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Cult Group Controversies:

Conceptualizing "Anti-Cult" and "Counter-Cult"

Introduction

Organized opposition to cults and sects is typically characterized as the "anti-cult movement." The argument advanced on the Religious Movements Homepage is that there are two distinct movements with easily discernable histories and objectives. The older is a *religious movement*, and the more recent movement to appear is essentially *secular*.

We refer to the *sectarian* movement as the **counter-cult movement** and the *secular* movement as the **anti-cult movement**.



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The two groups share a common belief that "cults" pose a threat to their respective ideologies, but they are seriously at variance in their history, backgrounds, and perception of the problem, goals, and strategies.

This brief introductory essay identifies some critical differences between the two groups. As the web site develops, additional essays analyzing these two groups will be added.

The **counter-cult movement** is the older group. It began long before the eruption of the 1970s cult controversy. They initially challenged nineteenth century sectarian movements such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Scientists, and other groups deemed heretical in nature. The counter-cultists focus on *doctrinal differences* between NRMs and established religions and, therefore, their opposition can be classified as *theological*.

Counter-cult groups draw members primarily from conservative Christian denominations. They seek to clearly delineate the differences between their own beliefs and those of the particular religious movement(s) they oppose. In doing so, they seek both to dissuade potential converts and to unify the faithful.

Counter-cult web sites are useful to the student of religious movements for at least two reasons. First, the care taken to delineate the beliefs of groups opposed by counter-cult groups has resulted in the production of an extensive descriptive literature. The information produced by counter-cultists is filtered through the prism of their own theology, but it can nevertheless be useful when information is otherwise scarce.

Second, counter-cult web sites can help students of religious movements to understand the enormous diversity of opposition to religious movements in contemporary society. These web sites exhibit the common feature of theologically grounded opposition to cults and sects, but they are anything but monolithic. No counter-cult organization speaks for the conservative Christian community. The authors of this literature present biting critiques of "cults" and their leaders, but they often save some of their harshest criticism for other sectarian Christians whom they accuse of falling prey to apostasy within the Church.

Three of the most significant counter-cult movements organizations are [Christian Research Institute](#) , [Watchman Fellowship](#) , and [Spiritual Counterfeits Project](#). The web sites of these groups are extensive, but not equally accessible. The *Watchman Fellowship* site is the largest and provides the most reliable information among the many counter-cult sites. The *Christian Research Institute* also has vast amounts of material, but much of it is not accessible from their main web site which has a distinct focus of product marketing.

The **anti-cult movement** grew out of the late 1960s cult phenomenon. Frightened parents, seeking to remove their children from the elusive cults they feared controlled their children, began an informal network of information. Their efforts quickly grew from kitchen table efforts into a professional network of organizations.

The anti-cultists believe the techniques of influence employed by "cults" are so dangerous that it is necessary to rescue those who have come under the influence of cults. And, further, they see themselves as providing an important public service in assisting persons who have been "victimized" by "cults," and educating the general public about the ever present threat of "cults" in our midst.

Anti-cultists accept uncritically theories on the use and power of brainwashing to control young converts to NRMs and countered the supposed mind-controlling effects of cult leaders with "**deprogramming.**" "[Brainwashing](#)" was the term coined by British journalist Edward Hunter to describe the process of alleged "mind control" used by Chinese Communist agents during the Korean War. Hunter asserted that the Chinese were able to develop powerful methods of "thought reform" which they used to alter beliefs, thought processes, and consciousness.

A small number of mental health professionals including Margaret Thaler Singer have used the brainwashing theory to support the anti-cult movement. Singer's Theory of Systematic Manipulation of Social and Psychological Influence (SMSPI) claims that cults have developed sophisticated means of changing behavior such as subterfuge (secret or deceptive techniques of influence) and that converts are therefore incapable of making rational decisions for their own well-being. This view of "mind control" led courts to grant conservatorship of adult children in cults to their parents and served as an effective defense against charges of kidnapping on behalf of deprogrammers. However, neither Singer nor any scholars have ever offered empirical evidence to support the SMSPI theory.

