

Cult vs. religion: what's the difference?

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Crucial distinction is whether a faith stands the test of time, as Mormonism clearly has
By Sam Fleischacker



Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

A pastor supporting Rick Perry calls Mormonism a "cult." Is that untrue?

Well, what's the difference between a "cult" and a "religion"? Not easy to say. Many people think they know the difference when they see it. Scientology and the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church are cults — aren't they? And Judaism and Christianity are surely religions.

But in fact, early Christianity was considered just a cult by both Jews and Romans; Islam was long considered just a cult by medieval Christians; and, of course, many Protestant groups, from the Baptists to the Quakers, were considered cults by other Christians.



The journey of Muhammad, from a text sourced to Afghanistan, about 1425.

Moreover, if your definition of "cult" is a group with a charismatic and very odd leader who thinks he or she has direct access to the divine and spreads a theology that seems both heretical and confused to the established religions around it, then Christianity and Islam and Buddhism were certainly cults when they began — and no doubt the Jews were as well.

Here, I suggest, is the real difference between a cult and a religion: about 100 years. Once a cult is able to establish itself for several generations, we call it a "religion." Before that, we dismiss it as a dangerous threat to real religion.

This may seem a mocking, cynical dismissal of the difference, and hence of religion itself. But I don't mean it that way. For there are good reasons to respect a group that can maintain a vision of how to live across two or three generations, ones that do not apply to groups that come and go within a single generation.

To start with the most obvious points, a group that survives over generations cannot afford the sort of self-destructive, oppressive or anti-social behavior that appalls us in cults. It cannot engage in mass suicide, of course, nor is it likely to continue if it prescribes extremely unhealthy practices. And it is likely to fall apart, or draw upon itself harsh attention by the political authorities around it, if it oppresses its members or engages in attacks on outsiders. To become a religion, a group with a shared vision of what God wants, or what makes human life worth living, is therefore likely to develop a morality much like that of the society around it — and indeed declare that morality central to what it has to teach.



Mormons depicted entering Salt Lake valley.

A group that survives over generations will also have to develop institutions for teaching its message to its young. But no system that has horrific or very bizarre implications is likely to retain the loyalty of its young (they, after all, do not join the group out of some unusual personal experience: born into it, they need to be persuaded of the group's message in a very different way from their parents). Nor is it likely to inspire a cadre of teachers or enable its educational institutions to solve their administrative and interpersonal issues harmoniously.

Finally, a group that survives over generations will normally need to reconcile its religious message enough with what the rest of the society around it believes and does that its members can find jobs in that society, maintain neighborly and economic relationships with others in that society, and function as citizens. All this requires that it temper or reinterpret the stranger claims and practices of its founding generation.

Of course, this is exactly what the Mormons have done. Today, they are clearly a religion, in the eyes of most Americans, and not a cult. They may once have been a cult, but those days are over, at least for the purposes of equal respectability in a multi-religious society. It is not hard to understand why some traditional Christians, looking out from a theological perspective, might think otherwise. But they should realize that from a theological perspective, most Christians look like heretics or pagans to Jews; Bahais look like heretics and Christians like idol-worshippers to Muslims; and Buddhists and Hindus see each other as severely confused. This is the perspective from which religious wars used to be launched, and one of the great triumphs of America is that it has allowed, instead, for a society in which people of different religions, while disagreeing sharply on theological issues, can yet live together as citizens in peace and mutual respect.

We undermine that wonderful achievement when we accuse fellow citizens, who are perfectly decent and reasonable in every way that matters publicly, of belonging to a "cult."

Reprinted courtesy of Sam Fleischacker, a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago-Illinois, who is the author of "Divine Teaching and the Way of the World." His email is fleischert@sbcglobal.net



Jesus giving to Sun Myung Moon his commission.

Editorial Note from News Team of Unification Church.

Dr. Tyler Hendricks, former president of the Unification Church, and former president of the Unification Theological Seminary commented: “This is a great essay. The transition from cult to religion is a fascinating subject. I would agree with all of what Prof. Fleischacker writes, and add that groups that turn into what society accepts as religions are capable of establishing open social networks by which outsiders can become members. Biological growth is abetted tremendously by the group being beneficial and solution-oriented enough to attract and assimilate non-members. The work of Rodney Stark in books such as *The Rise of Christianity*, is very instructive. He shows how Christianity benefited the poor, the infirm, and the status of women in the Roman Empire, in very tangible ways.”

The question of whether the Unification Church is a cult or a respectable new player in the mainstream of the world’s religions is worth asking – and answering. Let’s do the math: the Unification Church and affiliated groups comprise a new religious movement less than 60 years old, and most of the second-generation Unificationists who have participated in the Unification Church marriage blessing ceremony are still in their twenties, whereas most of the third-generation Unificationists are still children. So, does that mean we haven’t yet stood the test of time?

Some facts are in favor of acceptance of the Unification Church as religion that none should fear. The Unification Theological Seminary is an associate member of the respected Association of American Theological Schools. A growing throng of Unification Church members (including the Founders’ children and grandchildren) are jamming the doors of Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, and other Ivey’s as well as top state schools such as the University of California at Berkeley. More than 50 second generation Unificationists have served in war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. At least eight young Unificationists have graduated from service academies such as West Point. A handful of church members have served as elected representatives in State Houses. Does this sound like a group marked by “self-destructive, oppressive or anti-social behavior”? Not hardly.