

## **What distinguishes a small religion from a large cult?**

Keywords: cults, religions, Voodoo, Christian Science, moral hysteria, labeling, belief, behavior, power dynamics.

### **Introduction**

One group worships a supreme spiritual entity and believes in the reformatory power of possession. The second believes God's all-powerful love can heal all, and that sin and sickness are illusions. Which one is the cult? These are Voodoo and Christian Science—although both Voodoo and Christian Science have been labeled “cults” at some point, their level of “cultishness” exists on a spectrum, where the more problematic a group is, the easier it is to call it a “cult.” From a sociological standpoint, the negative connotations embedded in the word “cult” have created a populist “us” versus “them” narrative, dichotomizing religions and cults and drawing a powerful distinction between what is—and isn't—socially acceptable. So what, exactly, differentiates a religion from a cult? In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the fractional Voodoo religion was framed as a “black magic cult” to mainstream America, characterizing its relationship to spirits and mysticism as dangerously “Other.” In contrast, the rise of Christian Science in the late 1800s was ideologically supported by the Christian Church, although its “spiritual faith healing” and methods of eschewing modern medicine led to the deaths of children associated with the faith. While both groups practice varying degrees of mysticism, public perceptions vary, ranging from powerful resistance to ideological acceptance. Using Voodoo and Christian Science—both of which have been labeled as “cults” *and* “religions”—as case studies, I argue that the distinction between “cults” and “religions” is rooted in moral hysteria. The difference between large cults and small religions comes from the degree of their deviant behaviors—if a mystical group's actions challenge a leading ideology, it becomes a “cult.”

### **Defining Religions and Cults**

In this essay, I address the incongruities in the terms “cult” and “religion.” Campbell describes a “cult” as a group that is not permanent or exclusive and evokes overall negative biases (377). As Voodoo's worship of spirits and African deities vastly contrasted with the 18th-century Western world, hysteria ensued, resulting in its mischaracterization as a cult that believes in human and animal sacrifices, cannibalism, and Satanism. Despite the longevity of Voodoo, the label “cult” remains to many. Conversely, as a largely accepted religion, Christian Science's adherence to the word of the Bible as its singular “truth” has decreased the stigmas attached to its spiritual faith healing practices, and although its numbers are declining, its status as a “religion” is intact. Schilbrack uses the term “religion” to describe “certain kinds of social patterns that exist in the world” (292). While both religions and cults engage larger, collective groups for social or ideological purposes, the *behaviors* of these groups can drastically differ. Although both Voodoo and Christian Science have doctrines that require absolute faith, the practices that they promote and the levels of harm that follow are extremely different. Labeling a group as a “cult” is less of a concrete definition and more of an attempt to limit the spread of its harmful behaviors.

### **Voodoo: Religion or “Black Magic” Cult?**

In the 1750s, Voodoo emerged, coexisting with a resistance movement against the French Catholic colonizers of Haiti. The question became: was it a small religion or a large cult? As early as 1797, Voodoo was represented by Europe and America as “black magic” or “African witchcraft” that adhered to the practice of casting spells on enemies or individuals who resisted the practice (Bartowski). Where Christianity emphasizes the monotheistic worship of God (Witvliet), as an ideology rooted in the veneration of spirits, Voodoo threatened Christian teachings that limited the use of ceremonies while avoiding all conjurations, curses, and nature worship—values that Voodoo is devoted to. In effect, rather than worshipping the singular Christian god, Haitian Voodoo was the conglomeration of Bantu, Sudanese, Achanti, Ewe, Haoussa, Peuhls, Ouoloffs, Fons, and Yoruba religious traditions with Dahomean influences (Pierre). As Dahomean beliefs adhere to several gods, spirits, and magical powers, forming decentralized power dynamics relative to Christianity’s focus on Jesus Christ, Voodoo was radically “Otherized.” Yet just as the Christian Church engages with the Holy Spirit, Haitian Voodoo evokes the *Iowa*, or spirits who guide and protect individuals (Pierre). As the Catholic Funeral Mass includes the offerings of bread and wine for Eucharist prayer, Haitian Voodoo utilizes the funeral ceremony, Boulezin, to rid the human body of its soul (Pierre). Although the doctrines and structure of beliefs underpinning Haitian Voodoo differ from Christianity, they overlap in the depth of their ideologies and ritualistic properties. Yet in the 1700s, Voodoo was dangerous to Christianity because of its outward, “shadowy” superstitions and practices (McGee 239). Although in principle, a religion, its label as a “cult” was largely political, both a means of inciting moral hysteria and stigmatizing its spread.

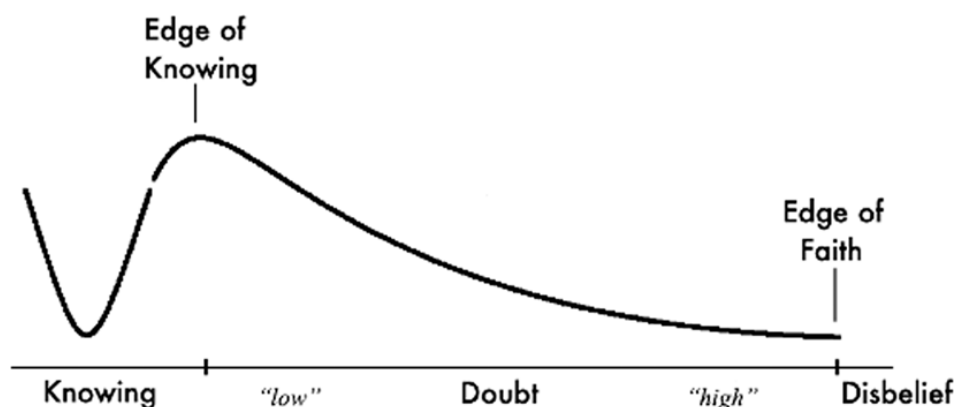
### **Christian Science: Church or Cult?**

