

The Return of the ‘Cult’: Introduction

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Abstract

Recent years have seen an apparent ‘return’ of normative religious and cultic language in political and media discourses, often adopted in pejorative and confrontational contexts. Arguably driven by contemporary political divisions and debates surrounding COVID-19 restrictions, terms including ‘cult’, ‘brainwashing’, and ‘groupthink’ have reignited discourses surrounding so-called ‘cultic’ behaviour and beliefs. We argue, however, that the ‘cult debate’ has not returned, but rather transitioned into new and implicit conversations surrounding ‘good’ and ‘bad’ religion. In this special issue of *Implicit Religion*, we seek to avoid retreading old ground concerning definitions of ‘cults’, and instead adopt a renewed approach to the academic study of normative cultic language – placing an emphasis on the ways in which these terms are used, negotiated, and understood in contemporary discourses.

Article

Have the ‘cults’ returned? This special issue of *Implicit Religion* coincides with a visible resurgence in the use of normative religious and cultic language (or ‘cult rhetoric’) in political, media, and popular discourses. It is arguable that this resurgence is tied to the evolution of media consumption, popular understandings of ‘groupthink’, and the ever-increasing digital exposure of New Religious Movements (NRMs). However, pejorative terms such as ‘cult’ and ‘brainwashing’ have also found a new cultural currency in social, political, and economic discourses. Indeed, casual and strategic uses of the term ‘cult’ are being utilized to shape political narratives, particularly relating to COVID-19, vaccines, and divisions between progressive Left and conservative Right political movements. For scholars of religion, this transition marks a significant shift in conversations surrounding ‘cults’ from early studies of NRMs, presenting a new series of questions concerning the ways in which normative cultic language and implicit religious themes have become embedded within political and popular discourses. Accordingly, this issue does not consider the ‘cult debate’ as something that has

‘returned’, rather the ways in which it has transitioned into new and implicit conversations surrounding ‘good’ and ‘bad’ religion.

Academic discourses surrounding ‘cults’, ‘new religious movements’ or ‘minority religions’ reached a boiling point in the 1970s and 80s with the so-called ‘Cult Wars’ (Gallagher 2018), which coincided with moral panics surrounding minority groups, particularly those that engaged with destructive and harmful practices. These conversations surrounded a series of typologies, most notably brainwashing theory (Singer 2003a; 2003b), which positioned members of such movements as having entirely lost agency through a process of coercion. From a critical and academic perspective, it became clear that reductive binaries surrounding ‘cults’ were inadequate in addressing the complexities of the new movements emerging in the post Second World War period. The pioneering work of Eileen Barker (1984) for example, paved the way towards an understanding of new religions from a more nuanced perspective, in which she determined that there was little to no evidence that members of the Unification Church had been brainwashed.

While ‘NRM scholarship’ began as a counter-narrative in academic discourses surrounding ‘cults’, it has since found a role as the dominant paradigm. However, this is not without its caveats; while the term ‘New Religious Movement’ is an attempt at forming a more critical and academic approach to studying such movements, it remains a problematic category in itself, particularly due to the subjective nature of the term ‘new’ (Chryssides 1994). As the study of new religions has reached maturity, Barker (2014) has turned her attention to the question of the ‘not-so-new religious movements’, and the future of the ‘cult scene’ (2017), suggesting that the study of new religions is beginning to enter a new phase.

Beyond raising questions of what constitutes a ‘new’ religion, the problematic nature of the category is amplified by debates in the wider study of religion regarding (i) what religion is, and (ii) how to approach religion as a subject for critical academic study. This challenge of developing frameworks of minority movements as ‘religions’ has been somewhat hampered by Protestant theological understandings of religion, which has historically dominated research on religion within the academy. This approach, typically positioning religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon, has been rigorously rejected in recent decades (Fitzgerald 2000; McCutcheon 1997) in favour of approaches that consider how religion is embedded in culture and society, whilst also tied to issues such as race and gender (Nye 2019). This presents an inherent flaw in

the ‘cult’ framework, in which groups interpreted as ‘bad’ are defined as cults, whereas those that are ‘good’ (and can lay claim to a historical lineage) are considered ‘*bona fide* religions’ – a highly subjective and limited approach at best.

While these problems of definition are worth mentioning, this issue seeks a renewed approach to the academic study of normative cultic language – placing an emphasis on the ways in which these terms are used, negotiated, and understood in contemporary discourses. Such an approach, which avoids retreading old ground, allows this issue to explore the nuanced and complex ways in which cultic language is used in the 21st century and the role religion plays in these debates. *Implicit Religion*, with its emphasis on challenging perceived boundaries between religious and non-religious issues, is an ideal place for these conversations to take place. With this issue, we encourage a study of ‘cults’ that moves away from debates of definition, and towards the implicit and hybridised ways in which cultic discourse is tied to wider social processes. The contributors provide a number of angles to this debate, drawing from a variety of methodologies to challenge contemporary notions of ‘cults’ from critical, qualitative, and theoretical perspectives.

