

Religious Cults, Sects, and Denominations: A Theoretical Inquiry into the Conceptual Boundaries and Intersections Within the Study of Religion

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Cite this article in APA

Tuhirirwe, C., & Bweyale, J. (2025). Religious cults, sects, and denominations: A theoretical inquiry into the conceptual boundaries and intersections within the study of religion. *Journal of philosophy and religion*, 4 (1), 52-67. <https://doi.org/10.51317/jpr.v4i1.743>



A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history

Received: 2025-03-28

Accepted: 2025-04-30

Published: 2025-06-03

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Abstract

This conceptual article undertakes to examine and explicate the term religious 'cult' and its relationships with the concepts of religious 'sect', religious 'denomination' and Religion. In the milieu of New Religious Movements, expanding religious pluralism, religious fundamentalism and extremism, the ambiguity of the religious terms cult, sect and denomination may be problematic for policies concerning Religion and worship, religious education and the practice of Religion. Using qualitative theoretical review methodology, the article investigated the historical and sociological origins and meanings of the terms cult, sect, and denomination, how they relate and overlap, how the meanings have transformed over time and the implications for both academia and religious practice. Conceptual purposive sampling was used to identify and select sources of academic discourses that illuminate the phenomenology of Religion and concepts of 'cult', 'sect' and 'denomination'. Data reveals that it is complex to formulate a precise and universally acceptable definition of the concept of cult from a religious perspective. This is because the term has undergone remarkable transformations from its original meaning and application, which was positive and neutral, to the present-day meaning with negative connotations. In view of the negative meaning and application of the term religious cult today, the term should be used in time and context. Where possible, it should be substituted with other neutral and less negative terms like New Religious Movement (NRM), alternative religious movement or emergent Religion.

Key terms: Concept, cult, denomination, intersection, sect.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The concept of religious cults, as used to brand some newly emerging religious groups today, has become a matter of concern. With the emergence of New Religious Movements (NRMs) and other groups such as 'religious *ministries*', coupled with the rise of religious phobia and religious extremism that have dotted the religious landscape, there is a need to dissect the various religious terminologies. Besides, failure to clearly understand these religious terminologies may be contentious for legislation of the practice of Religion and worship and religious education in different contexts.

Today, new religious groups compete for membership alongside historical religious traditions and, in some instances, tend to take centre stage, attracting large numbers of adherents. Severally, the NRMs and other groups have been either '*wrongly*' or '*rightly*' referred to as '*cults*', which gives a derogatory impression (Wheeler, 2020). Questions would certainly arise as to why these religious groups are categorised as *cults*. What is the meaning of a '*cult*', and more specifically, what is a 'religious *cult*'? How should this term be applied, and why and how are the religious groups referred to as *cults* distinct from the others? Classical theorists and sociologists such as Max Weber (1864-1920) and Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), among others, categorised the concepts of religious '*cults*', '*sects*' and '*denominations*' and articulated their historical characteristics.

However, it is important to note that with today's changing religious landscape, increasing religious pluralism and challenges of religious extremism, among others, there is a need for continued scholarship to examine the new understanding, interpretation and use of these religious terminologies. The article addresses the conceptual ambiguity and vagueness of the term cult as explicated in religious terminologies that relate to religious *cult*, *sect* and *denomination*. It has demonstrated its original usage of the term cult and its present-day application.

The article demonstrates the relationship and interconnectedness of the religious terminologies *cult*, *sect*, and *denomination* and how they overlap and relate with the broader term religion. While the term cult is sometimes used beyond the domain of Religion, the article discussed and analysed the term from a religious perspective. Today, the terms 'religious *cult*', '*sect*' and '*denomination*' are used, interpreted and applied inconsistently in both academic scholarship and popular public discourses. Their interpretation is marred with negative expressions, and new religious movements and groups are perceived as chaotic and exploitative.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The inquiry employed a qualitative theoretical review methodology to analyse and explore the distinctiveness of the terms religious cults, sects and denominations. To avoid unspecific data, appropriate search strategies that included (i) identification of suitable databases, (ii) setting restrictions and (iii) use of Boolean operators, including AND, OR, NOT or AND NOT as conjunctions to include or omit keywords in the search. The inquiry limited the search to credible publications with ISBN numbers, peer-reviewed journals and Digital Object Identifier (DOI).

The search ensured full-text online databases, as Bandyopadhyay (1999) argued that these are effective and important sources of periodical literature that may not be available in ordinary library collections. Data analysis employed a meta-synthesis approach that enabled the analysis of historical and sociological

religious literature. Jary and Jary (2000) and Bandyopadhyay (1999) described secondary research as any inquiry based on the re-analysis of previously reviewed research data. The study used indexed academic sources through databases including JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar and EBSCO host to trace historical and sociological religious texts and semantic contexts. To analyse classical theorists to trace historical and sociological origins and perspectives of religious *cults*, *sects* and *denominations*, the inquiry set no time scope in terms of years and geographical contexts of the reviewed literature.

