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The risk of overestimating and underestimating “religious cults” in South Africa

ABSTRACT

In South Africa on a number of occasions the media and other groups have referred to some religious groups as “cults”. The word “cult” is a loaded term which has positive, negative and neutral connotations. Unfortunately, the term has often been used not to describe a phenomenon but to classify groups that are not in line with the standards of society. This has led to tension between such groups and churches, and members of society. This article reveals that the study of cults is a complex one and one to be pursued with caution. Measures are proposed for the studying of cults in order to provide a balanced overview. In order to provide balanced information on new religions and cults an Information centre associated with an academic institution needs to be established.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent times a number of media reports on certain religious groups have indicated the perception among some members of society that South Africa is the home of “harmful cults”. The existence of a number of popular definitions that clearly illuminate the characteristics of cults leads to the practice of loose and fast classifications of new or alternative religious groups as cults. Although this unfair and hasty labelling of groups (based on whether a group meets a number of the characteristics of a cult) can lead to unnecessary tension in society this is no reason not to conduct research on these groups in order to ascertain their impact on society. Despite not being listed as such in the 2001 census, terms such as “sects” and “cults” are not terms entirely unfamiliar to the traditional Christian church, as well as society and the media in general. It is important, however, to understand that the word “cult” is not merely a classification tool based on certain characteristics. Barker (2001:1) reminds that cults do not exist in a vacuum and they are surrounded by (almost enveloped in) what can be called a “cult scene” that includes members of the wider society, cult-watching groups, churches and the media that contribute to the complex relationships between cults and the rest of society. Much has been published about cults and different viewpoints are raised about cults that vary from the belief that cults are generally not harmful (see Introvinge 2001; Richardson & Bromley 1983; and Baker 1995) to the belief that they are harmful, exploitative and destructive (see Singer & Lalich 1995; Hassan 1988; Enroth 1984).

This article addresses the complexity and different uses of the word “cult”. It also indicates that although classification of cults remains a challenge it is needed since cults can impact negatively on society and must therefore not be underestimated. Further, proposals will be made not only on how to deal with cults but also on how to address the needs for a balanced study of and provision of information on cults and new religions in South Africa.

2. SCRUTINISING THE TERM "CULT"

The term "cult" undoubtedly has many facets that have been subject to intense debate. The term is not only linked to religion but is also used to describe groups in other realms of life and business. Unfortunately, the term has also conveniently been employed indiscriminately by lay critics to disparage faiths whose doctrines were believed to be unusual and heretical. In everyday life, religions or religious groups regarded by the majority culture as spurious or unorthodox are generally referred to as "cults". Many scholars believe that the general use of the word "cult" to refer to all non mainstream religious groups is an unfair classification seeing that harmless groups are categorised under the same term with harmful groups. In order to address this generalisation as well as the negative connotation associated with the word "cult" it is mostly replaced with "new religious movements" (NRMs) or "new religions" (Woody 2009:218). This viewpoint is not shared by all studying "cults" and the term is readily used by certain cult watching groups when referring to groups believed to be manipulative, destructive and exploitative (Introvigne 2001:1).

For the purpose of this article, the word "cult" will be used seeing that the focus will be on groups believed to be harmful. Replacing the word "cult" with "new religious movements" or "new religions" will jeopardise attempts to specifically address issues related to the word "cult".

2.1 Different types of cults

The word "cult" can be used in many ways, and distinctions are drawn between different types of cults. Two broad categories are used, namely *religious cults*, which include Christian cults, Eastern cults and satanic cults and *nonreligious cults*, which include business, educational, personality, political and even UFO cults (Jones 2008:18-20). This article will focus on the category *religious cult*, which includes *Christian cult* or *pseudo-Christian cult*. This in broad terms refers to a religious group that claims to be Bible-based but deviates in practice and belief from the traditional Christian belief system.

Cults are further described in terms of the threat they pose or the harm they can inflict on society. Cults considered as relatively harmless even though their teachings and practices may be out of step with societal and/or theological norms are referred to as *benign cults*. *Harmful or abusive cults* are "those groups whose teachings and practices are not only different from societal and/or theological norms but are also believed to exert strong social and psychological pressure — which can make individuals do things that they would not have considered doing prior to joining the group" (INFORM(b) n.d.:1). Groups that have committed violence or which seriously harm their members, advocate violence that leads to suicide, and in some cases have even killed their own members are considered to be *destructive cults*, *suicide cults* or *Doomsday cults* (Wikipedia/cult n.d.:8).

