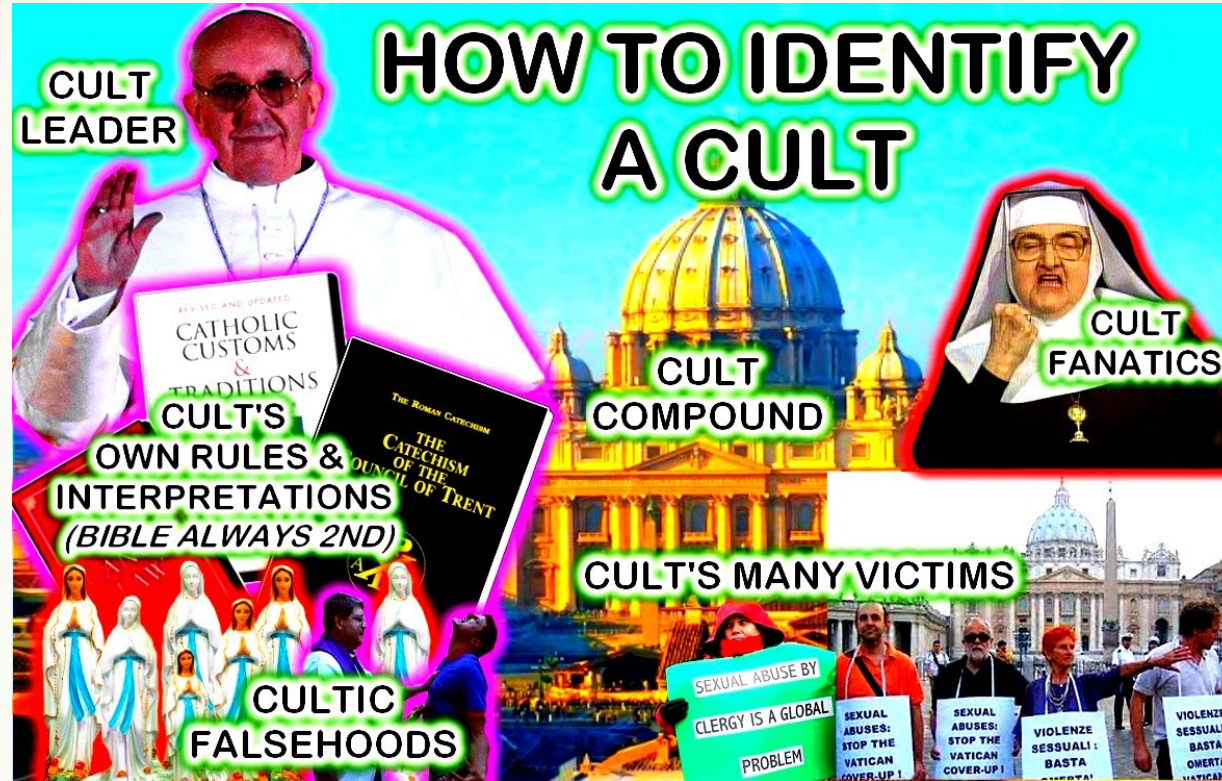


Heresies, Cults, New Religious Movements Three Labels for One and the Same Reality?

Massimo Introvigne (CESNUR, Torino, Italy)
University of Haifa, 8 May 2017

Insult or Scholarly Category?



- Some years ago, in Mexico City, I visited an Evangelical bookstore and asked how many “cultists” there were in the city. The answer was “six million,” counting all local Catholics as “cultists.” In front, a Catholic bookstore was selling books against “Protestant cults.” As Swiss historian Jean-François Mayer once stated, “the cult is the other”