3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Religious Perspective of the Term Cult

The term *cult* has become very popular today. It has generated controversies concerning its meaning and application (Robbins et al., 2001). From a religious perspective, it is difficult to state a precise definition in terms of etymological origins and theological and sociological meanings. This is partly because the term has undergone remarkable transformations in relation to its original meaning and application as well as the burgeoning aspects such as religious violent extremism, theophobia and Islamophobia, among others.

There exists no unanimous definition for the term *cult*. The term presently means different things to different people and in different contexts; the same is true for many other religious terms or concepts, including the term religion. Barker (2011) maintains that there is no universally unanimous definition of a *cult*; there are only generally recognisable traits. The lack of a unanimous definition of the term *cult* has led to a controversial application of the term *cult*. Yet, the term is widely used in academia and practice. Consequently, it has led the term to be descriptive rather than defined. Cult remains one of the most confusing religious words, though, in the past, its meaning and application were positive and neutral. Today, it is shrouded in negativity and bias.

The Etymological Meaning of the Term Cult

According to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, the term *cult* is of Latin origin and derived from the Latin noun '*cultus*', which is connected to the Latin verb '*colo-colere*' (Glare, 1982).

- a) **Cultus:** Means to worship or to give reverence to a deity. This is the first meaning of the term *cult*. The etymological meaning of the term *cult* is not only positive but also neutral. It can be applied to any group of religious believers or worshipers. All religions the world over are involved in worship and paying homage or reverence to a god, spirit or God. The implication is that all religions have an aspect of *cult* or cultic.
- b) **Colo-colere:** This means to cultivate or simply cultivate. This is the second meaning of the term *cult* as derived from the Latin verb '*colo-colere*'. Whereas the word cultivate or cultivation literally refers to the planting of seeds in the agricultural sense of the word. In view of the term *cult*, there is a symbolic reference to another aspect of cultivation. The term '*colo-colour*' implies a cultivation of ideas and/or concepts in the minds and hearts of people (Kabazzi et al., 2000).

Throughout the history of humankind and on a daily basis, people cultivate ideas of all kinds (negative or positive) into themselves or into others. This is done either by persuasion (including indoctrination or brainwashing, as some people would like to call it today) or by the use of force. The cultivation of ideas is done through different ways, including reading of written literature, media, speeches, sermons or teaching. Persuasion can happen from parent to child, teacher to learner or leader to subject. The cultivated ideas or

concepts may be good or dangerous, depending on the intention(s) of the one cultivating or sowing them into the minds of others.

A *cult*, therefore, if we go by this second meaning, is an organisation, religious or secular, which is seriously involved in the cultivation of ideas and concepts (good or bad) among its followers or subjects (Musana & Tuhirirwe, 2003). Therefore, a cult leader is a person (religious or not) who engages seriously in the cultivation of ideas (good or bad) among his or her followers. There are two points to be derived from the second etymological meaning or root of the term *cult*. First, we note that planet Earth is full of *cult* leaders, teachers or proselytisers in this sense (Kabazzi-Kisirinya et al., 2000).

Therefore, the institution of *cult* leaders and teachers is not a matter of today or yesterday. Rather, it is historical. Secondly, the term *cult* is not limited only to religions or theological applications. Noting from the definitions, the cultivated ideas and concepts may not only be religious; they may be economic, political, cultural and social. Subsequently, the term *cult* can be said to be neutral and generally used beyond Religion. For instance, some political or artistic movements can be categorised as cults (Tourish et al., 2018).

The Theological Meaning of the Term Cult

According to Watchman Fellowship (2001), the term *cult* means a system of religious beliefs or rituals. The definition is positive and neutral. It can be used in reference to any group of religious believers. It is also closely related to the original etymological meaning of the word *cult*, as they are both theological in nature (Newcombe et al., 2023). They are also both positive and neutral and applied to Religion unreservedly. They connote neither good nor evil. The theological meaning of the term *cult* is also clearly stipulated in (the Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.), where a *cult* is defined in three related ways: first, as worship or reverential homage rendered to a divine being(s); as a specific type or a method of worship, particularly concerning its external rites and ceremonies. And lastly, as devotion or homage to a particular person or thing. A critical observation of the three meanings shows that the first two have a close relationship to the original etymological and theological meanings of the term *cult* and are restricted to Religion. The last one, however, is related to the sociological definition, as presented in the next section.