2.2 Definition of cult

"A definition per se is a man-made decision and whatever characteristics are put together under the "label" can be interpreted differently from place to place, person to person and time to time. A term can also be used to denote a positive or negative evaluation instead of telling us about the specific characteristics of a phenomenon" (INFORM(c) n.d.:1). Defining a cult is even more challenging in the light of the varied applications of the word depending on the evaluator and user. This is further complicated by the inability of the existing definitions to accurately describe and encompass all aspects of cults without also including aspects present in other religions not considered as cults. There exists an overarching body of characteristics between so-called cults and religions in general. For this reason a number of aspects believed to be of higher intensity in

some religious groups functioning in a more controlled and sometimes isolated environment are usually used as distinguishing pointers in the study of cults.

It is believed that the term cult originates from the French word *culte* that referred to “worship” in the sixteenth century. The French word *culte* is derived from the Latin word *cultus* that referred to “care, cultivation, or cultivated and worship”. The term was used rarely after the seventeenth century but revived again in the mid nineteenth century as reference to ancient primitive rituals (Dictionary.com n.d.:3). From around 1920 onward the word “cult” was also used to refer to religious groups as a cohesive social group whose devotional beliefs and practices are considered outside of the mainstream culture by the surrounding population (Wikipedia/cult n.d.:1). In 1932 an American sociologist, Howard P Becker, started using the word “cult” as a sociological classification. The word was the result of his expansion of German theologian Ernst Troeltsch’s church-sect typology.

Becker used two of Troeltsch’s three categories of religious behaviour, namely churchly and sectarian and developed them further. He used *churchly* and split that into “ecclesia” and “denomination”, and split *sectarian* into “sect” and “cult” (Swatos 1998:90–93). Becker initially described cults as small unorganised religious groups that had the distinctive characteristic of being private in their personal beliefs (Campbell 1998:123) and later the concept “cult” took on the characteristics of deviant religious groups that derived their inspiration from outside the mainstream religion (Richardson 1993:349).

The words “cult” and “sect” are sometimes used interchangeably, especially in European countries and the USA. Different viewpoints exist on the difference between a sect and a cult. For the purpose of this article “sect” is understood to mean that it refers to a new religious group in Christendom that consists of members that have left the parent denomination because they believe that the denomination has neglected important doctrines. They often decry the liberal trends in the denomination and advocate that the aim of the new religious group is to return to “true” religion which entails the restoration of important neglected doctrines (Wilson 1982:89). Cults are like sects also a new religious group. Unlike sects cults may form without breaking away from a denomination and form as a new group. Cults although they claim to practice “true” religion are more readily distinguished by some “new revelation”, “prophecy” or “vision” that can be seen as an addendum to the Bible message. Cults are lead by a charismatic leader(ship) that claims to be the “godly” instrument in bringing forth the new or lost element of truth. A further distinctive characteristic is the belief that psychological manipulation, danger or harmfulness and authoritarianism are associated with cults (Robbins 1988).

Definitions for cult abound and dozens if not hundreds of proposals have been made, each claiming to have the correct definition. A cult can be defined from a sociological, psychological, legal, religious and secular opposition point of view (Wikipedia/cult n.d.:3-5). For the purpose of this article the definition of the International Cultic Studies Association, a well-respected, balanced international organisation will be used. This definition encompasses the issues generally debated about cults that include aspects of the sociological and psychological approaches as well as secular opposition approaches. According to Langone (n.d.:1) and West and Langone (1986:119–120), a cult can be defined as a group or movement that to a significant degree

- (a) exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to leadership, or a group or movement
- (b) unethical manipulative techniques are employed to persuade, control and socialise members
- (c) members are progressively and systematically induced to states of psychological dependency and isolated from former friends and family
- (d) special methods are used to heighten suggestibility, enforce powerful group pressures, increase information management, to suspend individuality or critical judgment, and to promote

a total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it

(e) causes psychological harm to members, their families and the community

It is also important to indicate that the word "cult" in a theological context is understood to be closely related to the word "sect" *hairesis* (*gr*). This term has the meaning of "a body of men following their own tenets", "a group with distinctive theories with an acknowledged founder" or "a strong, distinctive opinion of individual "parties" (sects) that operated within Judaism. In the second century *hairesis* became a term that was used to refer to a body of false beliefs (Dictionary of spiritual terms n.d.:1). In this context the word cult is used to distinguish between "true beliefs" and "false beliefs".

