

Cult Bashing

2.0

by

Ken Hutchins

I wrote this article in 2005, but did not publish it until 2012. The previously published version is found at:

ren-ex.com/cult-bashing/

This new version contains all (with some slight adjustments) that was in the 2012 version as well as much additional material. Hence, the title is *Cult Bashing 2.0*.

In the year 2001, I was interviewed approximately 200 times by various magazine columnists, radio and television show hosts, and newspaper writers. During this time I grew increasingly concerned that some interviewer would eventually put me on the spot and ask me if my organization was a cult. I agonized over this possibility, especially regarding my answer, if questioned.

I did not want to answer with denial. Whenever I have witnessed others in denial about some issue, they sounded weak and guilty. In fact, the use of denial seems a natural and forgivable red herring in any crime mystery. After all, our prisons are full of criminals who deny guilt, a few truly innocents notwithstanding.

Shortly before encountering an interview where the feared question was indeed popped, I came to an epiphany regarding cults. So when asked if I was a cult leader, I proudly answered, "Yes."

This answer surprised the interviewer, who represented *Fox News* Tampa. My complete reply included many of the following and something to the effect of,

Yes, but let's first briefly define *cult*. A cult is a group of people who uphold a certain belief system and/or its charismatic leader. I just described the Pilgrims, the Quakers, the Puritans, the Shakers, the Amish, the Baptists, the Catholics, the Democrat Party, the Republican Party, the Marxists, the Marines, the Daughters of the American Revolution, any fraternity or sorority on any university campus, the American Medical Association, the Jews, the National Academy of Science, the American Cancer Society, the Girl Scouts, the Branch Davidians, the Nazis, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Fox News, CNN, ABC, CBS, the United Nations, the Rotary Club, as well as my business and my following, just to scratch the surface.

Our forefathers fled European oppression for their beliefs and came here and settled in various enclaves. Collectively, they eventually formed a country promoting freedom of belief and speech. The United States is basically a collection of cults, and this is a major reason to be proud to be a citizen here.

The interviewer then said, “Turn off the camera. We can’t use that.”

I immediately asked, “What do you mean, you can’t use it? Granted, this is off topic, but, generally speaking, the most important information you’ve recorded in years.” He didn’t respond.

I continued to reflect on my answer for several weeks, sometimes wishing I could have stated it better. I also noted how the media has emotionally charged the word, *cult*, to imply something disparaging. From here, I came to realize that to label a group as a *cult* in this manner evolves to become an acceptable and subtle form of bigotry.

For example, if I want to disparage my competition as possessing values or practices I don’t respect, I can probably get away with calling them a *cult* easier than if I grouped them under any other obvious stereotype or racist remark. See? I have the option with “cult” to be judgmental, if not prejudicial and racist, without appearing such.

Recently, Senator Bob Corker characterized Trump supporters and the GOP as “cultish.” Corker was technically correct. But he was both incorrect and morally wrong to suggest that *cult* carries with it any degree of the pejorative.

This was a cheap shot by Corker. It was underhanded, sophomoric babbling to camouflage unorganized thought. Any readers of the late Richard Mitchell, the *Underground Grammarian*, would agree.

And Trump would be incorrect to deny that his following is a cult. His is certainly a cult.

Recently, my linguistically astute attorney friend stated, “But Ken, language evolves and *cult* has taken on a pejorative implication.”

I partly disagree. It’s merely been misused and misapplied with the pejorative. Yes, language evolves, but along with evolving, if so, we’ve muddied the meaning without distinctions. Besides, if you consult the dictionaries going back over the past five decades the pejorative does not clearly and exclusively creep into its meaning unless one solely consults that definition of *cult* by Google.

For example, following, is the entry from a 1961 (57 years ago) Webster’s Dictionary. There is no pejorative:

cult (kült), *n.* [F. and L.; F. *culte*, fr. L. *cultus* care, culture, fr. *colere* to cultivate.] 1. A system of worship of a deity; as, the *cult* of Apollo. 2. Hence: a The rites of a religion. b Great devotion to some person, idea, or thing, esp. such devotion viewed as an intellectual fad. c A sect.

