‘Cults’: What They Are

The term ‘cult’ is highly contentious and rather unfashionable. There are nearly as many definitions of ‘cult’ as alleged ‘cults’ themselves. Whether the word is applicable to any group at all is contested. Indeed, scholars of ‘new religious movements’ avoid use of the term ‘cult’. This is potentially unfortunate, as cults are not necessarily ‘new’ or ‘religious’.1 In this section I will be reviewing some of the existing definitions of ‘cult’ in an attempt to come to terms with what ‘cult’ is being used to mean. I will do this by drawing on the last chapter (the generalisations already made about cult rhetoric) and by referring to definitions offered by others. It is impossible to conduct meaningful discussions about cults in the absence of a clear definition of the term itself. Ultimately, I will be arguing for a neutralisation of the term in so far as I suggest it should be stripped of its negative connotations.2 While I will be looking at the use of the terms ‘cult’ (predominantly), ‘sect’ and ‘new religious movement’ (briefly) in the context of discourse, this section is ultimately semantic in its focus. It has already been established that cult and anti-cult recruiting rhetoric do not differ in the strategies that they use. In the next chapter, I will also examine the recruiting texts of a management consultancy, McKinsey, to see how far it satisfies the criteria of cult, even though it would not normally be classed as one. I do this in order to examine whether the features of cult and anti-cult recruiting rhetoric are specific to the cult discourse context.

Definition of ‘cult’

Examining the definition of ‘cult’ is important and timely, as outlined at the start of this book. Without a clear understanding of what a ‘cult’ actually is, legislation and policy changes are potentially oppressive and
certainly not informed. It should be noted that these language games do use ‘cult’ or the continental equivalent, i.e. ‘sect’.

These official moves against cults are understandable. The mass suicides of the Solar Temple, Heaven’s Gate and Jonestown loom large in the media representation of cults. There is no suggestion that there are not dangers associated with some groups and people. But whether or not these dangers are germane to cults as such is a pertinent issue.

It is possible to distinguish between some kinds of definitions depending on the ideological starting point. In short, the counter-cult movement (often known as the Christian counter-cult movement or CCM) is concerned with whatever is not orthodox Christianity. The anti-cult movement (ACM) is generally opposed to cults, usually on the basis of some kind of brainwashing model. Sociological work (which may be labelled negatively as ‘cult apologist’) tends to move away from the term ‘cult’ altogether. It is not always easy to classify work into one of these categories and this will not be done explicitly here. Further, I will not deal as such with the CCM as it is predominantly theological in detail (see Cowan, 2002).

Introvigne discusses the association of ‘cult’ and ‘danger’ in the notion of ‘moral panic’. In the 1970s ‘Moral panics were defined as socially constructed social problems characterized by a reaction, both in media representation and in political forums, out of proportion to actual threat’ (Introvigne, 1998). The moral panic is the result of particular narratives and representations. These narratives and stereotypes are reproduced by the media and the public as ‘new’, and unconfirmed folk statistics are repeated, even in the face of opposing scholarly work. Tabor and Gallagher confirm this specifically in relation to cults,

In public discussion the dominance of a single representation of cult activities testifies not only to the success of anticult activities but also to most people’s deep-seated fears about the loss of personal autonomy, profound unwillingness to question fundamental personal and social values, and suspicions about intensely held and acted upon religious convictions (1995: 127).

This general fear of cults and the pejoration of the term is a good starting place for detailing definitions of cults.

Hall et al. write,

The term cult has a variety of meanings. But whatever the possible dictionary definitions, in the late-twentieth-century United States,