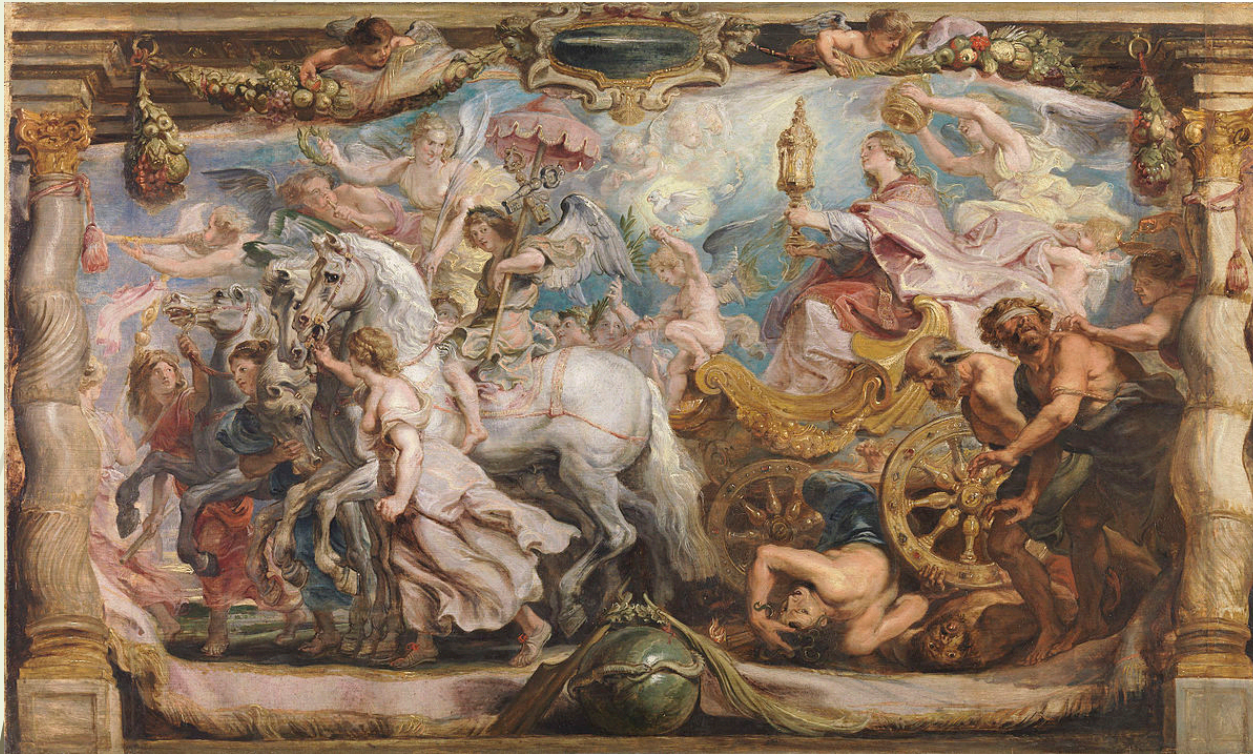
Lost in Translation?

- ▶ Before examining different uses of the word “cult,” an important comment about translations is needed. In German and in the Latin languages, the words functionally equivalent to “cult” are “sekte,” “secte,” “setta,” and similar. These words serve the same purpose, of designating an objectionable group, as the English “cult.” They should be translated as “cult,” **not** as “sect,” which in English has a different and less judgmental meaning



Above: A “cult awareness” Canadian organization has the right translation...

Once They Called Them “Heresies”



- ▶ In pre-Medieval and Medieval societies, “cult” was a simple synonym of the more frequently used word “heresy.” Heretics might be occasionally accused of deviant *behavior*, but the crucial deviation was denying, or offering an alternative interpretation of, one or another point of the mainline religious *doctrine*

Above: Pieter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), *Triumph of the Catholic Church over the Heresy*

Burn the Heretic!

- States acted as the “secular arm” of the dominant religion to eradicate “heresies,” or heretic “cults.” The greatest Christian theologian of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), insisted that, just as the States punish with the death penalty those who kill the bodies with poison, they should also put to death those who poison the soul with heretic *doctrines*. And this irrespectively of any particular *behavior*



Secular States and “Cults”



- ▶ With the French Revolution and the advent of the secular state, “heresies” should no longer have been punished. In fact, this was not the case, and the world “cult” still came out handy to label and punish “deviant” religious or esoteric groups

Left: Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863),
Liberty Leading the People



Freemasonry as a “Cult”

- Now separated from “heresy” and secularized, the word “cult” was used to designate religious or esoteric group who were suspected of *conspiring against the State*. Several secular states passed laws against Freemasonry and called it a “cult,” not because the Catholic Church did not like it but because they suspected that Freemasons were involved in politics and working against the governments