The Sociological Meaning of the Term Cult

The Websters offer a definition of a *cult*, which is more akin to the use of the word employed by both theologians and sociologists. Accordingly, a *cult* is defined as a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious. It also defines a *cult* as a great devotion to a person, idea or thing (Rynd, 1991). There are two aspects embedded in these two definitions of a *cult* from Rynd's point of view. The first definition represents a negative bias, which is oriented towards the present-day application of the word *cult*. It is also very restrictive to only the theological meaning and application. Yet, the second definition is positive and neutral, with explicit sociological implications of the term *cult*.

The sociological aspect of a *cult* depicts a *cult* as personal. It demonstrates an idea of a social relationship. It gives the impression that a *cult* comprises a strong attachment to a person (maybe a *cult* leader), an ideology, an object or something else. Such a social relationship or attachment is described as a *cultic* relationship. The extreme of it is that the ideology or the person becomes regarded as a *cult*. This is where one talks of a personality *cult* (Lu et al., 2014). It is the case of extreme allegiance to an ideology, an individual or a thing, 'having strong emotions, a feeling of extreme attachment', which sometimes can be

looked at as negative, as it causes extremist beliefs, attitudes and reactions. It should be noted, however, that the person to whom devotion is due may not necessarily be religious or a religious leader. Similarly, the ideology or thing to which devotion is due may not be religious; it may be a political one. It is the devotion element which creates a sense of total allegiance that is characteristic of both secular and religious cults.

Therefore, it is observed that whereas the first part of Webster's definition is theologically restrictive (cf., a belief system considered to be unconventional or false), the second part is not. It (second definition) relates well to the earlier one that a *cult* is an organisation, religious or not, which seriously engages in the cultivation of ideas and concepts (good or bad) among its followers. The same applies if it is an individual or a group of persons, and in this case, a cult leader or cult leaders. Both meanings imply that a cult cannot be limited to religious usage alone, and ideally, this should never be. The concern of the article is the religious interpretation and application of the term *cult*. Subsequently, the article explores a conversation about the cult from a religious perspective, thus using the concept of '*religious cults*'. These are clearly distinguishable from other secular, personal and political '*cults*'.

Religious Application of the Term Cult

The usage of the term *cult* from a religious perspective in this study is seen in two dimensions: the original and present-day application of the term.

The Original Application of the Term Cult

From the etymological, theological and sociological definitions as discussed, the original meaning of the word *cult*, with respect to Religion, is largely both positive and impartial. This is evident in aspects where a *cult* is defined as: to worship or to give reverence to a deity; a system of religious beliefs or rituals; worship or reverential homage rendered to a divine being (s); a specific type or structure of religious devotion, particularly concerning its outward rituals and ceremonies.; and devotion or homage to a particular individual, an ideology or a thing. All these definitions clearly show that the term cult, as defined, is positive or neutral and has no negative connotations at all.

However, from the same etymological, theological and sociological definitions above, we note aspects that depict the term *cult* as negative. For example, when it is looked at as an organisation (religious or not) that engages in the cultivation of ideas or concepts amongst its followers, some of the cultivated ideas or concepts may be negative and disastrous. Besides, the term *cult* is depicted as negative when it is defined as a religion or a religious organisation regarded as unorthodox or spurious or when devotion or homage to a particular person, idea or thing goes to extremely undesirable levels, leading to extremism.

As observed, the word cult, originally with a positive and impartial definition and meaning, has, over time, become conceptually fluid. The implication is that certain words' meanings and usage keep changing; new words emerge and are added to the vocabulary in use at the time. During this process, the original meanings of certain words change or are situated within the new contexts. Such has been the case with the word *cult*. Arguably, the changes in the meaning of some words may have an impact on a phenomenon. For instance, the change in meanings of the word cult is affecting the expressions of Religion today.

While in the past the meaning of this word, *cult*, was positive and impartial, today, the designation "*cult*" often reflects underlying negativity, prejudice and societal bias, especially when one considers its theological and sociological usage. For instance, at its inception, Christianity, which is a world religion, was originally seen as a religious cult. The teachings were not only contrary to the established Judaist tradition or culture, but they also had characteristics of a religious cult as perceived today. It was based on the teachings of a charismatic teacher or leader, Jesus Christ. Jesus, the leader and teacher, made several claims, which, to the Jews, were considered bizarre or outrageous. He had overzealous and enthusiastic followers who engaged in several unconventional rituals. Besides, the followers (Christians or believers) lived a community life and in fellowship and had "everything in common" (Acts 2:42-44).

They also owed total allegiance to their leader, who, for three years of active public ministry, moved around preaching, teaching and performing miracles. To the non-Christian community and the Jews of that time, Christianity was a cultic movement because it was contrary to the mainstream religious and political tradition of the time, which was Judaism. However, with a change in time and context, Christianity is a world religion today, and it is not considered a cult anymore. However, going by the original meaning of the word *cult*, like any other religious system, Christianity, too, is a cult. Contrarily, associating Christianity with cultism is not only an insult but also blasphemy, and it is a sin. Today, the usage of the word *cult* is extremely negative and destructive.