In the first article, Edward Graham-Hyde charts the transition of ‘cult’ rhetoric from early studies of NRMs to contemporary issues such as COVID-19 and QAnon. Drawing a line between the ‘cultic’ moral panics of the 1960s-1980s and post-9/11 discourse, Graham-Hyde provides a scholarly examination of the ways in which ‘cult’ rhetoric is weaponised in discourses related to the Coronavirus pandemic and presidency of Donald Trump. This is complimented by a qualitative analysis of a recently conducted survey on perceptions of terms related to NRMs, including ‘cults’, ‘brainwashing’, and ‘minority religions’. Graham-Hyde’s findings and analysis demonstrate the rich and nuanced understandings of these terms in contemporary discourse, through which he argues that ‘cult’ rhetoric is being increasingly weaponised in political and anti-establishment narratives, particularly amongst Far-right groups and individuals.

Bernard Doherty and Erin Sessions turn our attention towards the above-mentioned ‘brainwashing thesis’ in the second article, specifically the ways in which the notion of cultic brainwashing (a process viewed as pseudo-scientific at best by most in the academic study of new religions) has recently been deployed in discussions surrounding domestic and family violence (DFV). Focusing on the prevalence of DFV in Australia, Doherty and Sessions discuss

problematic conflations between coercive control theories and ‘cultic brainwashing’. Furthermore, the authors consider how the field of ‘cultic studies’ has also deployed the language of the coercive control paradigm by drawing parallels between theories of coercion and brainwashing. Doherty and Sessions argue that this conflation can undermine action against coercive control and abuse (both within and outside new religions) by bringing coercive control legislation into question, and hinder the prosecution of abusers and work towards solutions to the prevalence of domestic violence.

In the third article, Philip Deslippe explores the use of the term ‘cult’ in popular discourse throughout the 1990s. In a quantitative and qualitative analysis of American newspapers, Deslippe demonstrates the highly nuanced (and often-overlapping) ways in which the term ‘cult’ was both deployed and understood during this period, identifying a variety of ‘cults’ – including religious cults, cult television, cult films, cults of personality, cult of victimhood – amongst others. While ‘cult’ is often framed as a pejorative within the study of NRMs, Deslippe argues that the term was (and continues to be) utilised in both positive (such as cult television) and negative (such as cults of personality) ways in popular discourse, whilst also overlapping to create combinations of these categories. As such, Deslippe’s article demonstrates that ‘cult’ continues to be a diverse and contested category, adopting a variety of usages for various circumstances.

Krzysztof Nawrotek et al.’s article explores a contemporary example of the blurred boundaries between political and religious discourses, namely the relationship between Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and Pentecostalism. Liberal media bodies, the authors note, often strongly connect Pentecostalism with support for the ideologies of Bolsonaro (‘Bolsonarism’). Throughout their article, however, they challenge this approach by moving beyond homogenous approaches to Brazilian Pentecostalism and Bolsonaroism. By identifying political tensions within Pentecostalism, in addition to the lack of direct political or ideological affinities between both categories, the authors highlight contemporary issues within religion and politics – particularly perceptions of political leaders amongst religious communities and far-right rhetoric.

Susannah Crockford’s article on the ‘Cult of Trump’ considers the ways in which the figure of Donald Trump and his devotional supporters are positioned as ‘cultic’ by critics, Democrats, and media sources. Crockford draws from scholarship in ‘Trump studies’ and

NRMs to explore the relationship between Trump's racist rhetoric and the beliefs/ideologies of white American evangelicals. The article considers Trump through the perspective of a variety of typologies in NRMs – particularly the argument that Trump is a charismatic leader who has duplicitously 'brainwashed' supporters into blindly following worldviews and conspiracies they would otherwise reject. Noting the pre-existing views and values of white evangelicals, Crockford frames Trump as the outcome of America's racial divides, arguing that positioning Trump as a 'cult leader' reduces accountability for the Republican Party and American society of deeply-rooted white supremacy.

[M] Dudeck's article, 'Cult/Art: The Performance Artist and the Cult Leader in the Age of Trump', considers Donald Trump through two particular lenses – a performance artist and a 'cult leader'. Dudeck argues that there is a connection between these two categories, using Trump to demonstrate the emergence of new performative paradigms in which political figures and so-called 'cult leaders' are performance artists. Furthermore, Dudeck explores performance art and 'cult' as potential genres of popular culture, which have continued to develop and mesh with one another through the discourses surrounding the presidency and persona of Donald Trump.

We argue that, as demonstrated through the diverse and interdisciplinary articles contained within this issue, debates surrounding 'cults', new religions, and the 'return of the cult' in 21st century discourse are not simply niche debates surrounding small (and as a result, inconsequential) groups, but are at the heart of how religion is understood in contemporary scholarly discussion. Historically, the academic study of religion has often 'othered' the study of minority religions due to the misconceptions surrounding the so-called 'cult debate'. The reality, as demonstrated by the contributions to this issue, is that contemporary use of the term 'cult' offers us an avenue through which issues pertaining to religion, politics, and power are understood in everyday discourses. Ultimately, we argue that the interdisciplinary approach adopted in this issue is an encouraging approach toward a comprehensive understanding of contemporary religion, both explicit and implicit.

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