-cultists may have organized with local groups, a national network remained nonexistent, and the key concern of the budding movement regarded the ability of cults to “attract America’s allegedly best and brightest youth,”¹⁰⁶ with the process of brainwashing serving as an answer to the question of how such groups harnessed this ability. As the movement grew, bringing scholars, journalists, and clergy members together with parents of cult members and ex-members, local groups began interacting with one another, allowing for a more unified movement and leading to the creation of national organizations. This development marked the beginnings of the *expansionist stage*, the stage in which the movement resided during the theorizing of Bromley and Shupe.¹⁰⁷ While they were not positive as to how the Anti-Cult Movement would mature, the scholars hypothesized a third and final stage in the movement’s evolution, the *institutional stage*. With the dawn of the institutional stage, anti-cult groups and organizations would “establish bureaucracies and gain greater social legitimacy,” assimilating into mainstream society.¹⁰⁸

At the time of their speculation, Bromley and Shupe had no way to predict whether the institutionalization of the Anti-Cult Movement would actually occur; however, nearly 35 years since the initial publication of their model, the state and development of the movement may now

¹⁰⁵ Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, 141.

¹⁰⁶ Bromley and Shupe, “The Future of the Anticult Movement,” 224.

¹⁰⁷ Bromley and Shupe, “The Future of the Anticult Movement.”

¹⁰⁸ Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, 141.

be reanalyzed and compared to their proposed blueprint. When looking at the modern Anti-Cult Movement, the lack of institutionalization is quite evident. Despite the consolidation of the movement (it is now headed by the International Cultic Studies Association), it still exists on the fringes of mainstream society. Governmental and bureaucratic organizations do not work with anti-cult groups, and the work produced by the movement does not attain a high level of public visibility.

Although the Anti-Cult Movement, itself, may not have become institutionalized, as Bromley and Shupe predicted, the ideology espoused by the movement has. As discussed earlier, anti-cult ideology runs rampant throughout mainstream American society. Not only are NRMs classified as cults by the general public, relegating the groups to an inferior status and reducing them to their unattractive or objectionable qualities, the public perception of cults is remarkably negative, seen throughout media portrayals of both real and fictional cults and further evidenced through public opinion polls. Rather than simply remaining stagnant in the cultural realm, anti-cult ideology has permeated the institutional realm, affecting several American institutions. Instead of organized anti-cult groups gaining social legitimacy, as Bromley and Shupe imagined, anti-cult ideology has gained social legitimacy, not only acquiring societal acceptance, but also penetrating long-established institutions.

One institution that has been clearly affected by anti-cult ideology is the American legal system. Building on previous research indicating the negative opinions potential jurors have of cults, cult members, and cult socialization practices, Jeffrey E. Pfeifer highlights the implications of widespread anti-cult ideology on the legal process through his survey of 265 American university students. Within his study, Pfeifer assigned each participant one of 12 conditions, each of which included a shortened trial transcript detailing the type of crime committed (homicide or

sexual assault of a minor) and the defendant's level of involvement with the satanic cult (no involvement, alleged involvement, or admitted involvement).¹⁰⁹ Pfeifer chose to use the satanic cult due to the prevalence of the group in media accounts and research articles during the time of the survey. The study found that, whether the defendant committed homicide or sexual assault, mock jurors viewed the defendant to be significantly guiltier if he was associated with the satanic cult.¹¹⁰ The level of guilt of the defendant did not depend on whether he was allegedly involved or admittedly involved, indicating that the simple acknowledgement of possible, not definite, cult activity influences mock juror decision making. "The mere mention of satanic involvement in a criminal trial [was] enough to activate the negative perceptions held by jurors and subsequently affect their dispositional decision."¹¹¹

The effects of mainstream anti-cult ideology on legal proceedings has also been studied and commented upon by several other scholars, including S. A. Wright who, speaking of legal cases involving cults, shows that "objective information may be dismissed or selectively interpreted [by jurors] in light of prejudicial attitudes. Preexisting attitude structures may act like 'filters' that process only the information that corroborates previous beliefs."¹¹² In other words, the preexisting negative perceptions of cults held by the members of the general public may overshadow objective evidence, allowing for prejudiced decision making in legal cases brought against cults or cult members.

The legal system is not the only institution infiltrated and affected by the prevalence of mainstream anti-cult ideology; the institution of higher education is also largely influenced by this ideology, both in the academic domain and in the realm of campus life. In the academic

¹⁰⁹ Pfeifer, "Perceptual Biases and Mock Juror Decision Making: Minority Religions in Court," 413.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 414–15.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 416.