Contemporary Interpretation and Usage of the Concept of Cult

The popular usage, in the media or any other context, of the word *cult* is disastrous. Modern usage ignores the positive meaning of the word *cult* and concentrates only on the negative. The definitions of the term *cult* today are shrouded in negative connotations. For instance, Kets de Vries et al. (2021) summarise the modern negative meaning of a *cult* thus:

In the public domain, the word cult is associated with brainwashing, manipulation of followers, public scandals over cult leaders' sex lives, murder and mass suicide, rather than religious worship.

According to the present-day application, a *cult* means a small, evil religious group, often under the leadership of or following a single charismatic leader or a group of charismatic leaders. Such a leader may be living or dead, but his or her teachings are considered to be of the highest importance by the followers. The cult leader may be considered a genius, a great religious figure like a messiah or prophet. The cult is always seen as engaging in brainwashing, manipulation, and other mind control techniques of its members. Pretorius (2013) contended that,

The term religious leaders in the new religious groups or organisations means people who are abusive, manipulative or use illegal control over their followers' lives.

Cults are seen as overzealous and involved in unconventional rituals and teachings. For instance, while the historical mainstream religious traditions teach about death and the end of the world and always urge their followers to prepare for life afterwards, they are not regarded as cults. But when a new religious group teaches about the end of the world and encourages followers to prepare for the afterlife, the group or religious movement becomes a *cult*. Yet such teaching is based on an eschatological perspective, a preparation of followers for a supposed apocalypse or cataclysmic event with the characteristics of many religious cults. For instance, Pretorius (2013) noted that,

"...today, the term cult is often used generally by the public to describe any religious group they view as strange or dangerous".

Similarly, Cowan and Bromley (2015) view the term cult as an illegitimate exercise of Religion. In the same vein, Santana (2024) stated,

A cult is any religious group which differs significantly in one or more respects as to belief or practice from those religious groups which are regarded as the normative expressions of religion in our total culture.

Today, religious and academic literature and media demonstrate negative connotations of the term *cult*. The detrimental connotations and nuances are today indexed in academic and religious literature. Religious *cults* are seen as criminal, illegitimate, dangerous, unreasonable, unsystematic (without well-defined theological and conceptual frameworks) and sinister. For instance, Robertson (2024) contended that *cults* are sinister groups or organisations that indoctrinate their followers. The Western media reports from North America, Europe and elsewhere publish negative stories and activities about religious *cults*. *Cults* have been referred to as deceptive and only aim at diverting their followers from the 'true' religious faith. *Cults* are branded as harbouring selfish missions mainly targeting vulnerable people.

Religious cults are seen as deviations from historical religions or are simply organised heresies. Their followers are depicted as mindless zombies who have been manipulated into wrong doctrines. Cult leaders are seen as responsible for tilting the true theology. They are also said to be exploitative and lead their followers to death and destruction, and are referred to as Doomsday groups. For instance, in Uganda, the explicit example of the doomsday groups believed to be cults was the movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God or the Kanungu '*cult*' that ended up burning followers alive (Rupar, 2002).

Relativity of the Negative Religious Attributes of the Term Cult

It should be noted that while today the term religious cult is branded with negative bias, the negative adjectives that are used to describe cults are all relative rather than absolute. There exists no spiritual standard or measure for judging and determining whether a particular religious group is deviant, illegitimate, bizarre or dangerous. As Tucker (1989) argued, a *cult* is said to be someone else's religious group that does not agree with mine.

Because of the derogatory and pejorative attributes heavily embedded in the term cult today, some people prefer to refer to it as a New Religious Movement (NRM). However, the emergence of NRMs raises yet another problem of properly defining an NRM. It should be noted that some cults are also historical, with a very long tradition of existence in some communities of the world. Therefore, it may not always be correct to interchange an NRM for a *cult*. Hence, the difference between a religious cult and a new religious movement is the time and context of their existence. In African contexts, historical religions such as Islam and Christianity are new religious movements when described in the context of African Traditional Religion(s).

Differentiating Religious Cults

While the original concept of the *cult* was positive and neutral, contemporary societies are faced with the challenge of religious groups that engage in crimes such as murder and deliberately violate human rights. Yet, in the modern age of the right to freedom of Religion and worship, there is a need to identify religious groups with destructive potential. Subsequently, the article suggests a criterion for distinguishing dangerous religious groups. Positive characteristics of religious groups include;

- (i) A great degree of religious enthusiasm;

- (ii) Encourage the practice of spiritual disciplines exhibited in the form of commitment;
- (iii) Emphasise or stress more of experience than dogma and rituals, and
- (iv) Make a strong call for revival or renewal amongst the adherents.