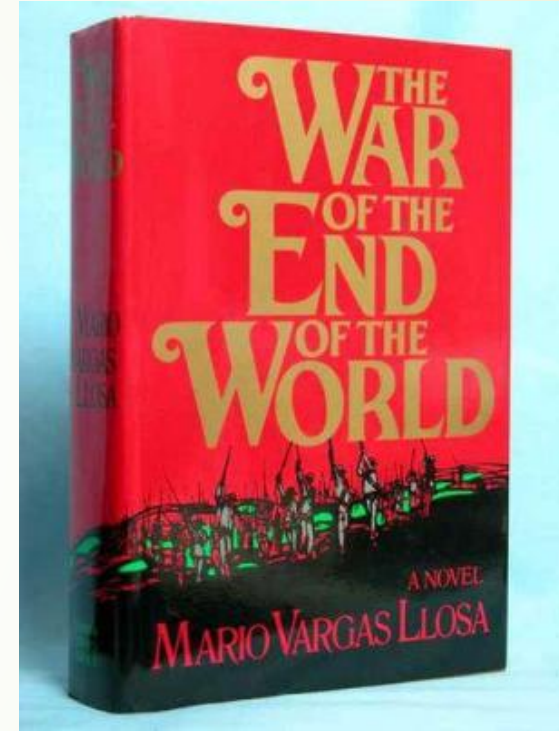


DAVIDE LAZZERETTI

Killing “Cultists”

- ▶ But at least secular modern states do not kill leaders and followers of unpopular religions, right? Wrong, unfortunately. For example, in 1878 the Italian military police raided the communal settlement of the Giurisdavidic Religion on Mount Amiata, Tuscany, killing its founder Davide Lazzeretti (1834-1878) and three of his followers, and leaving another 150 wounded

The Tragedy of Canudos



- In 1896-1897, the government of Brazil launched a military campaign against the communal settlement of rural prophet Antonio Conselheiro (1830-1897) in Canudos, Bahia, killing him (left) and some twenty thousand followers. The tragedy is the subject matter of Mario Vargas Llosa's 1984 novel *The War of the End of the World*

A New Meaning of “Cult”



Above: In Canudos, most male adult “cultists” were killed, while women and children were arrested and deported to labor camps

- Both the Mount Amiata and the Canudos movements did not recognize the authorities of the local Catholic bishops and were declared “heretic” by the Catholic Church. But both in Brazil and Italy the governments at that time were anti-clerical and even put some Catholic bishops in jail. They did not care about heresy, but violently eradicated these “cults” regarding them as *subversive*, in the sense that they did not recognize the authority of *the governments* and independently controlled portions of territory

Lombroso on “Cults”