The above characteristics pointed out in the definitions undoubtedly form an important basis not only for debate among those opposing or defending cults but also among those who assist "victims" of cults. It is important to note that the definition does not serve as a checklist in order to determine if a group is a cult. It provides guidelines in order to investigate study and deal with the complex phenomenon of cults.

2.3 Different views of cults

From a legal point of view according to Gunn (2003:196), religions are implicitly or explicitly classified. Depending on the approach of the evaluator, religions may be described in terms such as "good religion" or "bad religion", or even "religion" or "non-religion". A further evaluation can be that "monotheistic religions" may be described as "traditional religions" while "polytheistic religions" or "non-theistic religions" may be described as "primitive" or "superstitious". Some religions are classified as "not really religions" or "sects" or "cults". "They are viewed as not deserving of the label "religion" either for purposes of receiving benefits or being protected against discrimination" (Gunn 2003:197).

Cults have been studied by scholars of different disciplines including sociology, psychology, anthropology, law and theology. These different viewpoints are represented in different cult watching groups. Barker (2001:1) identifies five types of cult-watching groups that can be used as constructs and that can be useful in understanding the complicated process of social interaction. There are also individual cult-watchers who move between the different types. Cults as a result of outside influence change significantly in terms of their functioning as a group as well as how they act towards their members and society. The first type of cult-watching group is known as *cult-awareness groups* (CAGs) that consist of ex-members of cults, relatives of these ex-members, private detectives, counsellors, health practitioners and clinical psychologists and their focus is the harmfulness of cults. Their goal is to help victims, alert potential victims, and control or ban dangerous cults. Their sources vary from information from anxious parents, ex-members, the media, scholars and their own counsellors. Some CAGs have been initiated by government as in France, or are predominantly supported by the national church as in Russia. Another group called *counter-cult groups* (CCGs) made up of clergy, theologians, apologists and believers of the faith community focus not so much on what cults do as on what they believe. They expose the heretical beliefs of cults and their goal is to explain where and how cults deviate from the Truth¹. They obtain their information from testimonies from ex-members and cult literature (Barker 2001:2-3). *Research-orientated groups* (ROGs) made up of academics and other scholars and

1 The term "truth" is a term that is not so easily definable however in this context it refers to the doctrine known as the orthodox Christian belief. For the Christian the ultimate expression of truth is founded in the Bible, when Jesus said "I am the way, the truth and the Life (Joh 14:6) Based on this announcement of Jesus we as Christians believe He is right and we should listen to Him and what he teaches is therefore the truth. Cults deviate from the "truth" mostly in that they add additional revelations to the truth as is evident in other sources or prophecies or special revelations of a leader thus rendering the "Christian truth" as incomplete an insufficient (Martin 1980:16).

professionals aim at obtaining objective information about and understanding of cults based on objective information obtained from ex-members, family and society, and through the study of group dynamics. ROGs endeavour to contextualise information through comparison with other religions and/or those who share socioeconomic and various demographic characteristics. Another type of cult-watching is done by *human rights groups* (HRGs), consisting of human rights activists and professionals such as lawyers who focus on the protection of the human rights of religious minorities. These groups are more concerned with how society treats cults than with what cults do. Another aspect that can also be included in this type of cult-watching is those activists who do not focus so much on the protection of the rights of minority groups as on the individual rights of members of these groups. Their aim is to protect individuals in these groups based on the belief that the dynamics of some groups may harm members and infringe on their rights. Finally, groups known as *cult defender groups* (CDGs), consisting of members of cults and sympathisers of cults, defend cults and expose CAGs. CDGs ask questions about how cults have been misinterpreted and/or mistreated. They focus on the positive things in cults ignoring or explaining away any dubious actions. They oppose any form of deprogramming² and exit counselling³. According to CDGs the actions of CAGs sometimes lead to violent situations surrounding cults (Barker 2001:4).