Since its founding in 1879, Christian Science has emerged as a sect of Christianity that is, like Voodoo, steeped in controversy. As Christian Science denies that death and sickness exist, instead extolling the power of the “mind, spirit, God, and good,” it aims to save mankind from all that contradicts the perfection of God (Wardwell 175-176). While cults that come from Christianity normally assign more power to their founder than the Bible (Cleaver), Christian Science practices faith healing that denies the reality of the sickness, reducing it without glorifying its founder. Christian Science also modified Christian values to align with their beliefs, adhering to the fundamental worship of Jesus Christ as the savior. As a result, the Christian Church has backed Christian Science. In 1991, the legal case, *People v. Rippenburger*, involved charging a Christian Science couple with felony, endangerment, and involuntary manslaughter for denying their eight-month-old child, Mark Rippenburger, medical care—the Christian Church intervened to prevent an appeal (Richardson and Dewitt). In the years that followed, it became extremely difficult to pass laws against Christian Science healing practices (Richardson and Dewitt). Although Christian Science has crossed legal boundaries, it does not cross the religious boundaries created by the Christian Church; as a result, rather than being labeled a large “cult,” according to the Christian Church, Christian Science falls under the category of a small religious movement. While Christian Science may still be a “cult” to those who view it as dangerous, unlike Voodoo, it lacked the political and theological disruptions customary to cults. The categorization of a “cult” versus “religion,” then, seems inextricably tied to mainstream religious ideologies and creating, or upholding, their norms without promoting theologically deviant or often, biblically confrontational behaviors.

## Brainwashing and Faith

If a cult is defined by its confrontational *behaviors* rather than its *beliefs*, some may argue that a cult is a cult if it involves brainwashing. Rooted in thought-reforming techniques and initially developed by the Maoist government, brainwashing has since evoked a mass moral panic. If a group's belief system is unfounded, many argue that the only plausible way individuals can endorse it is through brainwashing (Richardson). If an individual joins a cult, many believe it is because they are brainwashed. Civil rights organizations and religious scholars, however, argue that this "brainwashing defense" is an invalid hypothesis that discredits the autonomy of competent adults (Heller). If brainwashing is neither "all-powerful" nor "irresistible," some degree of volition must exist that draws individuals to cults: I call it "voluntary self-surrender." Similarly, when trying to retain a religious community, coercive methods to keep members may appear controlling, threatening, and require the same level of "voluntary self-surrender" as a cult. If a group is, like Christian Science, demanding the rejection of modern medicine in favor of its purist faith, the degree of harmful behaviors its followers engage in is ultimately what defines it as a cult to me. Yet if the group, like Christian Science, is backed by the Christian Church, its behaviors appear far less radical to others. Here, the quasi-voluntary *behaviors* not the *beliefs* of the religion or cult seem a better comparative measure. The answer may not be in who is brainwashing, but in which behaviors pose a greater threat to society.

Cult hysterics argue that the more radical a group's beliefs are, the closer they are to "cult" status. Yet the beliefs of large cults and small religions often appear closely intertwined. According to Beckford, some new religious movements advocate a future of apocalyptic destructiveness, some encourage an extreme focus on self-actualization, and others position their followers as on the precipice of global or spiritual change. At some point, many religious movements portray characteristics synonymous with popular narratives of cults. And to an individual who has never encountered religion before, how different is belief in an alien god from the Christian God? According to Caglar, belief can contain a spectrum of intensity, from "knowing" to "doubting" to "disbelief," as seen in Figure 1:



Source: "Why Does Intellectuality Weaken Faith and Sometimes Foster it?" *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 2020.

Even a member of an established religion can undergo a period where their faith transitions from a feeling of "knowing" that the beliefs of their religion are true to doubting them completely. A member in a cult can experience a similar trajectory of faith, at times disbelieving the reality of their cult's doctrines. If the faith of the members of cults and religions is subjective, it becomes difficult to tell which doctrines are more objectively more

“believable.” As it is challenging to describe the beliefs of a group without cultural or religious biases, as seen in representations of Voodoo and Christian Science, our lasting impressions of cults and religions are perhaps better served by the impact of their behaviors on our collective memory.

### **Conclusion**

As Cleaver finds, “American cult scholars are more comfortable identifying the deviant behavior of cults than deviant beliefs” (165). Perhaps this is because without “cultish” behaviors, we cannot have cults. When viewing the early status of Voodoo as a “cult” or the establishment of Christian Science within the Christian Church, cults and religious tensions appear more as power dynamics than ideological inquiries. If a dominating religion, such as Christianity, wields the power to determine religion from a cult, the behaviors of the group become its evidence. When viewing Voodoo and Christian Science, the acceptability of their practices by Christian religious norms has more lasting power than the impact of their beliefs on mainstream society. Although Christianity permits the existence of Christian Science as a small religion, its practices remain morally ambiguous. Yet if America remembers Voodoo, it conjures up images of dolls full of pins and priestesses possessed by conjured spirits. When America speaks of Christian Science, it is often through a veiled and vague perspective of an extremist Christian sect. Neither perspective captures the totality of Voodoo as a religion that extols spiritual healing or Christian Science as a cultish ideology that has led to the deaths of thousands *because* of its nonconformist healing practices. If the degree of deviant behavior and the potential threat to a dominant religion or organization becomes the deciding factor in distinguishing a cult from a religion, do we truly have an accurate usage of the word “cult?” As society changes, it may be worth wondering: will the label of a “cult” remain forever tied to the defiance and deviance of social norms?

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