The anti-cult movement entered a new phase in its strategy against NRMs during the late 1970s. It attempted to prosecute NRMs for the employment of mind control techniques. Early cases were highly successful. They gained public sympathy

because of concern over Jonestown and other highly publicized cult disasters. The high cost of litigation resulted in bankrupting some of the smaller, less established NRMs.

Slowly, judicial sympathy began to shift and anti-cult movements began to realize that litigation could be a double-edged sword. The brainwashing defense, and attempts like New York's Leshner Bill to expand the limits of conservatorship (to help parents remove adult children from cults), failed to gain acceptance.

Legally, the anti-cult groups were placed on the defensive. Recently, decisions against anti-cult groups and independent deprogrammers have diminished the influence of the anti-cult movement. One of the most significant decisions involved deprogrammer [Rick Ross](#) and the *Cult Awareness Network*. The two were sued after Ross attempted to forcibly deprogram an adult male who was a member of the United Pentecostal Church International. Rick Ross and the Cult Awareness Network (CAN) were found guilty of conspiring to violate the victim's constitutional right to religious freedom. The damages awarded to the victim forced CAN into bankruptcy. The CAN name, logo and other assets were purchased by a member of the [Church of Scientology](#). CAN has been reopened under the guidance of Scientology. The new [mission statement](#) purports to, "promote religious tolerance, good will and understanding." Thus far, the content of the page focuses heavily on attacking the old CAN and its allies. This is, at best, confusing to one who is not familiar with the history of the conflict, and almost certainly counter-productive to the stated aims of the new CAN.

The bankruptcy of CAN leaves the [American Family Foundation](#) as the major anti-cult organization in the United States. The President of AFF is Herbert Rosedale, a New York attorney, and the organization maintains an executive office in Florida. The organization reports that requests for their services doubled in the two years following the closing of CAN. AFF offers telephone consultants, makes referrals, and publishes *Cultic Studies Journal*. [AFF](#) also maintains a significant web site.

There are many anti-cult sites on the Internet. [Trancenet](#) , and [F.A.C.T.Net International](#) are examples of pretty extensive efforts. [Rick Ross](#), an entrepreneur, has developed a web site that features derogatory information about many groups. [Steve Hassan](#) , a Unification Church apostate and entrepreneur, has two web sites, one of which proclaims to be a resource center for freedom of the mind.

To summarize, the *counter-cult movement* is concerned with *correct doctrine*. They possess theological truth that is beyond the resources of objective scholarship to judge. In contrast, the *anti-cult movement* proclaims an array of *secular truths that are open to empirical investigation*. They make claims about "brainwashing," "mind control," "coercive persuasion," "thought reform" and the like. They allege that these are extremely dangerous techniques of manipulation that are widely practiced by "cults."

The truth claims of the anti-cultists notwithstanding, there is a dearth of empirical evidence to support their position. There is, in fact, substantial evidence to challenge their claims. There has been little communication between the community of social scientists who study religious movements and the individuals in the anti-cult movement who claim to be experts. Social scientists who study cults and sects do not deny that the leadership of religious movements use techniques of influence, but they generally do not see these techniques as different from techniques of influence that are rather widely distributed in all human societies.

For a social science perspective on these issues, you are invited to explore the lectures of Jeffrey K. Hadden, Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia, creator of this web site on Religious Movements. Three lectures are particularly relevant: [The Anti-Cult Movement](#), [Joining Religious Movements: Social Science Perspectives](#), and [Brainwashing](#).

These lectures were prepared for my students in outline form and were placed on the web site for their convenience. As we became aware of the fact that others were accessing the lectures, we have attempted to add additional materials. For example, each lecture is followed by a short list of recommended readings. Other New Religious Movements lectures may be accessed through the [Lecture Index](#).

Also available in this site section:

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Last modified: 11/26/00

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