In conclusion three broad approaches to the study and observation of cults can be detected. Firstly, those that believe that all cults are harmful based either on their *belief* — thus theology — or the *dynamics* they utilise to proselytise and maintain members (Bowker 1997:247). Cults according to this approach are all evaluated negatively in general. Secondly, others obtain objective balanced information about cults through comparison with other religions in order to ensure that these groups are not mistreated and also enjoy the right to freedom of religion. This balanced approach does not consider all cults as harmful but remain mindful that some religious groups may pose a threat to its members and society. The third group is committed to protect, defend and promote cults even if it means ignoring their doubtful actions. The danger of this approach is that although it claims to be impartial it is bias and defends cults without considering the possible threats that some groups may present to society.

2.4 Important international organisations studying cults

In the United Kingdom an organisation known as INFORM (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements) founded in 1988 functions as an independent charity with the support of the British Home Office and the mainstream churches. The aim of Inform is to obtain and provide objective and up-to-date information about new religious movements or “cults” (INFORM(a) n.d.:1). In the United States of America, the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) “is a global network of people concerned about psychological manipulation and abuse in cultic groups, alternative movements, and other environments” (ICSA n.d.). Info-Cult founded a non-profit, charitable organisation founded in 1980 based in Montreal, Canada that offers help and

2 Singer & Lalich (1995) defined “cult deprogramming” as providing members with information about the cult and showing them how their own decision making power had been taken away from them in order for them to make their own decisions. “Deprogramming is an attempt to force a person to abandon allegiance to a religious, political, economic or social group. Methods and practices may involve kidnapping and coercion. The person in question is taken against his/her will, which has led to controversies over freedom of religion, kidnapping and civil rights, as well as the violence which is sometimes involved” (Wiki/Deprogramming n.d.:1).

3 “Exit counselling”, also termed “strategic intervention therapy”, “cult intervention” or “thought reform consultation”, is an intervention designed to persuade an individual to leave a group perceived to be a cult (Wiki/Exit Counseling n.d.:1).

information about cults, new religious movements and related groups and subjects (Info-Cult n.d.). CESNUR – Centre for Studies on New Religions – situated in Torino, Italy, was established in 1988 by a group of religious scholars from leading universities in Europe and the Americas. CESNUR not only promotes scholarly research in the field of new religious consciousness but also exposes the problems associated with some movements, while defending the principles of religious liberty” (CESNUR n.d.). The Cult Awareness and Information Centre (CAIC) in Australia established in 1995 focuses on people who are ensnared in totalitarian groups. The main aim is to warn the public about cults and their deceitful recruiting techniques (CAIC n.d.). The Federation of European Centres for Research and Information on Sects (FECRIS) is an umbrella organisation in Europe with offices in most European countries including France, Austria, Sweden, Germany and Spain. FECRIS protects human rights in the field of eradicating religious discrimination (FECRIS n.d.).

Although the aims of the aforementioned organisations differ, each of these organisations attempt to study and gather information on cults and new religions with the aim of providing balanced information to the public.

Apart from small organisations consisting of a few interested people, scholars and ex-members such as CIEC (Cult Information and Evangelization Centre) (Kies n.d.) that focuses on doctrinal differences and RIGHT (Rights of Individuals Grant Honor To) (no longer functioning) that focused on the rights of individuals belonging to these groups, and CARE-SA (Aserac) that deals with trauma of victims of drugs, occult, alcohol and sexual abuse (Aserac n.d.:1), no formal organisation exists in South Africa.

2.5 Criteria generally used to classify cults

- Based on the definition of a cult, different criteria are formulated in more detail in order to guide the study of religious groups and cults. The following list of social-structural, social-psychological and interpersonal behaviour patterns commonly found in cultic environments may be helpful in assessing a group (Lalich & Tobias 2006):
- Members display excessively zealous and unquestioning commitment to its leader. The leader’s belief system, ideology and practices are viewed as the Truth, as law.
- No questioning of doctrine or doubt is tolerated and dissent is discouraged or even punished.
- Any doubts about the groups and its leader(s) must be suppressed and mind-altering practices (including meditation and chanting, denunciation sessions and debilitating work routines) are used.
- Members are dictated to in terms of how they should think, act and feel (members must get permission to date, change jobs, leave the premises or marry. Leaders also prescribe to their members what types of clothes to wear, where to live, whether or not to have children and how to discipline children).
- The group displays an elite mentality. This means that it claims a special, exalted status for itself, its leader(s) and members. The leader is viewed as the Messiah, a special being on a special mission to save humanity.
- A polarised us-versus-them mentality is displayed by the group, which in turn may cause conflict with the wider society.
- The leader is exempted from accountability to any authorities (unlike the accountability expected from teachers, priests, ministers, rabbis and monks of mainstream religious denominations).
- A core teaching of the group is that the supposedly exalted end justifies whatever means are necessary. As a result members participate in activities or behave in ways they

would have considered reprehensible or unethical before joining the group. Examples of this behaviour include collecting money for bogus charities or lying to family and friends. Emotions of shame, fear and guilt are induced through applying peer pressure or subtle persuasion methods in order to influence and control members.