On the other hand, the negative characteristics of religious groups include;

- (i) Exhibition of a high degree of allegiance to an all-powerful leader (s);
- (ii) Social and physical isolation from the greater society, otherwise referred to as creating the 'US' versus 'THEM' mentality, and
- (iii) The absolute claim of truth about God;
- (iv) Creation of an aura of secrecy and mystery;
- (v) Extremism;
- (vi) Discouragement of rational thoughts or discouragement of independent thinking (mind control);
- (vii) Distorted key theological doctrines, such as defective Christology, a distorted view of God and salvation;
- (viii) Emphasis on the near end of the world (apocalypse) and
- (ix) A rigid set of rules by which devotees must live and seriously comply.

These are the general characteristics manifested in most religious cults. However, some of these characteristics equally manifest in historical religions such as Christianity and Islam. Consequently, the article suggests that there is a need to address the challenges of cultism beyond defining its characteristics.

The Intersection of Concepts: 'Cult', 'Sect' and 'Denomination'

These concepts are often confused and sometimes not applied well in daily usage. Whereas these concepts are related, interlinked and overlap, they are distinct and differentiated as regards their meaning and daily theological application. The article defines the terms cult, sect and denomination to clearly draw a distinction and not be confused by the resemblances of their shared features and characteristics. Similarly, the article makes an explicit definition and analysis of the relationship between these terms in the context of Religion. Before embarking on the issues of differencing each of the concepts, as a reader ponders a quote by Robinson (2002),

"If you believe in it, it is a religion or perhaps the religion; and if you do not care one way or another about it, it is a sect; but if you fear and hate it, it is a cult".

It is arguable that the quotation is not only humorous but is uncomfortably close to reality as far as Religion and belief are concerned.

Sect

Like the term religious cult, the term religious sect has a Latin origin from the word '*secta*', which means a way of life, a following or a school of thought with respect to Religion (Harper, 2024). Another definition (Glare, 1982) states that the word sect is derived from the verb '*seco-secare*', which means to cut. Authors suggest that the '*secta*' originates from the verb '*sequi*', which means to '*follow*' (Glare, 1982). In all definitions and descriptions, the word has reference to division or separation. According to Wilson (2009), a sect is a protest group that develops its own distinctive ethics, beliefs and practices against the background of the wider society. In the reconstruction of the theory of social and economic organisations,

Weber (1947) observed that sects are religious groups that emerge around one charismatic leader who experienced divine revelation.

The leader at the centre is the authority of all worship and the moral behaviour of followers. The dictionary definition of the word sect is two-fold; firstly, it is defined as a religious group, especially one that has broken away from an established religion; secondly, it means a group of people or a faction having a common leadership and philosophy (Rynd, 1991). In an analysis of the two dictionary definitions, one observes that the first one is theologically biased, while the second one is neutral and non-religious. Simply understood, a sect is a religious group which comes into being as a result of separating, breaking away or being cut off from an established religious organisation.

The separation may come about mainly as a result of tension within the established religious organisation. A sect holds most beliefs and, at times, practices in common with its Religion of origin. However, it also has a number of novel concepts or beliefs which differentiate it from the mother religious tradition. For instance, Suhartono (2017) stated that sects are defined as movements of religious protest. Quite often, sects protest certain aspects, either in belief or practice, which are part of the status quo in their mother religions. Therefore, they are anti-establishment and usually result from revivalism (Musana, 2000). Consequently, sects call for new ways or innovations as opposed to the common tradition in their religions of origin.

Many religions started as sects. For instance, Christianity was originally seen as a sect that arose out of Judaism. There are many religious sects in the world today operating alongside the historical or mainstream religions. Some of them have a long history of existence and have separated from or can be found within the major world religions like Islam, Christianity or Judaism. Some sects have steadily evolved into denominations, while others have remained in their state for a long time. An example of a sect of Christianity that has steadily evolved into a denomination is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly referred to as the Mormons.

As breakaways, sects are considered a normal mechanism by which New Religious Movements evolve and spread. A *sect* is usually under the leadership of a charismatic leader or a group of leaders and calls for structures and single-minded dedication among its members (Musana, 2000). The sect leader is drawn from the religious tradition of origin, where he may have been part of the leadership or was just a member. He is inspired by a vision of leadership and directing others. The leaders share a common vision. In spite of the strong zeal and enthusiasm with which religious sects emerge, most of them do not stand the test of time. Some die out quickly, while others linger on for some time. Others grow and evolve into newly established religious movements with big followings. Christianity, for instance, based on the teachings of a charismatic leader, Jesus Christ, stood the test of time and, over the years, evolved from a small sect into a vibrant world religion.