Next is the entry from a 1978 (46 years ago) *New World Dictionary*. There is no pejorative:

cult (kult) *n.* [< L. *cultus*, care, cultivation, orig. pp. of *colere*, to till < IE. base **kwel-*, to turn, dwell, care for: cf. WHEEL, COLLAR] 1. a system of religious worship or ritual 2. a) devoted attachment to, or extravagant admiration for, a person, principle, etc., esp. when regarded as a fad [the *cult* of nudism] b) the object of such attachment 3. a group of followers; sect —**cult'ic** *adj.* —**cult'ism** *n.* —**cult'ist** *n.*

Next is the entry from a 1992 (26 years ago) *Websters Dictionary*. It does mention in definition #3 that it might refer to a spurious or unorthodox religion, but note that the context here is religion, a distinctive application of the word that is not clearly assumed in a general context. I elaborate on this specifically in a later section herein:

cult \ˈkält\ *n* [F & L; F *culte*, fr. L *cultus* care, adoration, fr. *cultus*, pp. of *colere* to cultivate — more at WHEEL] (1679) 1 : formal religious veneration : WORSHIP 2 : a system of religious beliefs and ritual; also : its body of adherents 3 : a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious; also : its body of adherents 4 : a system for the cure of disease based on dogma set forth by its promulgator 5 a : great devotion to a person, idea, or thing; esp : such devotion regarded as a literary or intellectual fad b : a usu. small circle of persons united by devotion or allegiance to an artistic or intellectual movement or figure — **cul-tic** \ˈkäl-tik\ *adj* — **cult-ism** \ˈkäl-tiz-əm\ *n* — **cult-ist** \ˈkäl-təst\ *n*

Next is *cult* as defined online today by Google. As I might expect, Google seems to impart some pejorative slant that earlier definers have excluded. But also note that it is a restricted definition—should be much broader as in the previous ones already recited—as well as somewhat inconsistent. After stating “a relatively small group of people having religious beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister,” it lists synonyms as *sect*, *denomination*, *group*, *movement*, *church*, *persuasion*, *body*, and *faction*. This includes just about everybody and everything.

Note the word, *movement*. Later herein, I refer to it in my discussion of Hoffer's work.

What's more, who defines "relatively small group" or "strange" or "sinister"? Later herein, I refer to it in my discussion of the Plumed Serpent.

It's apparent to me that whoever wrote and/or reviewed this definition was either not aware of its broader meanings or that the writers deliberately intended to narrow its meaning. Still, its usage cannot be assumed to be pejorative by the listener or reader of the word:

- a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object.
"the cult of St. Olaf"
- a relatively small group of people having religious beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister.
"a network of Satan-worshipping cults"
synonyms: sect, denomination, group, movement, church, persuasion, body, faction
"a religious cult"
- a misplaced or excessive admiration for a particular person or thing.
"a cult of personality surrounding the leaders"
synonyms: obsession with, fixation on, mania for, passion for, idolization of, devotion to, worship of, veneration of
"the cult of eternal youth in Hollywood"

Now note what Wikipedia has to say. Note that the term is controversial. Also note the sociological classification of religious movement per se; it is a social group exhibiting deviant or novel beliefs and practices. Also, that "deviant" does not necessarily denote negative or positive deviation. For improvement to occur in anything requires change, thus deviation :



The image is a screenshot of the Wikipedia article for "Cult". On the left side, there is a sidebar with the Wikipedia logo and a list of navigation links including "Main page", "Contents", "Featured content", "Current events", "Random article", "Donate to Wikipedia", "Wikipedia store", "Interaction", "Help", "About Wikipedia", "Community portal", "Recent changes", "Contact page", "Tools", "What links here", "Related changes", "Upload file", "Special pages", "Permanent link", and "Page information". The main content area has the title "Cult" and a sub-header "From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia". Below this, there is a disambiguation note: "For other uses, see Cult (disambiguation)". The main text begins with "The term cult usually refers to a social group defined by its religious, spiritual, or philosophical beliefs, or its common interest in a particular personality, object or goal. The term itself is controversial and it has divergent definitions in both popular culture and academia and it also has been an ongoing source of contention among scholars across several fields of study." It then discusses sociological classifications, the history of the term starting in the 1930s, and the anti-cult movement of the 1970s. The article concludes with a definition of "new religious movement" and lists sub-categories like "Doomsday cults", "political cults", "destructive cults", "racist cults", "polygamist cults", and "terrorist cults".

