03 Chapter 1: 'Cult' Rhetoric in the 21st Century: The Disconnect Between Popular Discourse and the Ivory Tower

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Cults: Hybridised Approaches

As the study of 'new' or 'minority' religions transitions into the 21st century, increasing shifts in the religious and political landscape indicate that it is time for scholars across disciplines to revisit the foundations of the field, whilst also seeking new directions for its future. Research on New Religious Movements (NRMs) has been dominated by typologies – whether these are 'cults', 'brainwashing', 'charisma', 'conversion' or processes of secularization (to name but a few). As contemporary scholars in the field, it is difficult to ignore the deployment of this terminology in public life. Through reflecting on our research we began to notice the consistent use of value-laden terms in professional conversations (politicians, journalists, teachers, and so forth), often forsaking accuracy in the process. The consequences of popularising problematic terminology comes at a cost which has real-world impact, a consequence we both witness manifesting itself in the lives of our research participants. However, our continued reflections led to us endeavouring to establish an understanding of the everyday usage of NRM terminology which may move us away from the 'orthodoxy' of the field. So, what was our initial realisation? 'Cult' rhetoric, which includes terms like 'brainwashing'[1], had become a pejorative battering ram that could be used against religious groups deemed undesirable by others – which is not a novel realisation. However, and perhaps more interestingly, contemporary cultic discourses have a clear connotation in popular vernacular, despite a murky etymological foundation. In other words,

[1] As well as all derivatives of the term that have been used, such as 'mind control'.

the increasing popularity of everyday use of terms like ‘cult’ or ‘brainwashing’ (such as the ‘Cult of Trump’) can illuminate our approaches to public understanding of contemporary issues such as religion and politics.

This continuing prevalence of cult discourses in popular vernacular requires a shift in thinking for scholars of minority religions. Regardless of scholarly hesitation surrounding the term, it is undeniable that the use of the term cult is deeply rooted within popular vernacular, appearing in popular culture entertainment, news stories, journalist exposés, and (more recently) within hybrids of political, religious, and conspiracy narratives (Graham-Hyde 2023). While use of the term is continuously used to delegitimize minority religions, it is important to note its wider uses, which points to more nuanced applications of the term from the moral panics surrounding new and minority religions in the 1970s.

From a critical perspective, it is clear that the term ‘cult’ is unhelpful as a scholarly category, particularly due to its highly subjective nature. As Benjamin E. Zeller notes, ‘[l]abelling any group with which one disagrees and considers deviant as a cult may be a common occurrence, but it is not scholarship’ (2022: 31). However, while the term lacks scholarly rigour, an analysis of the term ‘cult’ in everyday life can greatly enhance scholarly inquiry. For example, in a quantitative analysis of American newspapers during the 1990s, Philip Deslippe (2023) outlines the complexities of how the term ‘cult’ was used across a variety of contexts. These, he notes, range from ‘positive cults’ (such as cult films and television) to ‘negative cults’ (such as cults of personality and cult analogies). These complexities create a term that is not possible to define in clear binaries. Accordingly, he urges scholars to understand the term as more than simply a pejorative. Moreover, as Susannah Crockford demonstrates using the example of QAnon in Chapter 9 of this volume, using the term ‘cult’ can be empowering for ex-members who have experienced harmful or traumatic experiences.

To explore these ideas further, we conducted a survey in 2021 that sought to understand how 'cult' rhetoric is used in popular vernacular. With over 2000 responses, the data began to highlight that there is a clear theme in how the terms are viewed which would not surprise even the least experienced researcher. What surprised us, however, was the amount of responses connecting the terms to a range of social discourses such as education, media, politics, health, and research ethics; building upon the expected religious and conspiracy theory discourses in which we are accustomed. Indeed, 'Cult' discourse has transcended the boundaries of religion, becoming an increasingly popular term in wider social discourse, with a variety of usage -- both positive and negative (Deslippe 2023).

The survey enabled us to gain a quantitative snapshot of respondent perception whilst simultaneously collecting qualitative data as to how respondents defined the terms and in what contexts they would apply their use.[2] We collected a quantitative snapshot of whether respondents had come across the terms: 'cult', 'brainwashing', 'new religious movement' and 'minority religion'; combined with a quantitative snapshot of how they perceived and used the terms in everyday situations.