Some sects are not well geographically widespread and are limited within their scopes of foundation and operation. In some cases, the leader of a sect is all-powerful and wields much authority to the extent that if he/she dies, there is not much hope for the sect's survival. Like cults, some leaders are visionaries who claim to receive divine messages over time from God to direct the course of the group.

Three pertinent issues to be noted about the meaning of the term sect. Firstly, like cultism, the term sect implies negative connotations as it implies an anti-establishment attitude that is opposed to the status quo. The term sect expresses bias, derogatory and shunned by people. Subsequently, followers would rather refer to it as a denomination or, at best, as a religion in its own right. Secondly, the daily usage of the term sect is not limited to religious usage. It refers to any group of people who share beliefs or opinions, such as politics or social sectors, used outside the boundaries of Religion. The term sect is neutral. Sometimes, beliefs or opinions can be social, political or economic. In such a case, a group of people who share such non-religious views or beliefs and opinions can also be referred to as a sect – and, in this respect, a secular sect. Therefore, it is false, as was discussed in a cult, to restrict the meaning and usage of the term sect to Religion.

Thirdly, there is a concern about the relationship between the terms *cult* and *sect*. Both terms have been falsely limited to religious or theological interpretation and usage. In addition, both terms have become pejorative and derogatory in application. In such a case, some people prefer to use more neutral and/or less problematic terms, such as New Religious Movements (NRMs) or a 'ministry' today. As Cowan (2016) argued, the term New Religious Movements lumps together everything without discriminating between the authentic and the spurious, the benign and the malefic, the redemptive and the diabolical. The term can also mislead us into treating all New Religious Movements (including *cults* and *sects*) as if they were a monolithic entity or monochrome in character.

Lastly, some people use the terms cult and sect interchangeably. This is not correct. Although they share some common aspects, the two terms are distinct in meaning and context. A religious cult is smaller compared to a religious sect. However, some religious cultic organisations are much bigger in terms of membership and have widely spread their ideologies as compared to some sects or even some denominations. International popularity depends on the ability of the particular cult to package its ideology and transmit it worldwide. For both cases (a cult and a sect), the zealotry of the leadership and membership in furthering their cause is very important.

Both a cult and a sect are the foundations of a religion or a denomination. There exists no clear demarcation to determine when and how a religious group graduates or evolves from a cult into a sect or from a sect into a denomination and later a religion.

Denomination

Etymologically, the term denomination originates from the Latin word '*nominare*', which means '*name*' (Lewis & Short, 1879). '*Denominatio*' comes from 'de', which means down or about, and '*nomen*', which means '*name*', is used in reference to the act of '*naming*' or '*classifying*' a phenomenon (Glare, 1982). The term denomination is one of the nomenclatures that define aspects of Religion. Troeltsch (1992), an authority in Christian scholarship, explains that a denomination is between a church tradition and a sect.

Unlike a *cult* and a *sect*, a denomination is an established religious group which has been in existence for many years and has geographically widespread membership. Wilson (2009) argued that a denomination, similar to a sect, is a voluntary association, but, unlike the sect, membership is relatively uncontrolled, and it can see itself as one movement among others, all of which are thought to be acceptable in the sight of God. Religious groups such as the Baptists and Anglicans, among others, are some examples of Christian denominations.

Usually, a denomination is a branch of an institutionalised religion with a distinct hierarchy and ritual style and whose interpretation of religious truth only slightly differs from the traditional view. It typically unites a group of individuals who congregate into a single administrative body. Whereas, like a cult or a sect, a denomination is viewed as a breakaway (schismatic), it acquires recognition due to its stability and credibility based on age and membership (Musana, 2000). It also acquires recognition due to its popularity, geographical distribution and impact.

Denominations differ greatly in sharing power between individual congregations and the central authority. In some cases, individual denominational groups may hold diverse beliefs. For instance, Baptist Churches have historically allowed their individual churches to hold diverse beliefs. The Episcopal Church in North America held a different and controversial belief concerning homosexuality compared to the traditional view of the Anglican Church. The same church ordained a homosexual bishop, Rene Robinson, of the New Hampshire Diocese in the U.S.A. in 2003.

Unlike sects, denominations are not closely related to cults. They are much bigger in size and more popular than either cults or sects. Their religious ideologies reach far within their area of operationalisation and beyond. The majority have well-demarcated administrative and worship structures and are perceived to be legitimate with a distinct hierarchy of leadership and a well-defined theology. Denominations have well-organised worship systems as well as stipulated schemes of rituals, religious functions and ceremonies. The religious dimensions and membership of denominations are defined, and unlike some cults and sects, denominations stand the test of time. Religious denominations are established as less controversial in theological viewpoints as well as in the conduct of rituals. Like sects, it is not easy to draw a distinction or to tell that a particular religious group has evolved from a sect into a denomination.

