“So a religion is just a cult whose founder has died, been around for a hundred years or more, and has gathered enough followers to call it a religion?” my class once concluded when we were attempting to figure out how to determine what made something “merely” a cult and not a religion. In many ways this overly-simplified observation is correct, but it also disregards an important element that religions have obtained that cults invariably lack: a robust, developed belief system that is appealing enough to survive across multiple generations. It is extremely important to note that I do not intend anything negative or disrespectful out of my description or designation of something as a “cult” (or a “religion”) here: it is not meant to denigrate any movements that I might describe as being a cult, cult-like, or as having been a cult in the past. Mostly, I want to understand what allows something to call itself that coveted title of “religion” and be recognized as something that often enjoys special social and legal consideration.

My argument in this chapter is that the three terms that I will be clarifying (cults, extremism, and fundamentalism) are merely descriptions to be used in understanding religious beliefs and practices, and, by themselves, contain no inherent valuation of their belief sets. In other words, just because something is a cult, a view is extreme, or someone is referred to as a fundamentalist, there is nothing we can immediately say about them being good, bad, right, wrong, appropriate, or inappropriate. All of these terms can also aid in understanding what constitutes a religion, as all of them are defined in relation to established religions. The boundaries between these terms and a “regular” religion are fuzzy, as many mainstream religions and their practitioners will have a bit of these elements present within their own belief systems. There is, undeniably, a negative connotation with all of these terms, however. We should not let this get in the way of a better understanding of religions, their beliefs, and their believers.
Generally, the only element that seems consistent in the numerous definitions and uses of cults is that they have beliefs that are significantly different than established religions, either by containing entirely new beliefs or having some significant variation in foundational beliefs from its “parent” religion. Oftentimes, a Christian-based group that maintains some of their religious leaders have made (or can make) claims that override the teachings contained in the Bible are deemed cults. Mormonism would be a cult according to this definition, and so would the Living Stream Ministry, a group that has actually sued others for defamation for labeling them a cult. Under this view that more recent individuals hold authority over older prophets, the Ahmadiyya would be a Muslim cult. There are also cults that contain views radically different than any other major religion out there, some of which have become infamous by their acts of violence or suicide, such as Heaven’s Gate (mass suicide in the belief they would be transported to a spaceship trailing the Hale-Bopp comet), Jonestown (mass suicide caused by the narcissistic leader’s fear of losing his cult due to his many illegal dealings), and Aum Shinrikyo (poison gas attack on Japanese subway).

For there to be cults in the first place, there has to be a standard that we can compare to. Under some views, Mormonism is a cult. To others, it is a religion. To others still, it was used to be a cult, but is now established enough to be a religion. However they work out, cults have some traits that make them different than what is normal or expected. One hallmark of a cult seems to be the direct worship or reverence of some being special and unique to them that appears to be quite wrong to outsiders. There are often special ceremonies or beliefs that give rise to this worship. I have referred to what is called “First Temple Judaism” (the period from 1000-567 BCE when Judaism was based in Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem) as “the cult of Yahweh at the temple in Jerusalem” as a way of helping myself understand and make sense of the practices of Jews at this stage in its history. I found it eye-opening when I learned about the beliefs and rituals of early Judaism, something that only occurred once I was old enough to study the history of the religion on my own. The religion practiced in Solomon’s Temple (the first permanent location of Jewish worship that housed the Ark of the Covenant and replaced the mobile Tabernacle as the dwelling place of God) was extremely ritualistic and involved a healthy dose of animal sacrifice. The Breastplate of Aaron (a shirt of gemstones that could divine answers from God), shrines to Asherah (the fertility Goddess that was revered alongside Yahweh, the God of the Jews), and the Kohanim (a class of priests that were the only ones allowed to carry out certain rituals) would be utterly foreign to modern worshippers. God was physical and resided in the temple, but no one could see him without dying, and the worship of this God was close and real. It was not an abstract notion; you worshipped something on the other side of a wall, spoke to him, and made offerings. All of this sounds cult-like and exhibits many of the traits we would think make something a cult. Judaism was one of many recognized religions at the time, so I don’t refer to it as a cult due to being unaccepted; I call it a cult because it exhibited many cult-like traits and is abnormal when compared to modern Judaism. While cults are not clearly defined groups, we still have an understanding of what makes something a cult that we can use as a helpful tool in analyzing what we call “religions”.