The data revealed that the terms 'cult' and 'brainwashing' were commonly used terms that were negatively perceived. Terms such as 'new religious movement' and 'minority religion' were more likely to be considered neutral but less likely to be in common usage (see Figures 1 and 2).

INSERT FIGURE1CHAPTER1

Figure 1: Have you heard of and used the following terms before this survey?

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[2] For a full methodology, see Graham-Hyde (2023).

Figure 2: How would you personally perceive the following terms?

Again, this is not surprising to anyone that researches minority religion. The findings from this survey support the findings of Paul Olson (2006) who had previously demonstrated that the term 'cult' was perceived more negatively than the terms 'new religious movement' or 'new Christian church'. Prior to Olson's research, Jeffery Pfeifer (1992) had also demonstrated that when the term 'cult' had been applied to a minority group so too were the pejorative assumptions, such as brainwashing, that exist within popular vernacular. Our survey provides contemporary evidence that further supports the scholarly rationale of using 'minority religion' when referring to any group that might be popularly perceived as a 'cult' or previously labelled as a 'new religious movement' within scholarly research.[3] If we seek to construct an critical overview of lived religion then avoiding value-laden terminology unless otherwise justified is certainly a firm foundation for academic contribution.

In addition to the quantitative snapshot, the survey attempted to capture qualitative data by asking respondents to define the terms: 'brainwashing', 'cult', 'new religious movement', and 'minority religion'. Whilst emerging themes and in-depth comparisons between definitions is beyond the remits of this chapter, some of the following examples provide insight into how everyday people apply the terms.

One respondent defined 'cult' as: 'a dangerously devoted group of religious people' and defined brainwashing as 'the act of convincing someone not to think for themselves'. However, the same respondent simply defined 'new religion movement' as a 'new religion' and 'minority religion' as 'a less common religion'. Another respondent chose to define 'cult' as 'a dangerous religious group' and 'brainwashing' as 'taking over someone's thoughts and brain'. Unlike the first respondent, 'new religious movement' was defined as 'literally the

[3] While 'New Religious Movements' has enjoyed frequent use as a scholarly category, the subjective nature of 'new' and subsequent generations of NRMs has resulted in a reconsideration of the term (see Barker 2014).

same as a Cult [sic]'. On first glance, one would be forgiven for thinking that this respondent had not given much consideration for nuance. However, this respondent reflected on how they would define 'minority religion':

> I would consider these differentiated from NRM or Cults [sic], however this term may be used to describe these groups. I'd call a long standing belief system that did not have much awareness in society a minority-religion.

There were many instances of clear nuance and reflection from the responses given. Of course, not all responses necessarily abided by the pejorative use of terminology in popular vernacular. There were responses that detailed the problematic terms with a clear awareness of the literature discussing issues with 'cult'.

The survey results are rich and diverse, and a full analysis will be published in due course, however these initial snapshots have been helpful in framing our conversations; we suspect they will be helpful to others.

The responses were enlightening but so too were the comments made on the social media posts advertising the survey.[4] Within the comments on the survey adverts, terminology was being used in virtual spaces to 'other' the opinion or position of individuals that oppose a popular but non-mainstream view. In this case, the view that COVID-19 was dangerous and that government intervention was necessary. Certainly, there was a significant 'anti-establishment' positioning of many of the social media comments made in connection to the survey. Perhaps the most significant finding from the comments alone was the way in which 'cult' rhetoric was being utilised in discourse about COVID-19 (Graham-Hyde 2023).

[4] A full methodology for how the survey was conducted has been written (see Graham-Hyde 2023 for more detail).

During COVID-19, the rejection of social distancing, lockdowns and other methods used by governments has formed part of the overall discourse of COVID denialism. J. Hunter Priniski and Keith J. Holyoak (2022) demonstrated that, in the USA, COVID-19 scepticism was initially driven by the preexisting distrust in Democratic politicians and medical science professionals but that 'auxiliary beliefs' became entrenched within the two dominant categories. Auxiliary beliefs, in this instance, included conspiracy theories suggesting that political and scientific organisations had an ulterior motive which was peddled through mainstream media (Priniski and Holyoak 2022).