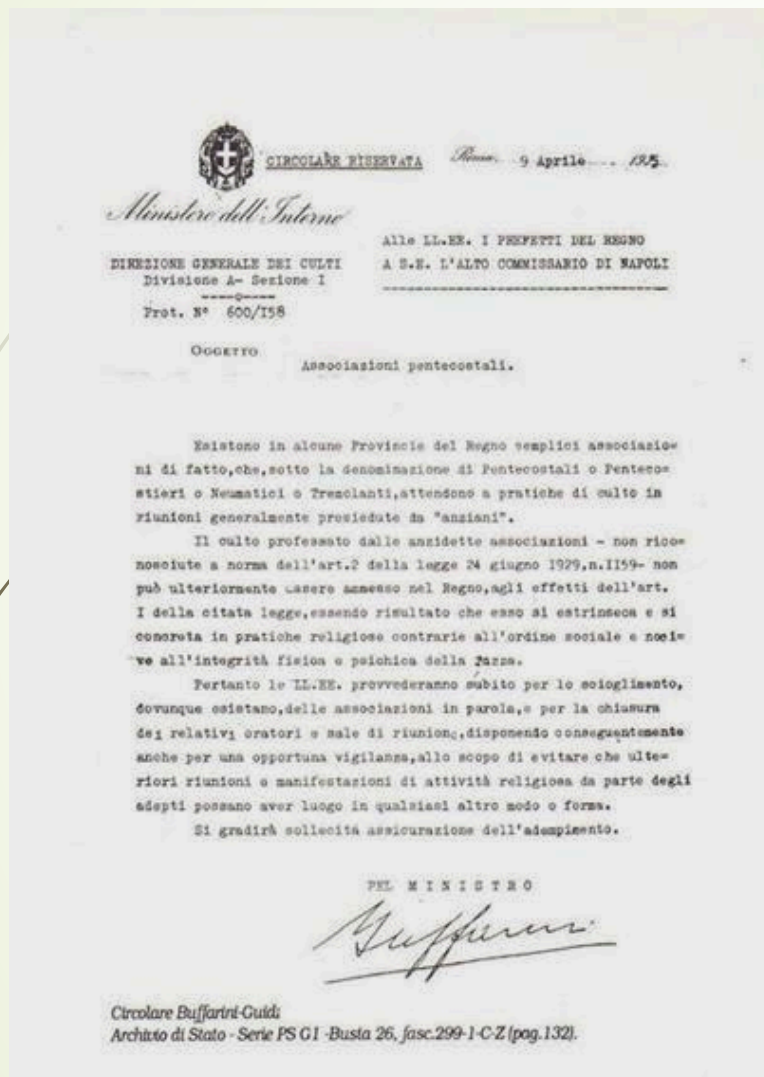


- ▶ A new *criminological* definition of “cult” was born, based not on *creeds* but on *deeds*. Its definition was offered by the father himself of criminology, Italian physician Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909, left) – ironically himself an advocate of Spiritualism, which in some countries was regarded as a “cult” –, who obtained and dissected Lazzeretti’s body looking for “anomalies.” Cults, he stated, are religious groups conspiring against the public order and following a mentally disturbed leader. This definition completely ignored the cult’s *doctrines*

Totalitarian Criminology

- ▶ Lombroso-style criminological definitions of “cults” evolved one step further with the German Nazi and Italian Fascist persecutions of religious minorities. While for Lombroso “cults” were *conspiring against governments*, Nazism and Fascism killed a good number of Jehovah’s Witnesses (right) and Pentecostals who had no political interests at all. However, in order to be labeled as a “cult,” it was now enough *not to support* the government openly and exhibiting a lifestyle different from the regime’s normative model





Fascism vs the Pentecostals

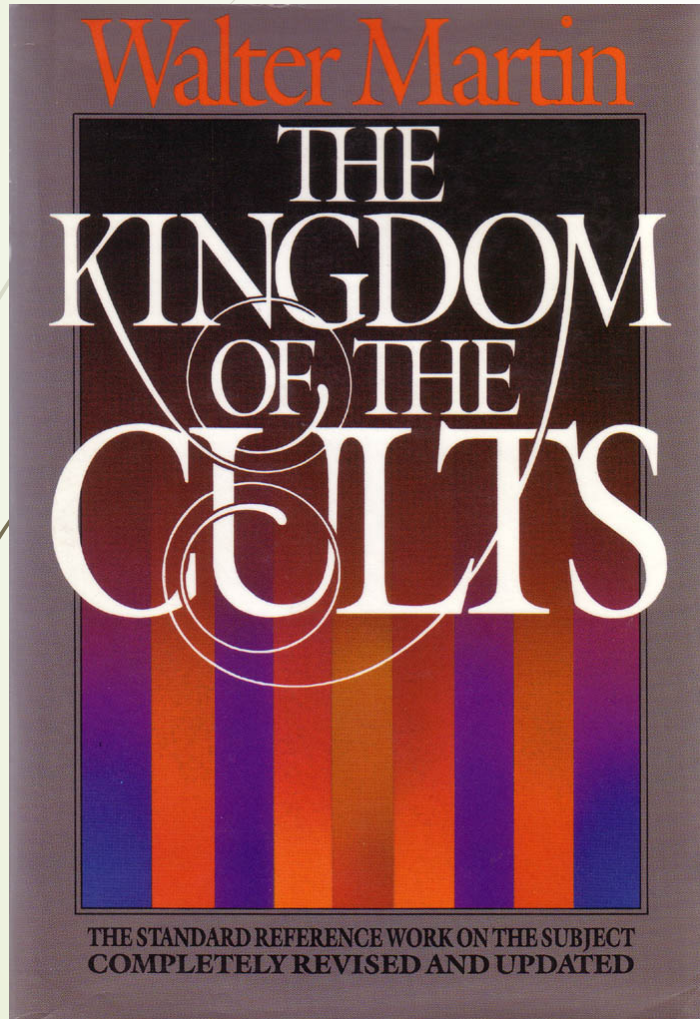
- In the infamous Fascist administrative order of 1935, the Pentecostals "cult" was even accused of "compromising the psychical and physical racial integrity of the Italians" by speaking in tongues and exciting their nervous systems

Competing Definitions of “Cult”

- ▶ The fall of the Nazi and Fascist regime did not mean that criminology abandoned its own use of the word “cult,” which dated back to Lombroso and continued to indicate a religious group that *commits serious crimes*, by now not necessarily including conspiring to overthrow the government
- ▶ However, in the meantime, theologians and sociologists had started using “cults” with meanings different from criminologists