- Total commitment to the leader or group requires members to cut ties with family and friends, and radically alter or abandon personal goals and activities they had before joining the group.
- The group focuses on adding new members to the group.
- The group is preoccupied with making money.
- Members are expected to spend inordinate amounts of time with the group and to engage in group-related activities.
- Socialising of members is only to take place with other group members.
- The possibility of life outside the context of the group is not an option for the most loyal members (the “true believers”). As a result the group is the only way to be saved. It often fears reprisals to itself, its loved ones or others if it even considers leaving the group.

2.6 Challenge in applying the behaviour patterns appropriately

It is evident from the list of guidelines above that the classification of a particular group is not that simple. Some of the guidelines listed can be “visible” or more easily detectable: for example the zealous commitment of members is easily detectable by the ones who know them — so also the elitism they display with regard to other religions. Their commitments to the leader and the inordinate amounts of time spent engaged in the activities of the group could also easily be detected. But other guidelines are “subliminal” in the sense that they refer to an individual’s internalised reaction and adoption to the environment, culture, teachings (formal and informal) and belief system that becomes visible in the individual’s detectable behaviour.

The challenge, however, remains how the subliminal abstract aspects of the dynamics of these groups can be detected. How are the teachings and culture of the group internalised? How do the unwritten rules subtly dictated to members through acceptable group behaviour affect members? How are certain dynamics utilised to ensure a particular behaviour, for example how are the emotions of fear, guilt and “love” employed to obtain a desired behaviour? What role does the polarised mentality we-versus-them, strengthened by group isolation from the outside world, play in behaviour? What impact does the belief that salvation is only obtainable through membership and the “godly sanctioning” of the leader have on the level of obedience and commitment? Also to what extent does it differ in terms of the impact it has on individuals? How can these effects be measured? These are a few challenges indicating the difficulty in utilising guidelines to classify a group.

3. EVALUATION OF CULTS

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the postmodern world is accessibility to information on any topic. The same applies to the study of or information available on cults. Unfortunately, the information available in this way can consist of skewed perceptions and one-sided or unscientific conclusions that in turn can lead to incorrect evaluations of groups. The lack of knowledge or unbalanced information can contribute to the overestimation or underestimation of cults.

General knowledge about cults amongst the public varies from those who are totally unaware of their existence or those who have some experience of so-called cults as a result of a loved one who got involved to those who sell themselves as “cult experts”. Two equally important traps must be avoided with regard to cults, namely overestimation and underestimation of the

impact they may have on members and on society. Overestimation and underestimation can be equally dangerous. In overestimation some portion of society may “cry wolf” when there is no wolf. With underestimation on the other side some may view a “real wolf” as a “sheep”: the proverbial wolf in sheep’s clothing. For that reason this issue must be approached with caution in order to get a balanced picture.

3.1 Overestimation or underestimation of cults

Overestimation of groups may occur in the following instances. Firstly, it may occur through utilisation of “generic criteria” as discussed above in order to determine if a particular group is a cult. Some believe that if only a number of the criteria fit a particular group, the group can be labelled as a cult. This is an irresponsible generalisation seeing that the term “cult” refers to a continuum in which a large gray area separates “cult” from “non-cult” or adds qualifiers to the term “cult” such as “benign”, “harmful” or “destructive”. The criteria listed are a compilation of characteristics observed in these groups and are not necessarily meant to be used as a yardstick to determine if a group is a cult. The criteria are a benchmark not an organised structure that can be used to select those observations that confirm a stereotype (Langone & Rosendale n.d.:3-4). Each case must be evaluated individually with regard to the group’s dynamics, teaching and changing environment and how persons interact with the culture and what impact that culture has on them.