A further analysis of 'auxiliary beliefs' highlights the religious connections to COVID-19 denialism. Perhaps this is best exemplified by QAnon, a prophetic political movement following the posts of an anonymous observer named 'Q'. Adherents of 'Q', who vary in political and religious background, believe that 'Q' is unearthing the covert war that Donald Trump is raging against the 'deep state' (Hughey 2021). Of course, Donald Trump enjoyed substantial support from evangelical Christians throughout his nomination and election as President of the United States (Margolis 2020). Unsurprisingly, QAnon belief also found purchase among evangelical Christians during the COVID-19 pandemic, connecting evangelical concerns with anti-mask and anti-vaxxers conspiracy theories (Beauchamp 2022).

The eclectic mix of distrust and belief embodied by QAnon members is a contemporary example of how health, political and religious narratives are threaded together with the use of 'cult' rhetoric (Graham-Hyde 2023). With the terminology no longer being purely 'religious' in popular vernacular, it begs the question: is scholarly work, emerging out of the study of religion, using terminology without this wider frame of reference, academically robust enough to forward the body of literature in a meaningful way? We think the answer is a resounding no.

The ‘cult wars’ of the past and scholarship to this date has been foundational in avoiding reductive binaries of ‘what religion is’ that subsequently ‘others’ that minority religions. The creation of INFORM (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements), for example, is testament to the amount of work that was (and sometimes still is) needed to ensure the phenomenon of minority religions is understood, providing expert advice to judges, governments and members of the public. To be clear, this scholarly activity is helpful in establishing a scrupulous and sapient body of literature about religions that would otherwise go unresearched. However, with the exception of recent insider/outsider discourse and bespoke in-depth analyses of specific minority religions, the field seldom moves beyond the scaffolding of ‘cult wars’ and dominant typologies – with much contemporary scholarship operating within the confines of this space.

When the terminology in popular vernacular fails to match the way in which scholars are using the term then, at best, we risk becoming irrelevant. At worst, we are in danger of totally missing a new phenomenon in the development of normative cultic language and the rhetoric therein.

Forget ‘Atrocity Stories’: Listening to Ex-Members

Whilst preparing the manuscript for this book, we chaired a roundtable panel on ‘cult’ rhetoric at the 2022 British Association for the Study of Religions conference at the Open University. While the discussion covered a range of topics and prompted lively debate amongst the audience, one common critique of the study of NRMs stood out: the field’s historical hesitance to meaningfully engage with the testimonies of ex-members. The audience, consisting mostly of scholars from the wider study of religion, largely expressed concerns that overlooking (or dismissing) ex-member testimonies resulted in survivor narratives and instances of abuse being marginalised or muted in the field. Indeed, the wider

study of religions is making strides towards studies of spiritual abuse, notably the ongoing Abuse in Religious Contexts project (Abuse in Religious Contexts, n.d.), which places the lived experiences of survivors at the centre of its research. The study of NRMs, at least from the perspectives of many of our panel's audience, is lagging far behind.

Such perceptions of the field are rather widespread beyond the academic community, with the study of NRMs often being framed as 'cult apologism'. Such framing is often dismissed as not truly understanding the nuanced and 'neutral' approach to NRM studies – but do these accusations point at an uncomfortable truth for NRM scholars? Does the study of NRMs prioritise the 'insider' experience? Has the field, in its attempt to rightfully combat prejudice and misinformation surrounding certain new religions, allowed the valuable testimonies of ex-members go unnoticed? These questions point directly to the relationship between the 'ivory tower' of academia and popular discourse.

As George D. Chryssides (2019) notes, insider accounts have typically been prioritised in the study of religion beyond the field of NRM studies. On face value, this seems an understandable perspective. Who better to ask for insider experiences than the insiders themselves? The origins of the study of new religions is particularly embedded in this approach, attempting to provide an account of new religions that is free of sensationalism. Rather than maintain a critical and careful balance of data from member/ex-member sources, however, the study of NRMs has typically swerved hugely in favour of current members. Accusations of the field's 'cult apologism' often concern scholars dismissing ex-member testimony as biassed and distorted accounts, with ex-members being categorised as 'apostates' and often depicted as having axes to grind. For many ex-members who have become vocal opponents of the groups they have left, being dismissed due to their 'ex' status is viewed as an insult and a devaluing of their lived experience. While it is erroneous to accuse all scholars of new religions of this framing (particularly more recent scholarship

which has benefited greatly from the information provided by ex-members), it is clear that strands of distrust in ex-member narratives have existed in the field, often shaping the ways in which scholars set out to understand the groups they engage with.