Theologians: “Cult” as Heresy



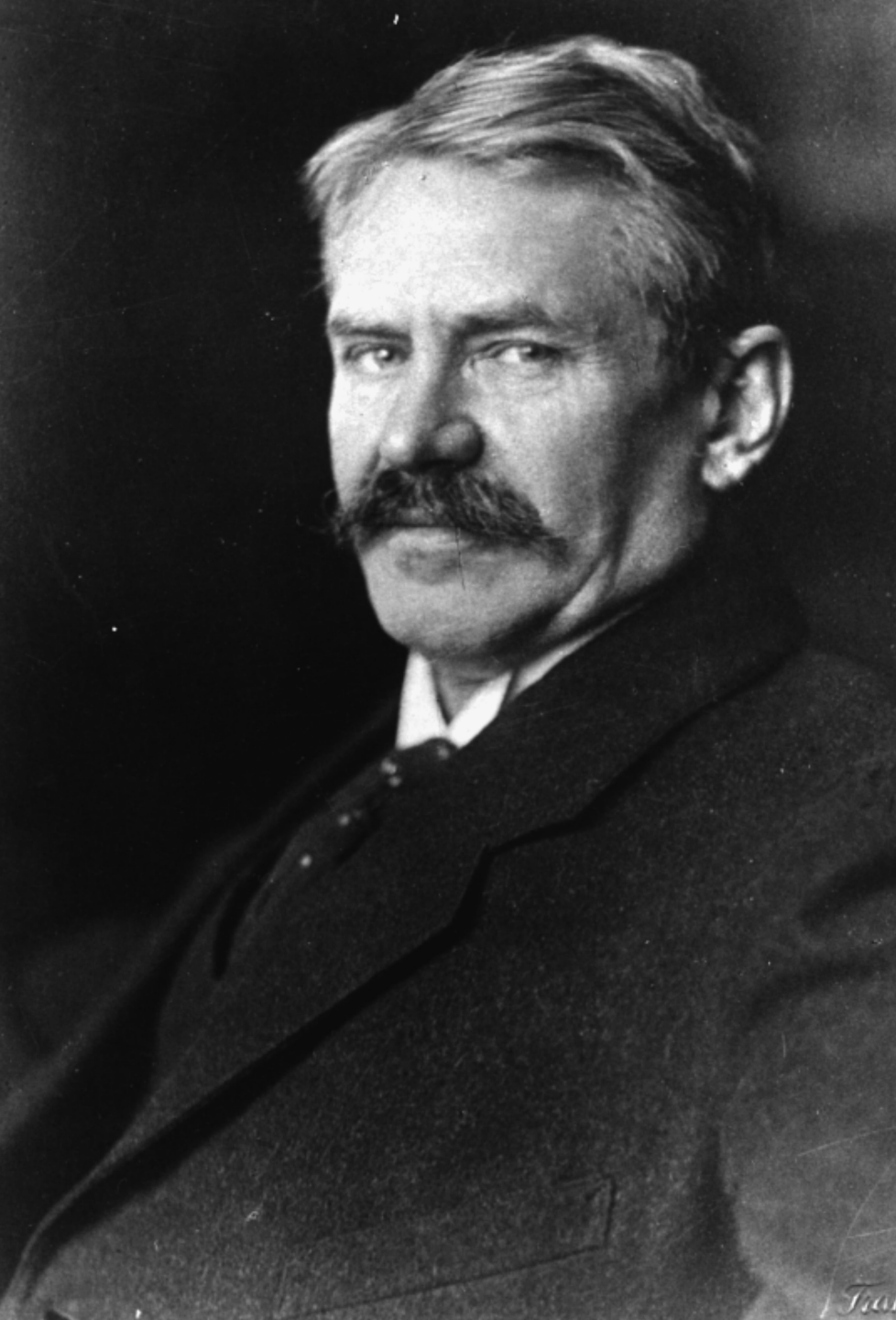
- ▶ Christian theologians started realizing that the word “heresy” evoked the Inquisition and the burning at stake of dissidents. Some of them preferred to use the old synonymous of “heresy,” “cult,” which in the meantime had entered common language. However, they used the word with a meaning different from criminologists. For them, *creeds* were more important than *deeds* and a group who denied the Trinity or the divinity of Jesus Christ was a “cult” even if its members did not breach any secular law

Left: In 1965, Walter Martin (1928-1989) published one of the first Christian books against “cults”

Sociologists: “Cult” as a “New” Religion

- ▶ Early authoritative sociologists of religion such as Max Weber (1864-1920, right) and Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) were contemporaries of Lombroso, yet they largely ignored his work when they introduced a sociological notion of “cult” (*sekte*) as a religious group where the majority of members had joined the religion as adults rather than being born there





The Christian “Cult”