Secondly, another generalisation that must be avoided is that a group is a cult because the interpersonal influence of the leader is harmful. This generalisation simply holds no water because cults are not the only groups that harm people. Langone and Rosendale (n.d.:5) point out that “a “new age” group that is neither manipulative nor authoritarian might also harm some people through its promotion of a medically dangerous diet or psychologically harmful practices”. Parishioners may even be harmed in a church because the pastor is domineering and abusive in the manner he deals with the members. Many examples can be given of harm inflicted by interpersonal influence, and therefore harm cannot be used as a criterion to classify a group as a cult.

Thirdly, there is the danger of overestimating the experience of one or two members of a group that claims that a particular group is harmful seeing that the interaction of personality and group environment can produce very different results. An unassertive person, for example, may view a mildly controlling environment as abusive, whereas a very assertive, confident person may view the same environment as “not harmful”. One must guard against only seeing the casualties that can skew our perception of a group, casualties can be found in any religion. (Langone 2012:1).

Fourthly, sources of information can also lead to an emotional reaction to hastily classify a religious group as a cult. The aim of the media is to compile a good story that would ensure the loyalty of the readers, listeners and viewers. They do not take into account the “ordinary life” in religious groups and rather want to expose them as fraudulent and sensational. Given the tight schedule they work with in order to meet tight deadlines the gathering of their information is limited compared to the time spent by scholars. The time or space to present its story is also limited. Therefore it focuses on selected sources that can provide good quotes without obtaining versions of the reality from members (Barker 1995:299). Even people directly affected by cults base their information overwhelmingly on the mass media. Very few attempt to contact cults directly (Beckford 1994:104). Think of all the emotionally loaded reporting and coverage about the mass suicide of Jim Jones’ Peoples Temple where more than 900 followers died including children, the Solar Temple, the terrifying siege of the Branch Davidians of David Koresh at Waco which ended with the fire that killed the children trapped in the compound. There is no doubt

that such information not only has the tendency to invoke emotions but also establishes a general negative association with the word “cult”. Jenkins (1998:158) describes this as “moral panic” which he defines as socially constructed social problems characterised by a reaction, in the media and political forums, which is out of proportion to the actual threat.

It is understandable that relatives or friends affected by a loved one’s involvement in a particular group are at times desperate to protect the loved one against harmful activities. The question that needs to be asked is whether the person is in a life-threatening situation. If not, a cautious and informed approach is advisable, gathering reliable information and consulting with knowledgeable people on the subject.

Underestimation on the other hand can also lead to a skew picture of the influence of cults on its members and society. Underestimation occurs when a judgement is made based on insufficient or no information. That is when reports about possible harm done by religious groups are simply brushed off as sensation without investigation. Or when religious freedom is viewed as a freedom that even justifies harmful activities as long as these are performed as part of religion (Pretorius 2011:237).

The first an important aspect in the sphere of religion that must never be underestimated is the sanctioning that is afforded to some religious leaders. The position of authority and power taken up by a religious leader is in many cases believed not merely to be a man-made institution but a godly appointment supported by scripture. The leader also enjoys special direct communication with God (Singer & Lalich 1995:7). According to Henke (2006:2), this belief of the special selection of the leader can be used to teach followers to suppress criticism against the group or leader.

The danger lurking in such a position of authority or “godly sanctioning” is that it can be abused. The authoritativeness of the position justified by scripture can easily be used not only to exploit the submission of followers but also to demand unquestionable execution of the leader’s commands. Individuals are more susceptible in a religious environment and their judgement more easily tainted. This has been demonstrated by some cases indicated previously where followers will obey the leader to the extreme of mass suicide. A person of authority can therefore gain an unhealthy influence over his/her followers.

Secondly; the belief that members of some cults are the only chosen and elected people of God and that the “truth”⁴ and salvation are only found inside the group creates an almost unbearable responsibility for the followers. They not only must maintain God’s special election and calling but act in such a way that they do not disappoint God. This almost “God-given” responsibility is an important dynamic in motivating followers to aspire to almost limitless ends in an endeavour to please God and do “His will”. The desire to please God at whatever cost leaves followers wide open to spiritual abuse (Pretorius 2007:263). Actions can include lying, cheating and deceiving outsiders for money or getting members to perform actions a person would normally not perform. These wrongful actions are justified by “the eventual goal justifies the means”.

Thirdly; the claim of cults that the leader and the groups are specially selected by God with the aim of restoring the true people of God must also not be underestimated. The emphasis that some groups place on a “right standing with God” manifested in a committed lifestyle appeals to individuals who feel that this aspect was neglected in their own congregation. The need for this change is normally realised when these groups refer to the individual’s past religious experiences as being unsuccessful and at the same time offer restoration of the person’s relationship with God (Johnson & Van Vonderen 1991:184).