Perhaps the most damaging framework for the dismissal of ex-member testimony is Bryan R. Wilson's (1990) model of 'atrocity stories', in which vocal ex-members are characterised as 'rehearsing' a narrative in which they are coerced and manipulated by duplicitous religious leaders, even suggesting that ex-members 'have sometimes sought to make a profit from accounts of their experiences in stories sold to newspapers or produced as books' (Wilson 1990: 19). Wilson (1994) would subsequently frame such financial gain as part of a pattern of motivations for ex-members' dissemination of personal testimonies. While it is clear that publications of ex-member narratives have become a popular market and even a career for some (see Bromley 1998; Cusack 2021; Gregg and Chryssides 2017), Wilson's dismissal of the validity of such narratives based on accusations of profiteering seems overly cynical. Moreover, the popularity of ex-member biographies highlights a significant disconnect between the sociological study of new religions and wider public discourse, in which ex-member narratives are valued and understood to be rich sources of insider knowledge.

These sources and the communities from which they emerge are fruitful areas of research in themselves. A considerable 'ex-member scene' has emerged in the digital age, as Chryssides outlines in Chapter 3 of this volume. Anti-cult testimonies have grown far beyond exposés and memoirs – the Internet has allowed ex-members to gather, share stories, and form friendships beyond the economic and geographical boundaries faced in previous decades. The increasing influence of social media, which allows networked publics of like-minded individuals to emerge through the collaboration of sharing experiences, news and events (see Papacharissi 2016), has also played a significant role in this shift. Both current

members and ex-members of NRMs use social media to not only share their own views, but also interact with one another, creating an often heated (and attention grabbing) debate. Despite the now easily accessible nature of ex-member testimonies via Tweets, Facebook posts, and YouTube videos (amongst others), we are faced with another methodological question – how representative are these accounts of the overall ex-membership? In their study of ex-member testimonies, in which they also reinforce the importance and value of ex-member accounts, Gregg and Chryssides (2017) estimate that roughly 0.23 percent of former NRM members in the United Kingdom are publicly critical of their respective movements. This, they conclude, leaves open the possibility that most former members have quietly left with mundane accounts of their time within the movement and their departure. These accounts, while no less valuable in terms of accumulating a broad picture of lived religion, are more difficult to obtain for the scholar.

Ex-member accounts are likely to maintain a greater popularity with a public market than scholarly analyses of new religions. While academic verbiage is often offputting for non-academics, alternative sensational accounts of new religions perceived as 'cultic' or 'strange' fare well in terms of sales, particularly when authored by a former member who can attest to insider knowledge. However, there is a bigger issue at play than mere sensationalism or entertainment. Ex-member narratives, whether circulated online or published as memoirs, can be valuable sources of data for scholars on the one hand, but also an opportunity for ex-members to share instances of malpractice or abuse on the other. These are incredibly serious issues; ones that must be considered carefully by scholars of religion – both within the study of NRMs and wider study of religion.

As already established, the issue that is often raised when concerning ex-member narratives is their lack of objectivity. If an ex-member harbours ill feelings towards their former group, then can they be trusted as reliable accounts of insider information (Wilson

1990; 1994; Kliever 1995; Johnson 1998)? This approach seems short-sighted however, as it does not appear to be applied with the same level of scrutiny to current members, who are *also* subjective in their narratives. Indeed, in his account of conducting fieldwork with the Church of Scientology, Stephen E. Gregg observes that it is not uncommon for scholars of religion to witness 'represented religion' – 'the ways in which religious people and organisations present themselves and their traditions, in 'official' materials or in the ways in which they engage with visitors to their communities' (2021: 133). He argues that scholars can be 'stage managed' in the field, in which they are introduced to enthusiastic current members and presented with an 'ideal' vision of the movement. This has also been the case in our own experiences of fieldwork (Thomas 2020). This is not intended as a criticism of the groups who kindly (and often very generously) welcome scholars of religion to their sites and organisations, but rather to acknowledge that all communities we study, whether regarded as insiders, outsiders, members, ex-members (amongst others), will display tendencies of bias. It is understandable that religious communities would want us to see them 'at their best', but while we acknowledge that ex-member testimonies can be problematic, current member narratives (particularly those through institutional and 'official' channels) can be equally problematic. The key for scholars, as Chryssides (2019) correctly notes, is the 'need to "manage" their informants, as is customary with all research data, evaluating the available evidence' (2019: 389-390). In other words, we should critically triangulate our sources across parties in an attempt to assemble what we view as an accurate account (see Carter 1998: 234).