Religion

Like the term cult, defining the term religion is a challenge. The concept of Religion is interpreted in various ways by different individuals. And scholars (Musana, 2000). Etymologically, the term religion has roots in three Latin words: '*Religionis*', '*Religare*' and '*Religere*' (Smith, 1962). '*Religionis*' means respect for what is sacred. It suggests that in Religion, there must be respect for what is considered sacred or holy. Secondly, '*Religare*', which means to bind together. It involves binding or uniting people together as a group or a fellowship and linking them with a higher Supreme Being, God, or a deity. The groups of people have a common bond, which is social and religious, and it is this bond which ties them to the Supreme Being.

Lastly, '*Religere*', which means sacrificing everything and courageously carrying out a difficult job. It also means executing painstakingly. Religion, therefore, implies sacrificing oneself for the sake of pleasing a supreme being. It involves a spiritual duty to fulfil for the sake of God. Notable from the definition of Religion is that the phenomenon of Religion technically covers all aspects of '*Religionis*', '*Religare*' and '*Religere*'.

It implies a system of organised beliefs and practices, worship and ritual. It also means a social institution that deals with supernatural or sacred matters. In addition, Religion is a life experience or a social aspect of life, upholding individuals (social bonds) to express recognition or pay homage to a Supreme Being. To the Supreme Being, service, worship, reverence and honour are due. This is executed by belief, observance of

rituals and ceremonies and by the conduct of life. In brief, Religion refers to a social aspect of life related to the sacred or the divine.

Arguably, the term religion directly relates to the cult, sect and denomination in definition and practice. It is a general term which ties them all in the sense that they are all religious systems. The article contends that Religion, however, is the climax institution from an evolutionary process, which starts with a cult, then transforms into a sect, a denomination, and finally, matures into a religion.

Religious Ministries

There is a new religious phenomenon, "nomenclatural", known as '*ministry*' that refers to new religious groups. A church ministry is defined as a wide range of activities that aim at supporting and nurturing the people of the congregation in the context of a church and reaching out to the wider community. The Houston Christian University (HCU) defines '*religious ministry*' as the 'act of serving others and spreading the message of Jesus Christ. It involves living out one's faith through actions that demonstrate love, compassion, and service to those in need. Apparently, the concept of religious *ministry* is rooted and specific to the Christian religious structure and practice.

By definition, Christian *ministries* mean all actions or services extended to other people with the aim of sharing the message of Jesus Christ., such as love, compassion, sharing, preaching, and prayer, among other things, as HCU (un) demonstrates Christian *ministry* can take many forms of leading a congregation, volunteering, and doing charity with the goal of glorifying God and sharing His love with the world. The term and usage of the term 'ministry' in the context of Religion needs to be investigated, as its relationship with the terms '*cult, sect and denomination*'. In Uganda today, the term ministry applies to breakaway sects, particularly in Pentecostalism and Born-Again Christian structures. Each ministry is independent, and the followers identify with only one ministry without crossing over to the other. *Religious Ministries* are not under any religious structure.

They are independent and registered as autonomous religious organisations. In some countries, like Uganda, each ministry breaks away from the original ministry. There is no uniformity between these ministries; they are registered in the names of the individual founders. Each of the *ministries* has its own ways of religious practice, and some are characterised by exploiting followers by extorting sums of money through tithing, offerings, and sowing. Others are reported to distort the Christian gospel and indulge in activities of torturing followers, defilement and rape, among other evils, such activities that are labelled as cultic. In religious discourses, there are people or groups of people who deliberately choose to camouflage themselves under Religion to pursue and achieve disastrous missions.

They distort teachings from historically established religions, they manipulate followers, and they entangle Religion with politics and power to achieve personal agendas. Such persons are responsible for branding cults as criminal, destructive, bizarre, deceptive, sinister and illegitimate because they engage in brainwashing practices and harmful rituals like human sacrifice (Li, 2024). Yet, religious cults start with positive intentions, to fill spiritual gaps, correct the traditional religions where they go off track or embrace new experiences that may come through visionaries.

The article argues that while a cult begins small in popularity and membership with challenges of being branded manipulative, diversionary and sometimes blasphemous when it designs credible ideologies and

practices, it has the potential to resist challenges and evolve and develop into an established religion. The lack of proper terminology to define and explain the groups of self-seekers led to the negative usage of the terms 'cult' and 'sect'. However, when the term cult is used negatively, it deprives the small, upcoming religious ideologies of the opportunity to be innovative, to rebrand, to accommodate new visionaries and to improve religious ritualism.