Extremism is a rather simple concept: it’s taking any aspects of a religion and focusing on them to an extent that can be considered extreme. Extremists are not to be confused with zealots that blindly and obediently follow religious dictates to a fanatical extent without compromise. Zealot often has a negative connotation, as its origins and historical uses usually capture religiously motivated violence. The difference between an extremist and a zealot is hard to capture since all zealots would appear to be extremists (though not all extremists are zealots), but it’s beside the point. Extremists can be outsiders or a branch within an established religion. The Amish can be considered extremists, as their reading of the Bible focuses on elements that they believe means they should eschew all technology that is too advanced (which appears to be after the 17th century, and I’m not entirely sure why axes and wheels are fine, but not electricity). Within the Catholic Church itself there are subsects that have particularly strong views on particular elements and use their...
importance as a central aspect of their beliefs and practices, as could be the case with Eucharistic adoration and meditation. A radical, as far as I understand it, would be someone that wants to see changes based on their extremist views. Someone can be an extremist and not expect others to follow them, however.

Fundamentalism is a looser and more complicated concept than extremism and is thus even more difficult to understand. Generally speaking, fundamentalism denotes a concerted effort to go back to the "fundamentals" of a religion, but which fundamentals and how they are to be interpreted, is debatable. A fundamentalist can also be an extremist, but need not be. The Amish, again, could be considered fundamentalists. To return to Judaism, there are Orthodox groups preparing for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. When the second temple was destroyed, the Jewish religion changed to adapt to a home without a central place of worship (and thereby lost its last remaining cult-like elements of worship, like animal sacrifice and divination), but there was always the underlying pretext that the required rituals would return if the temple were rebuilt. Thus, were the temple to be rebuilt, a return to its fundamental nature as a “ritualistic cult of Yahweh at the Temple in Jerusalem” would be required. There are any number of ways people can return to a religion’s roots, and that’s all that fundamentalism implies; but how one returns, and which viewpoints one returns to, is not set in stone (unlike the Ten Commandments).

Why does any of this matter? In some sense, it doesn’t, but the reason it doesn’t is important: we ought to concern ourselves with the specifics of religions and their beliefs, as opposed to the labels we give them or their relationship with those groups that might be more mainstream. In academics, the most respected publications utilize some sort of blind review format, where people reviewing the quality of an article (primarily its academic rigor and unique contribution to the field) do not know who authored it or why. The work itself should be able to stand on its own and be critiqued on its own, outside of any context and apart from the reputation of the author. Religions and religious views that are open to philosophical critique (which would be anything and everything – philosophers have a knack for being able to make anything their problem) ought to be considered and discussed on their own and in their own right. Cults, religions, fundamentalism, and extremism are all words we can use to help our understanding, but that’s all they are: descriptions. Philosophy, in all of its branches, is aimed at clarity first and foremost, since if we are not clear, we are unable to properly assess the worth of any claims. So, if something could qualify as a religious exemption or religious holiday, it should be assessed directly to see if it fits the sort of views we have on such things, regardless of who it comes from or which tradition it is a part of.

There is one major objection to everything I’m saying and arguing for: a big part of a religion is its history. The reason certain religions and holidays get special treatment is because they have played a long, important role in our societies and histories, and we have thus deemed them worthy of a special type of respect. Their evolution and development is an integral part of this staying power, and this should be respected. I can see the value in this, but then it would also seem to arbitrarily be preferencing those viewpoints that are currently held. What happens when religions continue to evolve? At which point in time is a religion the “correct” version of itself? All views are non-standard at one point or another. This historical justification then dismisses non-standard beliefs as unworthy of respect. In a pluralistic society, this is a big claim to make. Regardless, we ought to be careful in the terms we use when discussing religion and how we value the related concepts.

For Review and Discussion

1. Make a list of groups and viewpoints you would consider to be religions. What is similar about these? What is
different?

2. Make a list of groups and viewpoints you would consider to be cults. What is similar about these? What is different?

3. Can you think of any group that is not considered a religion or cult but that you think should be? What is it about this group that makes it cult-like? Would calling a cult change how people view it?