These challenges are closely intertwined with notions of insiders and outsiders, a key methodological debate in the study of religion (see McCutcheon 1999; Gregg and Chryssides 2019). The framing of ex-member narratives as entirely unreliable presents a problematic binary between insiders on the one hand and outsiders on the other. The reality is far more complex. Carole M. Cusack (2019) demonstrates blurred boundaries between

insiders/outsiders in a study of communities of ex-members from two separate groups: Kerista Commune and the School of Economic Science. By considering the narratives of ex-members found online, Cusack notes that Kerista Commune acts as a particularly interesting example, wherein all members are 'ex-members' due to the formal disbandment of the group in 1991. Nevertheless, members have been able to utilise online spaces to develop and maintain relationships based on a past belonging, thus ex-members 'continue to "believe" to a certain degree, but the sense that they still belong is stronger' (Cusack 2019: 403). In other words, complexities of insiders/outsiders in the study of new religions points to a number of potential publics under the 'ex' umbrella. These binaries are blurred further by recent NRM schismatics, such as Free Zone Scientology, wherein ex-Church of Scientology members have broken away from the CoS and rejected the need for institutional/hierarchical leadership (Cusack 2019). While these Scientologists may be categorised by the CoS as 'ex-members', they do in fact identify as Scientologists and practise L. Ron Hubbard's spiritual technology, albeit outside the institution Hubbard himself created (Thomas 2021). The Free Zone accordingly acts as an example of how breaking down problematic categories of 'outsiders' or 'ex-membership' to include more than those who entirely reject their former movement/community can lead to a more rich holistic picture of contemporary new religions. Moreover, while Free Zone Scientologists uphold the value of Scientology as a spiritual practice, it is not uncommon for some Freezoners to frame the Church of Scientology as a 'cult' (Graham-Hyde Forthcoming), demonstrating nuances of cult discourse in popular vernacular.

Moving Forward: Framing the Discussion

Removing Agenda from Dialogue

Scholars, authors and individuals with long-term interest in this field will not be surprised to yet again hear a call for de-agenderising, as robust peer-reviewed research must always aspire to such pedigree. Most are not blind to the controversy that often surrounds this field; the passionate, sometimes emotive, arguments that emerge are often met with rejection and hostility from 'the other side' of the argument. Regardless of the perspective we have when approaching the study of minority religions, all 'sides' of the argument often intentionally or unintentionally peddle agendas.

Critical analysis should avoid becoming embroiled in tit-for-tat discussions — defending religious organisations that can speak for themselves, whilst simultaneously worrying about what aspects of our collected data are 'too controversial' for publication. If scholars wish to avoid the label of 'cult apologist' then it stands to reason that they need to speak freely on all issues that concern minority religions and the lived reality of adherents.

Leaving the Ivory Tower

The majority of what is written about minority religions does not emanate from scholarly positioning. As academics we risk relevancy if we continuously ignore what is being published in the popularly accessed domain, more so when we label it as unnoteworthy, under researched or merely 'spam'. We believe that proverbial olive branches need to be extended to those that we might starkly disagree with, especially if they operate outside of academia. Those that have been labelled 'apostates', publishing in a way that circumvents academic scrutiny and rigour, often possess lived experience and/or listened to the lived experience of many who have been involved in minority religions. Whilst we might disagree with their overall approach or potential misrepresentation of a religious group, it would be remiss to ignore the wealth of lived experience that they embody. We have engaged with an

increasingly popular podcast called 'The Cult Vault',[5] an endeavour of Kacey - the host of The Cult Vault, who is fascinated by minority religions and wants to document her journey of learning about them. Overtime, Kacey has engaged with 'survivor' interviews and has often collaborated with those that heavily critique the work of scholars in the field of NRMs. Whilst we might not always agree with the conclusions drawn by Kacey (or those that team with her), she has a high degree of access that we have not replicated, consistently ascertaining the lived experience of those who have left minority religions. Engaging with Kacey has been beneficial to our developing approaches toward the use of 'cult' rhetoric and we encourage academics to reach out to additional sources of information and access as opportunity arises.