- ▶ Troeltsch (left) was a pious Protestant Christian, yet for him the typical “cult” was the primitive Christian Church gathered around Jesus and the Apostles. This was clear evidence that the early sociological notion of “cult” *did not imply any negative judgment* and that, according to this terminology, “cults” that did not disappear were destined to become full-blown “churches” or religions in a few decades

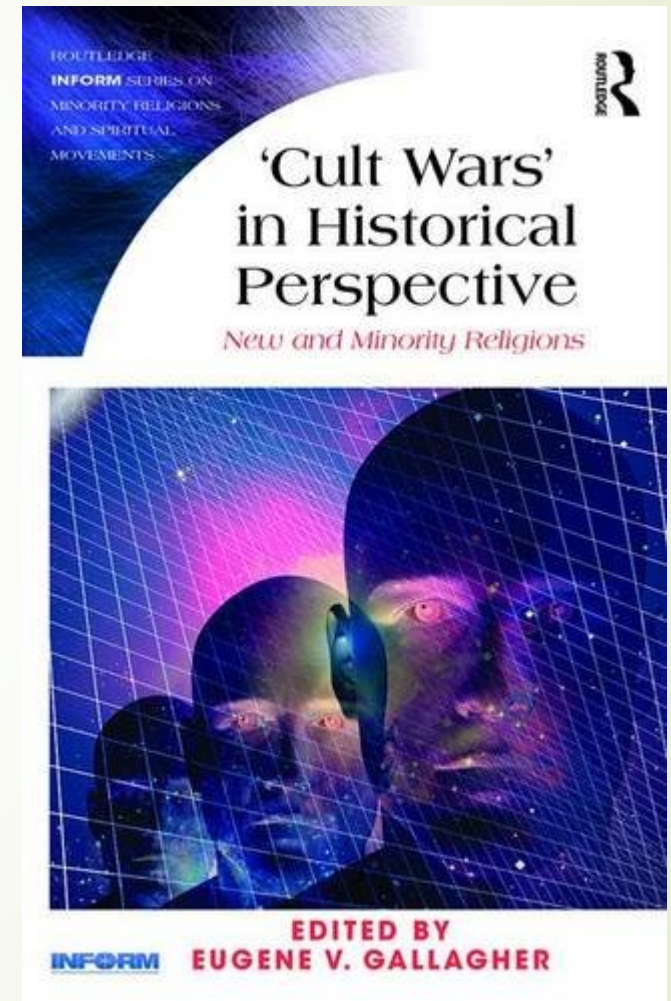
Some Confusion

- ▶ Thus, by World War II, the word “cult” was used in three different meanings by criminologists, theologians, and sociologists, creating some confusion as evidenced by the cases of the Oneness Pentecostals (some 24 millions today), a Christian group denying the traditional doctrine of Trinity

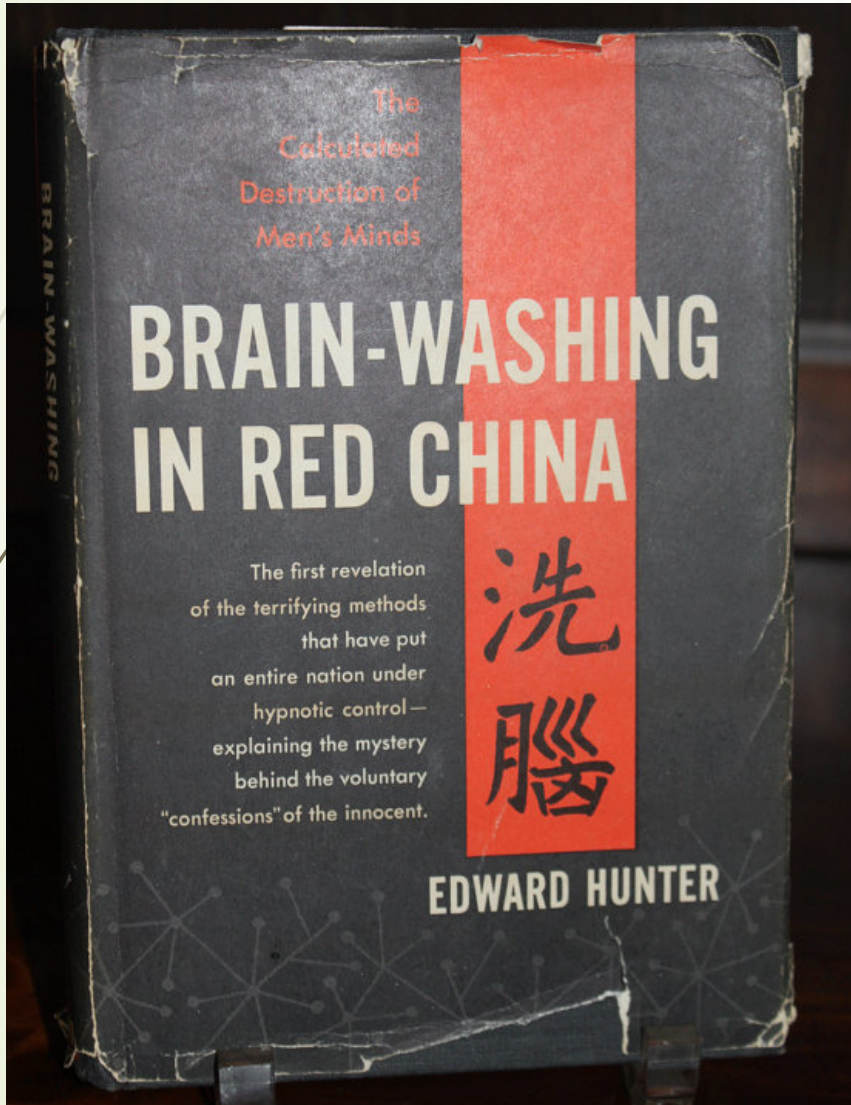
Different communities of scientists	“Cult” is a religious group that...	Are Oneness Pentecostals part of a “cult”?
Criminologists	commit crimes	No
Theologians	denies doctrines shared by mainline Christian churches	Yes
Sociologists	includes a majority of first generation members	Depend in which countries and historical periods