4 This “truth” is based on the “new revelation” or “prophecy” received by the leader that adds new teachings and beliefs to the scriptures.

Fourthly, the impact of the group dynamics on a person must not be underestimated. People respond differently to group or peer pressure. In most cases, however, peer pressure, and what is perceived as the acceptable behaviour, does influence the actions of a person. The group identity displayed by members is imbedded in a camaraderie strongly motivated by the belief of being the chosen people of God destined to persevere persecuting for a higher cause (Pretorius 2008:275).

Lastly, the effect that criticism of cults by the media has on strengthening the belief of persecution for a higher cause must not be underestimated. For some it is proof that they are indeed the true church of God being persecuted by "satan" (Zukeran 2006:3) and motivates them to commit even more strongly. The outside world is viewed as being on the side of the "media" and therefore also as an enemy used by "satan" to pull followers away from the truth within the group.

It can therefore be concluded that a cautious but responsible approach is needed when religious groups believed to be cultic are studied in order to detect harmful activities or practices in order to address them. It thus stands to reason that a religious group cannot merely be classified as a cult based on certain criteria but an understanding of deeper dynamics as pointed out above is also needed to provide a bigger picture, and also how the surrounding society activates these dynamics by virtue of their actions.

3.2 Current situation regarding cults in South Africa

Over the last two decades or more, different reports on what were referred to as "sects" or "cults" featured in the media. In the 1980s a group known as *The Mission Church of Christ* enjoyed media attention. The leader of the group Lester Bloomberg was described as a prophet. Family, ex-members and the media reported that the group alienated the children from their family and was responsible for radical change in the behaviour of the children⁵. In the mid-1990s the "prophet" Eugene Houy hit the media. The media reported on this religious group that lived in isolation and that believed they were the selected people of God. The leader attracted special attention with his women followers that succeeded one another as his wives. In 2000 reports saw the light about another religious group in Umtata, approximately 100 members, known as *The Ark*. Reports had it that children were in the grip of the group. It was feared that these followers could follow the route of the then recent cult suicide of the group *The Restoration of the Ten Commandments* in Uganda where more than 300 people died. *The Ark* leader Nokulunga Fiphaza indoctrinated her followers and predicted the end of the world on 31 July 2000. Eight corpses of followers of the group were allegedly found in shallow graves close to the premises of the group⁶. In 2004 the South African Broadcasting Corporation featured a documentary on the group known as the *Emmanuel Fellowship* on the programme Special Assignment. This group

5 Louw, L. 1994. Sektelede in greep van vrees en totale onderdanigheid. *Beeld*, 15 Maart, bl. 11. Gouws,

A. 1994. Kommer oor SA mense in Bloomberg-sekte. *Beeld*, 7 Oktober, bl. 2.

Gouws, A. 1994. Bloomberg kon lede "dryf tot selfmoord". *Beeld*, 18 November, bl. 2.

Louw, L. 1994. Kinders dalk nog nie verlos van sekte nie. *Beeld*, 5 Maart, bl. 3.

Botha, P.R. & Botha, M. n.d. The Bloomberg Cult. Available at: <http://www.gkbellville.org/bybelstudies/bloomberg.htm>. Viewed: 3 October 2004.

6 Jackson, N. 2000. Sekte wag weer op Jesus. *Beeld*, 21 Julie, bl. 16.

Stiemie, M. 2000. Gemeenskap wil met sekte praat. *Die Burger*, 3 Mei, bl. 5.

Preller, C. 2000. Polisie vat kinders weg van sekte wat verwaarloos, indoktrineer. *Beeld*, 8 Oktober, bl. 5.

Preller, C. 2003. Grusame vonds: agt lyke reeds uitgeken. Ark-sektelede draai in hof. *Die Burger*, 27 Junie, bl. 5.

was also suspected of influencing people and exploiting members under the banner of religion⁷. A report in the *You* magazine in 2009 about a group called *Alon International* described the life of pain of some ex-members belonging to this group, describing their experience as “years spent in the grip of a fanatic cult”⁸. Recently in 2010, Carte Blanche hosted a programme about a religious group – *Grace Gospel Church* – that allegedly controlled followers and alienated them from their families⁹.