¹¹² Wright, "Cults, Coercion and Psychiatric Testimony: Some Observations and Comments on Complications in Court Cases Involving New Religions."

domain, despite the sporadic inclusion of education pertaining to cults and NRMs, instruction regarding alternative and emergent religious groups is largely overshadowed by that of traditional religious groups. In the realm of campus life, groups given a cult classification are refused a presence in college communities, regardless of their comparable religious existence to other groups allowed on campus.

As detailed in Chapter 2, NRM studies is a growing field. Articles pertaining to NRM studies are published in a variety of journals, several academic conferences consistently offer space for the presentation and discussion of findings from NRM studies research, and there exists a wide network of NRM studies scholars. Despite all of this, in the words of Michael W. Ashcraft, “the present state of affairs for NRM studies can be interpreted as either a glass half full or a glass half empty,”¹¹³ and the shortcomings of the field’s modern existence can be largely attributed to its presence, or lack thereof, within institutions of higher education.

At the undergraduate level, courses pertaining to cults are sparse, generally taught by individual NRM studies scholars dispersed throughout American colleges and universities.¹¹⁴ Religious studies departments, typically placing educational focus on more conventional religious traditions, oftentimes overlook the vast number of alternative and emergent religious groups in recent history—remember, the category of ‘New Religions’ is the second largest in the *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, the only other category with a greater number of entries being that of ‘Christianity.’¹¹⁵

A similar disregard for the educational inclusion of groups with a cult label can be seen at the graduate level. The most basic piece of evidence for this occurrence: despite the field’s decades-long existence, as well as the sheer number of NRMs available for academic

¹¹³ Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, 237.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹¹⁵ Smith, “A Matter of Class,” 172.

contemplation, the successful establishment of a graduate program dedicated to NRM studies has yet to occur.¹¹⁶ While select graduate programs do offer more comprehensive instruction, many of the leading religious studies graduate programs in the United States, such as those offered at Harvard Divinity School and the University of Chicago Divinity School, lack faculty members with a background in alternative and emergent religious groups, therefore lacking courses pertaining to such groups;¹¹⁷ thus, in many cases, graduate students who may choose to focus their dissertation on NRMs, as some programs allow, typically must seek external guidance from established NRM studies scholars, forming connections through professional organizations and networks, rather than having resources provided to them by their university.¹¹⁸ The minimal presence of cults and NRMs within institutions of higher education not only presents additional barriers for students interested in studying such groups, sometimes barring the study altogether, it also threatens the overall integrity of the field of NRM studies.

Because NRM studies lacks a successful graduate program, the field is fragile. The chain of interaction rituals could break at any time, and what might be a minor setback in a larger field like Islamic studies or Christian studies, could have serious repercussions for NRM studies.¹¹⁹

The large scale exclusion of NRMs from the academic domain of educational institutions makes the entire field of NRM studies vulnerable, and this segregation can be attributed to the institutionalization of anti-cult ideology. Because NRMs are reduced to their most salacious, violent, or deviant qualities, through their mainstream designation as cults, these groups lose their claim to a religious title, therefore losing the interest of many religious studies scholars, the

¹¹⁶ Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, 236.

¹¹⁷ “Faculty of Divinity”; “Faculty Directory.”

¹¹⁸ Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, 236.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 237.

very individuals shaping religious studies programs. Although the advocacy of NRM studies scholars, scattered throughout American educational institutions, gives rise to some inclusion of cults in religious studies curricula, across the entirety of American institutions of higher education, instruction pertaining to cults is greatly lacking.

Without the inclusion of cult education in religious studies departments, a comprehensive understanding of cults may never be reached. As highlighted by Jonathan Z. Smith, the othering process that occurs through the cult classification blocks understanding, and while the field of NRM studies works to facilitate the comprehension of deviant religious groups, the exclusion of instruction pertaining to cults and NRMs within higher education impedes such an endeavour. Not only does the lack of educational incorporation threaten the entire field of NRM studies—and, if the field ceases to exist, the effort to understand will likely perish alongside it—at a less drastic level, the absence of education lengthens the process of understanding. If students are introduced to cult/NRM education as undergraduates, thereafter provided with graduate programs dedicated to continuing such a study, the possibility for the growth of the field of NRM studies increases significantly, and with the growth of the field likely comes an increase in understanding.