Enter the “Cult Wars”

- ▶ Among the most studied topics in the social scientific study of religious movements are the so called “cult wars” of the 1970s and 1980s, when a societal reaction developed against the success in the West of new religious movements, either imported from Asia or domestic. Parents and the media did not understand why youths might be willing to sacrifice their careers in order to spend their lives in an exotic religious organization



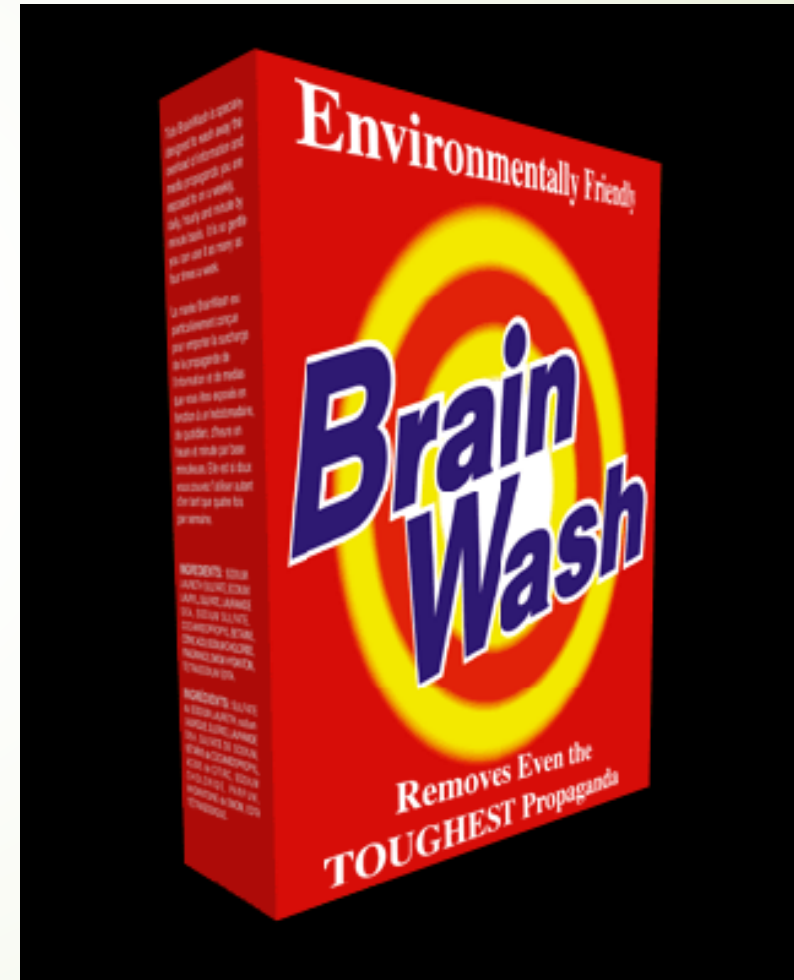
“Cults” and “Brainwashing”



- ▶ A handful of psychologists imported from Cold War American propaganda against Communist Russia and China (left) the notion of “brainwashing”, arguing that these youths did not join the groups voluntarily but were manipulated through mysterious mind control techniques. “Cults” were defined as groups using “brainwashing,” yet another evolution of the criminological definition – but one making reference, rather than to *actual* crimes such as violence or rape, to a *hypothetic* crime (brainwashing) whose very existence was disputed

But Does Brainwashing Exist?