Lastly we have the Online *Merriam-Webster's* definition with the realization that Google, Wikipedia, and *Merriam-Webster* are concurrently up-to-date. Note that it more clearly includes the broad panoply of the word:

The screenshot shows the Merriam-Webster website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the Merriam-Webster logo, the text 'SINCE 1828', and a search bar containing the word 'cult'. Below the search bar are tabs for 'DICTIONARY' and 'THESAURUS'. The main content area is titled 'Definition of CULT' and lists five numbered definitions. To the left of the definitions is a vertical sidebar with social media icons (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Heart) and a 'CITE' button.

Merriam-Webster SINCE 1828

cult

DICTIONARY THESAURUS

Definition of CULT

- 1 : a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious (see [SPURIOUS 2](#)); *also* : its body of adherents • the voodoo *cult* • a satanic *cult*
- 2 a : great devotion to a person, idea, object, movement, or work (such as a film or book) • criticizing how the media promotes the *cult* of celebrity; *especially* : such devotion regarded as a literary or intellectual fad
b : the object of such devotion
c : a usually small group of people characterized by such devotion • the singer's *cult* of fans • The film has a *cult* following.
- 3 : a system of religious beliefs and ritual; *also* : its body of adherents • the *cult* of Apollo
- 4 : formal religious [veneration](#) : [WORSHIP](#)
- 5 : a system for the cure of disease based on dogma set forth by its promulgator • health *cults*

For the record, *cult* is the root of *culture* and various cultures comprise our society at large. A *sect* is merely a further subdivision of *cult*—not to be confused with *occult*.

Diversity

To be hip, one must promote diversity, especially social diversity. And this diversity can figure into many realms: race, language, art, customs, music. Not necessarily, but often, a politically liberal individual espouses diversity and then slams his political or religious opponents as a cult in the pejorative sense, little realizing that the slam was intolerant and *anti-diversity*.

For the United States or any other country to espouse diversity, cults are necessary. I believe that cults are a hallmark of the United States! We are the so-called melting pot. We represent pluralism and fairness and equal opportunity!

Cultism is authentic Americana!

Eric Hoffer

In 1951, Eric Hoffer wrote *The True Believer—Thoughts On the Nature of Mass Movements*. This approximate 165-page book remains a seminal treatise on mass movements. It is a disturbing little book.

I do not remember Hoffer using *cult*, but *movement* and *cause* are pretty much interchangeable terms that involve a *following* or *cult*.

On many of its editions, the rear jackets includes a phrase:

Reporting on the true believer, Mr. Hoffer examines with Machiavellian detachment mass movements, from Christianity in its infancy to the national uprising of our own day. His analysis of the psychology of mass movements is a brilliant and frightening study of the mind of the fanatic, the individual whose personal failings lead him to join a cause, any cause, even at peril to his life—or yours.

With no judgmentalism for their appropriateness, Hoffer analyzes Christianity, Socialism, Marxism, Nationalism, and several other movements. At the front of many published editions of the book is the quote from Pascal (*Pensées*):

Man would fain be great and sees that he is little; would fain be happy and sees that he is miserable; would fain be perfect and sees that he is full of imperfections; would fain be the object of the love and esteem of men, and sees that his faults merit only their aversion and contempt.

The embarrassment wherein he finds himself produces in him the most unjust and criminal passions imaginable, for he conceives a mortal hatred against that truth which blames him and convinces him of his faults.

Anyone visiting the Eisenhower White House received a copy of this book.

I first learned of *The True Believer* from Nautilus founder and owner, Arthur Jones. One day the general manager was away on vacation, and I was sitting at the manager's desk reading the marketing book by Al Reis and Jack Trout entitled, *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*.

Arthur silently entered the office, noted what I was reading, more or less ripped it from my hands, studied it for about half a minute, then handed it back while asserting, “If you really want to understand marketing, read *The True Believer* by Hoffer. He then turned and bolted out of the room. Our relationship was like that.

During the following several months, Arthur would ask if I had yet read *The True Believer*. For a long time, I disappointed him.

Then one rainy day that I remember very well, I followed Arthur out the front door of an office building onto a covered stoop. As I was walking just a few feet behind him I said, “Arthur, I finally read *True Believer*.”

Arthur instantly spun around with his finger in my face and asked, “How do you like yourself?”

A few weeks later I was at dinner with Nautilus long-time and loyal general manager for Arthur, Ed Farnham. I told him of this story wherein Arthur spun around, pointing at me to be introspective. Ed, shaking his head in his hands with disappointment and dismay, said, “I really wish Arthur would not do that.”