The ability to fully understand those groups labeled as cults by mainstream society, instead of writing them off or ignoring them, may produce any number of valuable effects. Not only will the canvas of religious experience expand tremendously, perhaps allowing for a clearer picture of what ‘religion’ encompasses, the ability to recognize, describe, and possibly empathize with nonconformist religious groups will increase. This sort of understanding may allow for healthier communication between the mainstream and the alternative, leading to a decrease in the

number of violent or destructive events; or, it may simply facilitate the discernment of why such events occur. In any case, the ability to understand is much more preferable to the inability.

Outside of the scholastic realm, anti-cult ideology also influences educational institutions within the sphere of campus life. The notion that college students, finding newfound independence and exploring their identities, are especially vulnerable to cult recruitment has been asserted by the Anti-Cult Movement since the campaign's conception, with many thinkers emphasizing the danger cults pose to students.¹²⁰ Studies organized by anti-cultists also emphasize this conviction, such as the 1992 survey conducted by M. D. Langone. Langone's unpublished report showed that 43 percent of his 308 subjects were students when they joined a cult, with 11 percent of subjects noting that they had been recruited on a college campus.¹²¹

Because of the purported threat cults pose to college students, specifically those students inhabiting college campuses, several thinkers have highlighted the necessity of making peer and faculty leaders aware of the dangers of on-campus cult recruitment, as well as offering strategies to curb such engagements. Anti-cultist Russell K. Elleven, working with various colleagues, has surveyed chief housing officers (resident assistants), chief counselling officers (counselors and therapists), and campus chaplains in an effort to evidence the vulnerability of college students and the lack of awareness held by each of the surveyed populations. Elleven, et al. claim that the results of such studies evidence the necessity of additional education regarding "cult issues on college campuses," such as the facilitation of training programs teaching campus leaders how to respond to cult recruitment and discourage students from joining cults.¹²² Additional authors

¹²⁰ Blimling, "Cults, College Students, and Campus Policies"; Martin, "Cult Awareness on Campus"; Blunt, "Cult on Campus: Awareness Is Key."

¹²¹ Elleven, Kern, and Claunch Moore, "Residence Halls and Cults: Fact or Fiction?"

¹²² Ibid.; Elleven, van Veldhuizen, and Taylor, "Cults on Campus: Perceptions of Chief Counseling Officers"; Elleven, Greenhaw, and Allen, "Campus Chaplains: Cult Training and Perceptions."

have produced works of a similar nature, such as those offering suggestions to campus security forces and college administrators.¹²³

While the work produced by those within the Anti-Cult Movement may not be directly cited by college leaders, there exists a tendency to prohibit groups given a cult label from the college community, evidencing the influence of mainstream anti-cult ideology. Unlike traditional religious groups, which are given space to engage students and create organizations, cults are barred from the ability to interact with the campus community, largely due to the perception of cults as troublesome social groups instead of valid religious groups. As seen through previous discussions, however, many cults possess a variety of positive characteristics, but these redeeming attributes are generally overshadowed by their cult classification.

Instead of being altogether rejected from inclusion within the campus community, religious groups given a cult label by mainstream society should be allowed the opportunity for involvement. This is not to say that cults should be blindly invited onto college campuses and given free reign. On the contrary, just like any other organization existing within a campus community, groups with a cult label should be objectively considered before being allowed entry and should remain responsible for abiding by the college's code of conduct and organizational standards. If a breach of conduct is committed, the college should then be able to dismiss the group from the campus, if the circumstances necessitate such an action, as they would do with any other secular or religious on-campus organization.

This process, however, is not the one typically followed by modern colleges. Rather than being objective judges, college leaders tend to base decisions of inclusion upon the stereotypes of cults perpetuated by mainstream society's anti-cult ideology. By rejecting the influence of this ideology, and allowing a space for the coexistence of deviant religious groups and societally

¹²³ Martin, "Cult Awareness on Campus"; Blunt, "Cult on Campus: Awareness Is Key."

accepted religious groups, college leaders may be able to foster the effort of understanding, as on-campus inclusion may allow for the natural observance of cult activity.

Building upon and revising the model of the Anti-Cult Movement's evolution, proposed by Bromley and Shupe, over the past few decades, anti-cult ideology has gained social legitimacy, facilitating its impact on the institutional realm of American society. Seen in both the legal system and higher education, among other institutions, mainstream anti-cult ideology enables the institutional discrimination of groups recognized as cults by the general public. Specifically pertaining to the domain of higher education, the structural impacts of anti-cult ideology can be seen in the sphere of academia, as the inclusion of instruction regarding NRMs and cults in religious studies programs is minimal, and the sphere of campus life, as the incorporation of cults into the campus community is prohibited. Both of these phenomena are authorized by the reduction of cults to their deviant or troublesome qualities, as this simplification allows the general public to discredit the acceptably religious characteristics of such groups. Through the recognition of groups with a cult label as dynamic religious groups, in conjunction with the rejection of anti-cult ideology in the institutional realm, the opportunity for understanding, which has been diminished because of the othering process of the cult classification, may proliferate.

