

Definitions of terms:

Cults, Sects and Denominations

Quotations:

- "...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." Leo Pfeffer. A humorous quotation, but one that is uncomfortably close to reality.
 - "Cults are claimed to be deceitful. They are claimed to be harmful to their members. They are claimed to be undermining American values. Cults are claimed to be just about every bad thing in the book these days, and with the pervasive images of Manson and Jim Jones hanging over us, any group that is called a cult is immediately associated with those two people." J. Gordon Melton.
 - "My working definition of a cult is a group that you don't like, and I say that somewhat facetiously, but at the same time, in fact, that is my working definition of a cult. It is a group that somebody doesn't like. It is a derogatory term, and I have never seen it redeemed from the derogatory connotations that it picked up in the sociological literature in the 1930s." J. Gordon Melton.
 - "A cult is a church down the street from your church." Anon
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Meanings of the word "*cult*":

Many common religious terms lack a generally accepted, single, current definition. This leads to confusion over the meanings of certain religious terms, such as [*Christian*](#), *cult* [*hell*](#), [*heaven*](#), [*occult*](#), [*Paganism*](#), [*salvation*](#), *Witch*, [*Witchcraft*](#), [*Unitarian*](#), [*Universalist*](#), [*Voodoo*](#), etc. A reader must often look at the context in which the word is used in order to guess at the intent of the writer.

In the newsgroup *alt.usage.english*, terms like this one are often called "*skunk words*." They have diverse meanings to different people.

They have so many meanings that they often cause misunderstandings wherever they are used. Unfortunately, most people do not know this, and naturally assume that the meaning that they have been taught is the universally accepted definition of the term.

The term "*Unitarian*" is a good example:

- **Pre-1776 [CE](#):** Belief in a single God and the rejection of the Christian concept of the Trinity.
- **Post-1775:** A creedless and dogma-free religious organization. The *Unitarian Universalist Association*, (UUA) is an association of Unitarian congregations.

Utter confusion reigns when an author is using one definition of "*Unitarian*," while a reader assumes the other meaning.

Misunderstandings also happen when an author assumes that both definitions refer to the same organization or belief.

One of the most confusing and dangerous religious term is "*Cult*". The word is derived from the French word "culte" which came from Latin noun "*cultus*." The latter is related to the Latin verb "*colere*" which means "*to worship or give reverence to a deity*." Thus, in its original meaning, the term "*cult*" can be applied to any group of religious believers: Southern Baptists, [Mormons](#), [Jehovah's Witnesses](#), [Roman Catholics](#), [Hindus](#) or [Muslims](#). However, the term has since been assigned at least eight new and very different meanings. The original meaning of "cult" remains positive; more recent definitions are neutral, negative, or extremely negative:

- **Positive Meaning:**

Theological usage