Ken: “Do what?”

Ed: “Arthur devotes his time and money writing and advertising and language to cultivate a loyal devotee and employee like you, Ken, and then rubs your face in it. For what purpose does this serve? Certainly, you and I find it amusing, even humorous, but this is counterproductive.”

Ironically, all the inner circle of the cult that surrounded Arthur Jones had read *The True Believer* and, when privately discussed with me almost all denied that Hoffer’s insights applied to them...Hilarious!

I have read *The True Believer* many times. The first exposure was a struggle for me.

In an issue of my now-defunct newsletter twenty years ago, I excerpted passages of *The True Believer*. One or two members of our professional organization (200 members) protested having such “anti-Christian” observations in a public journal. I replied that Hoffer’s work was not judgmental and that Hoffer only sought to explain how the following was assembled and held together. I’m fairly certain that they did not accept my explanation.

Later I shared the protest with another member of our organization (our cult) who was an ordained Baptist minister. He chuckled and then explained to me that *The True Believer* and other of Hoffer’s writings (*The Ordeal of Change*, *The Passionate State of Mind*) are required reading in graduate social studies as well as in many seminaries.

Several points stand out in my memory of *The True Believer*. One is that passion is an important, if not indispensable, ingredient to evoke a following. And people want something to believe in, something to be passionate about, something to cling to, something to give their life meaning. Life is empty without passion.

Another point is the value of hatred. As Hoffer underscores, a cause might be created and sustained without a god, but never without a devil.

My takeaway from this is that slamming a competitor as a cult is extremely useful only if it includes the pejorative. What's the point of using this term in today's social and political milieu unless it can cast aspersions and passion—however prejudicial and empty—against the accused. Without the implied pejorative *cult* is really as indistinctive and useless as I have belabored in this treatise. Calling the competition a cult with intentional pejorative overtones is hate mongering.

The Plumed Serpent

Earlier, I deferred expansion on the Google definition of *cult* regarding, “relatively small group” or “strange” or “sinister.”

If I started a religion and I called it the *Religion of the Plumed Serpent* and included virgin sacrifices, I'm sure I would be labeled a cult leader, a deviant, and a criminal. But if I could build my following to include enough members to rank as a proper religion what would that number be? 100 is probably too few. Even 1,000 is probably too few.

What if it covered the whole state of Texas with a membership of 29 million? What if it covered an area that exceeded the land mass covered by Judaism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, or Islam? Would it be considered mainstream and not be maligned as a cult of deviant behavior?

800 years ago, the Religion of the Plumed Serpent was the largest religion on earth and its sacred temples (Place of the Seven Grottos) were in Trinity County, Texas. 1200 years before this, the area where part of Lake Livingston now sits was home to the Aztecs, the Toltecs, and the Mayans.

[It is this exact area that La Raza (a cult, of course) and others reference in their demands for open borders, except that their fabled sacred homeland (Aztlán) is not a fable and not the entirety of North America as they seem to claim. Apparently, they are unaware of the finiteness of Aztlán.]

For hundreds of years before this, these three tribes cohabitated. And although the Mayans are revered today as those of the Yucatan who had technological superiority in astronomy, metallurgy, stone hewing, and time-keeping (calendar) technology, they actually acquired this knowledge from the Aztecs and Toltecs many centuries earlier in what centuries later would be known as a county in Texas.

You see, the Mayans were actually the last kid on the block, so to speak, to get the information. They were the Johnny-come-latelys. They had migrated from the east to join the other two tribes, because they desired the technological enlightenment, but were simultaneously hesitant about the human sacrifices that were demanded by the Plumed Serpent. So they took the trade-off of bad and deviant behavior of the other two tribes for the benefit of the technology.

About 400 BC, the lake which enabled the tribes to navigate to their temples and other holy sites partially drained due to drought. The Mayans, then, checked out and moved to the Yucatan. With successive droughts at 400 AD and 1100 AD the Toltecs, then the Aztecs, migrated to the Central Valley of Mexico.

One Man's Cult is Another Man's Religion

Earlier, I wrote that I had responded to my *Fox* Tampa interviewer with,

Our forefathers from Europe fled oppression for their beliefs and came here and settled in various enclaves. Collectively, they eventually formed a country promoting freedom of belief and speech. The United States is basically a collection of cults, and this is a major reason to be proud to be a citizen here.