VI. Conclusion

The prevalence of alternative and emergent religious groups within American society during the early and mid-twentieth century gave rise to the field of NRM studies, a discipline whose goal is to objectively study and understand religious groups that deviate from societal norms. Initially utilizing the ‘cult’ term to demarcate such groups, early scholars in the field soon transitioned away from this label due to its pejorative connotations, instead opting to use the label of ‘New Religious Movement’ (NRM). Although ‘NRM’ is not without issues, due to discrepancies in categorization and definition, it has since existed as an objective classificatory label.

Alongside the development of NRM studies, two movements aiming to discredit and invalidate the religious claims of emergent and alternative religious groups emerged, the Countercult Movement and the Anti-Cult Movement. Founded upon religious and secular motives, respectively, the two movements advertised the danger NRMs posed to mainstream society and individuals existing within the general public. In order to advance their claims, these movements made use of the ‘cult’ categorization, unlike their counterpart of the field of NRM studies, as the derogatory implications of the term furthered their goals of demonizing and disbanding the groups.

Despite the transition from use of the ‘cult’ term to the use of ‘NRM’ within academia, mainstream society continues to label deviant religious groups as ‘cults,’ evidencing the existence of mainstream anti-cult ideology. This collection of widespread beliefs, maintaining that cults are negative and destructive entities, is also seen throughout media portrayals of the groups and polls regarding the opinion of the general public. Nonfiction accounts of cults, spread through print and videographic news media, documentaries, and interviews, typically portray

real-world cults in a negative light, declining to offer historical or social context. Fictional accounts of cults, appearing in books, movies, and television shows, capitalize on the violent, salacious, or otherwise troublesome characteristics of cults, furthering the belief that cults are dangerous to mainstream society. In both cases, the media portrayal of cults, whether real or fake, sensationalize the groups. Typically, as members of the general public do not have direct encounters with cults or cult members, their sole exposure to the groups is through these sensationalized portrayals. It is not surprising, then, that the vast majority of the general public views these groups negatively, as seen through the numerous public opinion polls conducted throughout the past few decades.

By utilizing the cult classification and diminishing cults to their most deviant and outrageous characteristics, ignoring their positive and acceptable religious qualities, the general public brackets these groups away from the religious realm, relegating them to the status of the 'other.' In doing so, not only is the superiority of mainstream society, and the religions they practice, emphasized, the inferiority of cults being subsequently established, the opportunity for understanding these groups is inhibited.

The ability to understand cults is further hindered by the impacts of anti-cult ideology on the institutional realm of American society. One institution that has been largely affected by anti-cult principles is that of higher education, as groups provided with a cult label by the general public are excluded from much of the instruction provided by religious studies departments and are prohibited from becoming involved with the campus community. By failing to study these groups with the same level of rigor used when studying other religious groups and failing to invite these groups into the campus community (allowing for the possibility of their observation and regulation), instead distancing these communities from the mainstream, educational

institutions are sacrificing the opportunity of understanding, an opportunity that has long been denied due to the growing presence of anti-cult ideology.

By rejecting the delimitation facilitated by anti-cult ideology, following the path that the field of NRM studies has begun to pioneer, true understanding may be achieved. Working toward understanding may allow for the combattance of destructive actions that exceed a socially tolerated level, avoiding future events rivalling the Jonestown massacre and the Waco siege. It may simply accomplish the basic task of further illuminating the nature of religiosity. In any case, while the possible effects that accompany understanding are vast and unknowable, they are favorable to the alternative of rejecting the opportunity of conceptualization.

Anti-cult ideology has far-reaching effects, both at the individual and at the structural level, and if left to exist unchecked, it has the potential to infiltrate increasingly larger sectors of American society. Over the past century, this ideology has expanded from the domain of the Countercult and Anti-Cult Movements to the expansive spheres of the general public and longstanding institutions; thus, the unrestrained growth of anti-cult ideology has the potential to pervade American establishments of great power, including governmental entities, possibly going as far as impeding upon the freedom of religion granted by the First Amendment.

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