Scholarly Use of Terminology Must Be Justified

In previous publications we have argued that the use of 'cult' rhetoric must be avoided altogether (Thomas & Graham-Hyde, 2021; Graham-Hyde, 2023; INFORM, 2021). However, in the process of collecting contributions for this volume we have come to accept that 'cult' rhetoric is an immovable fixture. Whilst we largely agree with Zeller's (2022) recent assertion that the term 'cult' has little utility in scholarly contexts, it does possess utility for survivors of abuse and trauma, as argued elsewhere (Dubrow-Marshall, see Chapter 6 in this volume). It is important that scholarly research attempts to unpack the meanings intended by ex-members/leave-takers of minority religions when using 'cult' rhetoric. Furthermore, it is not the remit of scholars to make value judgements on the effective use of terminology when used by participants. Therefore, we argue that it is entirely justifiable to use the terminology when directly referring to the ideology of participants and those that have a lived-reality that criticises their previous religious identity/affiliation using 'cult' rhetoric.

[5] The full podcast episode can be found at: https://www.cultvaultpodcast.com/podcast/episode/279aa5df/104-bonus-episode-discussing-todays-academic-studies-of-cults

Unfortunately, the use of terms such as ‘cult’ can sometimes be ‘throwaway’ in that the terms are used flippantly in other fields with little consideration given to the consequences. Therefore, where justification for the use of terms such as ‘cult’ or ‘brainwashing’ is not evidently necessary, we argue that scholars should refrain from usage unless particular care is given to articulating their definitional position. We do not wish to draw attention to articles where usage of the term is seldom justified, however we do suggest that specific fields (and their derivatives) such as health, business, social work, political science and history pay particular attention to the vernacular they are choosing to implement – ensuring that the way in which they label groups/ ‘others’ is academically rigorous and evidence-based. Our reasons extend beyond agreeing with Zeller (2022); we argue that the mis-informed usage of terminology weakens academic research in other fields and can lead to further discrimination against those that live a minority religious reality. Ultimately, even without the publication of this volume, there is a plethora of publications in existence that highlight the issues of ‘cult’ rhetoric and it is lazy (if not wilfully ignorant) to lack attention to detail when labelling social groups and further obfuscates the issues within our field(s).

The Purpose of this Volume

This book has been assembled to revisit the notion of ‘cults’ and to reconsider the academic study of New Religious Movements as it faces the new paradigms and societal shifts of recent decades. We believe that this is best achieved with a multidisciplinary focus. Accordingly, we invited a variety of contributors to discuss aspects of ‘cult rhetoric’ in relation to their own scholarship and reflect on its impact. As this is the first volume in a new INFORM book series with Bloomsbury, we wanted our contributors to reflect the organisation’s emphasis on diverse perspectives, thus demonstrating a breadth of opinions and scholarly approaches to the notion of ‘cults’. The response was greater than we had anticipated and we are pleased with the rich contributions provided within this book.

These diverse contributions are an attempt to steer the ship in the direction of multi-disciplinary approaches to the study of religion, beginning with a fresh and innovative discussion about the terminology we use to frame our discussions. We aim for this to be the beginning of a conversation about how the study of NRMs can move both beyond its historical foundations and archaic understandings of religion more generally, while also aiming to potential scholarly avenues which we believe will be helpful to all who study minority religions irrespective of disciplinary positioning. As with any book offering diverse perspectives, it is likely that there may be disagreement between both contributors and our readership, but we promote this in the spirit of productive dialogue. The term 'cult' is an often vague and highly subjective term – a multi-disciplinary approach moves us towards a broader understanding of its deployment in contemporary discourses.