It's easy to fall prey, as I did in the original version of *Cult Bashing*, to say that,

Our forefathers from Europe fled oppression for their beliefs and came here and settled in various enclaves to eventually form a country promoting freedom of belief and speech.

These cults did not come here to form anything but a place so that they could impose a form of religious tyranny at least if not more tyrannical than the ones they fled in Europe. Indeed, there was no purpose intended toward religious freedom in most cases, if any.

Note the Tolerance Act of 1649. This was only 29 years after the landing at Plymouth by the Pilgrims. Most of the enclaves of the other cults were settled after 1620; hence, they had been settled for even less time.

I suppose that the Tolerance Act might represent the notion that, "Look, boys, we're struggling here with the Indians, starving to death, enduring the harsh winters and the threat of disease. Perhaps our survival chances would be better if we didn't kill each other over religion. Truce. Two exceptions: Jews and atheists."

The Tolerance Act went back and forth several times and was eventually and permanently repealed in 1689, at least until the United States Constitution included its original amendments.

I am a professional trumpet player who specializes in church music. I have performed in as many as five different services in three different denominational churches on the same

day. I usually use one particular church as my base of operations with an understanding that I will float around to the needs of other churches as the demand and schedule permit.

If I maintain the same church as my base, I usually get to know the politics of that church. Anyone with ears and eyes realizes what a hotbed of dissent that often exists just below the surface of the niceties of the church membership that can erupt like a volcano to destroy it.

It seems that a church (any church) is like an ovary that is incessantly casting off newly generated ova, spawning breakaway churches that increase geometrically in number (with ever-decreasing memberships in current day). The justification for the breakaway groups vary tremendously, but it is often based on biblical interpretation. In this case, the dominant church (usually a larger and older cult) is the prevailing (orthodox) interpretation of the scriptures while the breakaway (usually a smaller and newer cult) are the deviants (unorthodox).

Another Epiphany

If I, Ken, take a narrow view of our society, I am not a bigot; however, I might scorn the Branch Davidians, Jim Jones and his Jonestown, as well as those religious sects that worship by dancing with poisonous snakes. Therefore I must admit to being a *conditional bigot*. After all and otherwise, I am cool with all the major religions and races in this country.

But if I expand my horizons to include all of present humanity as well as admit that tolerance is ideally unconditional, I might openly condemn the cannibalistic practices of a New Guinea tribe or the virgin sacrifices of another tribe in some other remote locale.

And if I expand my horizons temporally rather than just geographically, I might consider disgusting the ancient Spartans who sent their boys at reaching the age of seven away from their mothers to live in a homosexual bivouac. Taken in this broader context, my intolerance with these practices and their belief systems makes me a bigot.

Approximately 20 years ago, a friend and computer engineer once proclaimed to me that he was a “mainframe bigot.” I laughed and asked, “What do you mean by that?” He replied that part of his job in his company was to enable the desktop personal computer users to interface with the company’s mainframe computer. At that time, there were many different PC manufacturers (Pet, Commodore, IBM-PC, TRS-80-Radio Shack, etc.) requiring differing interfaces. Apparently this frustrated his primary focus of doing mainframe maintenance.

Another friend and practicing attorney told me that he once took several business courses from an instructor who was fond of using the phrase, “selective tolerance.” At any opportune moment the instructor would utter the phrase under his breath in a clever, but cynical manner.

We both mused that, “So that’s what we are when we consider ourselves to be purely tolerant,... we’re *selectively tolerant...hmm?*” Reciprocally speaking, we are, therefore, as stated before, *conditional bigots*.

By the way, the origin of *bigot*, literally means *by God*. [At least, I have found this etymology in one reference, but conflicting in others.]

The Resulting Problem with Total Tolerance

If I, Ken Hutchins, on the other hand, am totally tolerant—if I can openly accept without criticism all the practices and attitudes of the world—past and present—then and only then can I be labeled as completely nonbigoted and nonprejudicial. However, I am now beset with another problem: Ken Hutchins has no convictions.

I see this as a messy paradox, especially for any legal or justice system. Are laws in a society merely arbitrary? (Isn’t *arbitrary* the adjective form of the noun, *arbitration?...Hmm?!*) If not, where are the lines between *practical*, *arbitrary*, and *just*?