The media coverage of some religious groups referred to as “sects” or “cults” indicates a level of awareness about cults in South Africa. Furthermore it indicates that some non-mainstream religious groups have been or are still active in South Africa. Unfortunately, this kind of awareness is not based on sound research and study of these groups and society can be presented with a skewed picture either overrating or underrating the issue.

3.3 Guidelines in evaluating and dealing with new religions in South Africa

It has become evident that the evaluation of religious groups in order to determine if they are cults is no simple matter. The media, some experts, affected families and other interested people always run the risk of a hastened classification of a group based on simplistic criteria.

The following must be taken into account when dealing with cults:

- Definitions of cult cannot be used as a kind of medical diagnostic category. The term “cult” must rather be used as a pointer that will assist when working with and studying religious groups. It is important to also take into account that groups and individuals differ. The dynamics and functioning of groups also change over time as a way for them to adapt to their respective environments.
- The starting point for the classification of groups as cults in most cases is as a result of either a person who claims he/she has been harmed by a group or loved ones who feel that a family member or friend has been hurt by a group. It is risky to base a conclusion on the experience of a person or a few individuals. The experience of one or more individuals should never merely be taken as representative of all the members in the group as experience may differ. Therefore it is important to ensure that sufficient information is gathered including personal testimonies and that the information is updated. Consult and discuss the issue with members of the group with the assistance of knowledgeable people in this field. Obtain information on the particular group’s belief system, teachings and their practices. Also gather information from other sources such as family, the community and other role players in the community. Systematically collected data is a lot more compelling than one or two outspoken people
- Care must always be taken to guard against the tendency to allow casualties to prematurely dictate a conclusion. Instead, a calm balanced approach is advisable.
- Because of the difficulty of demonstrating the abusiveness of environments behaviourally according to scientific methodologies, an outright classification of a group as a cult should be avoided (Langone 2012 n.d.1).

3.4 Recommendations

The aforementioned cases of cult activity in South Africa calls for the establishment of an Information centre. An information/study centre focusing on the study of new religions can add value to the challenge with regards to new religions and cults in South Africa. The information

7 South African Broadcasting Corporation. 2004. “Special Assignment: Emmanuel Fellowship”. SABC3, 11 May.

8 Moses, A. 2009. Painful years in Paradise. *You* magazine, 12 March, pp 16-17.

9 Grace Gospel Church, M-Net, 2010. Carte Blanche. Broadcast on 7 February.

centre must be made up of scholars in this field, be they from different disciplines, ex-members, jurists and other role players of the society who can add value to the study of cults and provide balanced information to the community. This centre can obtain valuable information and guidelines from similar organisations in other parts of the world. With this information adapted to fit the demographics and unique culture of South Africa, a respectable centre can add value to the need in this field.

4. CONCLUSION

It is clear that the word “cult” can be used in different ways. It can be used in an attempt to point out that a certain religious groups are harmful and a threat to its members and society. In this sense attributes such as violence, abuse, control and exploitation, been attached and has made it a term with mixed meanings of which the negative ones are the most likely to prevail. It is understandable that scholars studying cults therefore reverted to using less loaded terms such as *new religious movements*, *new religions* or *alternative religions*.

The word cult can however also be used in another less offensive sense to point out how different a religious group is from another religious group in terms of its doctrine and practices - thus as a measure of dissociation. In this sense the theological definition of “cult” is used as was indicated before to differentiate itself (orthodox Christianity) from other beliefs. Within the ambit of the dynamics of religious belief systems and religious freedom this distinction is justified seeing that each religious system must be able to declare the beliefs they believe is the “right beliefs”. They further enjoy the freedom to defend those beliefs for the sake of the coherent functioning and existence of their belief system. The word cult thus plays an important role within the framework of theology and must not be abandoned. Careful use of the word cult is advised in order to minimize the possibility of unfairly labelling other religious groups or to indicate religious superiority.

It is also important to take note that harm can be caused by some religious groups and that their teachings and beliefs can escalate into violence or even breaking of the law. This article attempted to point out that the term “cult” must be understood and used responsibly against its background.

More importantly, evaluating or classifying a religious group as a “harmful” cult is not simplistic yet necessary and entails thorough research and a balanced approach. What is important, however, is that no “ostrich mentality” can be afforded regarding this topic in South Africa. New religions in South Africa are a reality and thorough research and the dissemination of information is needed to establish on what level these groups are functioning and if they are a threat in any way to members of society.

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