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This article has discussed the lack of unanimous conceptual definitions of the terms cult, sect, and denomination. The article also notes that while these terms share similar characteristics and have been used interchangeably over time, today, the term cult is singled out to depict danger. Originally, the term cult was used in reference to religious beliefs and practices. In a sociological context, the word cult concerns a minority religious group that did not approve of some issues within the mainstream predominant Religion. Cults were foundational in the evolution process of Religion. From a cult, which is smaller in membership and extent, there is a progression to a sect, then a denomination and finally a religion. Besides, a religious cult does not just emerge from the vacuum (Márquez, 2018).

It is aimed at filling a spiritual vacuum created by an established religious denomination or a religious belief system. Today, the term has other usages, such as political *cults* and personal *cults*. The media has contributed to brand *cults* with negative attributes. The terms sect and denomination have maintained their original meaning and interpretation. The implication of the negative and biased use of the word cult deprives upcoming religious groups of the right to freedom of Religion and worship, spreads the phobia of Religion, discourages divine 'visionarism' and presents continuous growth of the experiential dimension of Religion. Consequently, the derogatory interpretation of the term cult has resulted in the birth of a new phenomenon of 'religious ministry'. The upcoming and breakaway groups now prefer to describe themselves as '*ministries*' to shun away from using the word *cult*.

Besides, this study observes that there is often some confusion surrounding the use of the term cult and other terms, such as sect, denomination and Religion itself. It, therefore, became very necessary to define and explain each of these religious terms and to show how they relate to the term *cult*. In view of this, it was found that a *cult* is very foundational in the evolution process of a religion. It is not always easy to distinguish a cult from a sect, and quite often, the two terms are used interchangeably, just like denomination and Religion. In addition, the distinction is not easy to determine in terms of which stage of evolution and development a particular religious group is in. That is to say, at what point or stage a sect, cult or even denomination becomes a religion is undefined.

While this is the case, the use of the term religion in reference to the final stage in the evolution process can be very confusing. This is because the word religion is general and can be used for all the primary and secondary stages during the evolution process. That is, a *cult*, sect, or denomination can all be referred to as a religious group. Thus, some scholars today would suggest that the religious group's size and worldwide influence best qualify it to be classified as a religion and to best make a distinction, it is referred to as a world religion. This term is arbitrary.

According to the findings of this study, a world religion is seen as a religious movement that has attained a status recognised worldwide for its embodiment of particular sacred traditions. However, even a cult or sect can attain this worldwide recognition depending on its level of popularity and charismatic leadership. Finally, the inquiry established that a religious cult does not just emerge from the vacuum. It emerges from several evolutionary stages.

Recommendations: Because of changes that keep occurring in the meaning and usage of certain religious terminologies, a reader must not only be aware of the transformation but must also closely analyse the context in which they are being applied. This is necessary in order to reflect on the meaning and intent of the user or the writer. Whenever the word cult or religious cult is used, for example, there is a need to analyse it against the socio-historical and present-day context in which it is being applied. This helps in judging whether one is applying it with a negative bias or with a positive and neutral intention.

When someone says that one belongs to a religious cult, for example, before reacting to this as abuse, one needs to analyse not only the intention of someone who says so, but also to understand whether one is applying the original or the present-day meaning of the word cult. Therefore, the idea of time and context is important when one is considering the application of terms and, in particular, the term cult. There is a need to investigate the definition and application of the term 'religious ministry' in the modern sense. Consequently, the study recommends that;

- (i) Authors and researchers need to write about these terms in a way that adopts greater precision and ensures grounding them within the contexts so that they appear free from implicit value judgments;
- (ii) The media and academia should desist from depicting emerging religious groups with bias and exaggeration; there is a need to be neutral and to present facts as they appear to reduce negative public misconceptions and misinterpretations.
- (iii) Interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate sociology, theology, history, and psychology should be encouraged to deepen understanding of religious movements' complexity and evolution;
- (iv) Academia should encourage an interdisciplinary approach in research and publishing; for instance, interest in sociology, theology, history and psychology researchers to integrate the concepts of religious cults, sects and denominations to enable the readers to appreciate the evolution and complexity of these terms;
- (v) Both academic and media portrayals of religious groups should avoid sensationalism and seek to present balanced, evidence-based analyses to reduce public misconceptions;

Finally, the article recommends that governments establish a Council of Religion and standards to regulate the operations of the different religions and to categorise cults from new religious movements and ministries. The council will ensure religious freedom and the right to Religion and belief, identify and prevent harmful religious practices, regulate media and publication about Religion, certify religious leaders and monitor religious institutions. The council will maintain religious quality control, promote cohesion between religions and enhance interreligious dialogue.

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