In an attempt to not retread old ground, this book is not intended as a 'guide' to various NRMs, nor a broad history of the field. Rather it is intended as a collection of contemporary and contextualised analyses of 'cult rhetoric', and the nuanced (and often unexpected) roles it plays in 21st century society.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I, 'Approaches to Cult Rhetoric', aims to explore critical and scholarly approaches to the category of 'cult'. Suzanne Newcombe and Sarah Harvey (Chapter 2) provide a contextual account of both INFORM's history and its approach to the term 'cult'. In Chapter 3, George D. Chryssides critically explores the history of anti-cult rhetoric and demonstrates that 'cult' controversies further entrenched pejorative connotations toward such groups, and little re-evaluation of how these religious groups have responded has occurred. William Sims Bainbridge (Chapter 4) also historically contextualises 'cult' rhetoric through examining the intersection of religion and psychiatry over the last two centuries. Bainbridge then develops his analysis in light of the 'cult' conversion model he helped develop with Rodney Stark, before identifying the pervasiveness of 'cult' rhetoric and

identity construction in Massively Multiplayer Online games. In Chapter 5, Douglas Cowan explores the new religious tropes in popular culture and provides an analysis of how the usage of terms such as 'cult' or 'brainwashing' have become metonyms for religious violence. Cowan uses an innovative methodology for analysing 'cult' rhetoric, using a propaganda model of information theory, and demonstrates how such an approach adds value to the field. Roderick P. Dubrow-Marshall (Chapter 6) completes Section 1 by providing a rationale for the continued use of the term 'cult', arguing that the word has utility for survivors of abuse. Durbow-Marshall further argues that the term should only be applied to groups that have unhealthy and damaging psychological impact upon members. Therefore, the term 'cult', as Dubrow-Marshall argues, refers to specific harmful practices rather than denoting a belief system as the term can be levied against any harmful group, not just religious.

Part II, 'Contemporary "Cultic" Issues', aims to deepen the conversation by exploring 'real-world' and contemporary issues pertaining to the term 'cult'. In Chapter 7 Donald A. Westbrook draws from his fieldwork with La Luz del Mundo ('The Light of the World') to assess the opportunities and limitations of an 'NRM' approach to a Mexican Christian movement which has previously been understood through pentecostal frameworks. Bethan Juliet Oake, in Chapter 8, explores the contemporary 'Satanic Cult Conspiracy' (SCC). With the apparent resurgence of 'The Satanic Panic' in the previous decade, Oake's chapter deconstructs the anti-cult rhetoric and stereotypical image of a 'cult' deployed by the SCC to explore the broader issues at play in constructions of 'satanic cults'. Chapter 9, written by Susannah Crockford, turns its attention towards the QAnon movement and the 'cult' accusations surrounding it. Drawing from a variety of discourses, including interviews with former members, Crockford explores how the term is used with a variety of meanings and interpretations both within and outside QAnon, and how contemporary American politics

resulted in the emergence of this movement that has been connected to the controversy of the Capitol riots (and more). In Chapter 10, Vivian Asimos unpacks the relationship between 'cult' rhetoric and popular culture, considering the notion of cults in terms of fandoms and communities emerging around 'cult TV', 'cult films', amongst others. By positioning popular culture as a form of religious and spiritual engagement, Asimos demonstrates how 'cult' rhetoric is directly tied to shifting paradigm(s) of what religion is (and is not) for the everyday individual. Finally, in Chapter 11, Catherine Wessinger reflects on media depictions and documentaries of the Waco tragedy, and her experience of educating/advising journalists on 'cults' and issues pertaining to 'cult essentialism' from the position of a minority religion researcher.

W. Michael Ashcraft contextualises the entire volume with an afterword that critically reflects on the deconstruction of the study of new religious movements with historical perspective. This afterword provides a helpful connection to the previous INFORM book series, with this volume being the launch of a new and innovative INFORM book series entitled 'Religion at the Boundaries'.

While these chapters may be diverse in nature, they are by no means comprehensive; several other areas exist as fruitful areas of discussion. However, it is our hope that this volume begins a renewed discussion of minority religions, 'cult' rhetoric, and future directions for the field. This book was initially conceived as a method of moving beyond former typologies and the 'cult wars', yet it is not possible to give a simplistic answer to such a complex issue. Accordingly, the chapters from all our contributors provide a number of angles and methodologies that will help illuminate a variety of paths forward.

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