- Sociologists and other scholars reacted against the “brainwashing” theories, claiming that they were pseudo-scientific tools used to deny religious liberty to unpopular groups labeled as “cults.” The argument, they claimed, was circular. We know that certain groups are “cults” because they use “brainwashing,” and we know that they use “brainwashing” because, rather than persuading young people to embrace “reasonable” spiritual teachings, they spread bizarre forms of belief, i.e. they are “cults”



Chambre des Représentants de Belgique

SESSION ORDINAIRE 1996-1997 (*)

28 AVRIL 1997

ENQUETE PARLEMENTAIRE

visant à élaborer une politique en vue de lutter contre les pratiques illégales des sectes et le danger qu'elles représentent pour la société et pour les personnes, particulièrement les mineurs d'âge

38) Les Szatmars

De plus, les instances officielles amenées à résoudre un problème d'ordre judiciaire sont souvent confrontées au fait qu'elles ne reçoivent aucune aide de la part de la communauté; il existe, en effet, un principe selon lequel on ne dénonce pas un Juif — même criminel — à un non-Juif. Ce refus de collaboration est cependant difficile à sanctionner.

Enfin, des cas de kidnappings d'enfants et de recel de ceux-ci au sein des ramifications internationales du courant ne constitueraient pas des pratiques isolées.

Satmar as a “Cult”

- The Belgian Parliamentary Report on Cults of 1997 was an egregious example of how *any* group could be considered a “cult” and accused of “brainwashing,” based on the opinion of private anti-cult organizations. The Satmar Hasidic Jews were included, and the report even claimed that the Satmar apply “the principle that one should not report the criminal activities of a Jew to non-Jewish [authorities]” and that “kidnapping children... is not infrequent among them.”

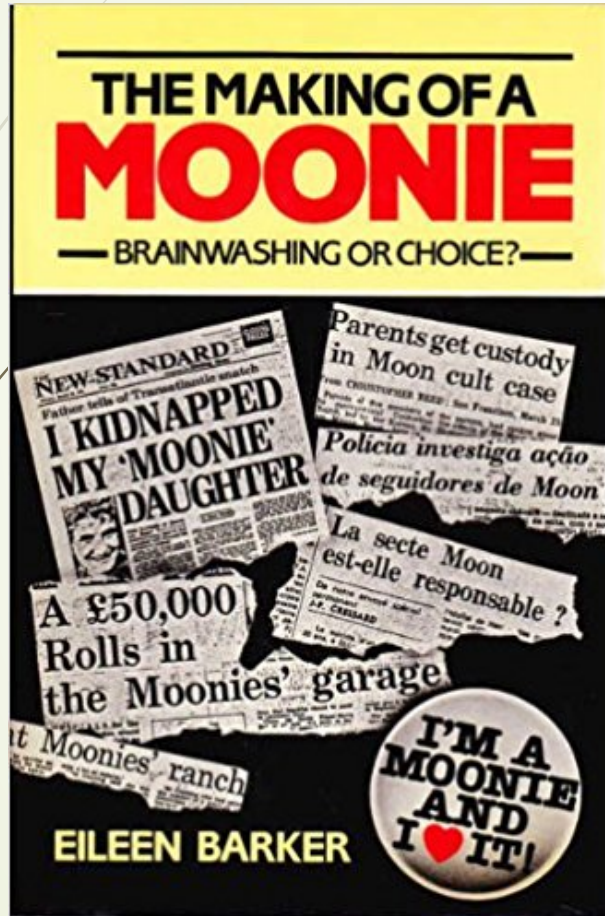


Ultra-Orthodox Anti-Cultism in Israel

- ▶ While in Belgium and elsewhere Hassidic Jewish groups are listed as “cults,” in Israel it is not uncommon to see ultra-Orthodox Jews label as “cults” groups they accuse of missionary activities or “heretic” teachings. Israel, of course, also has its own *secular* anti-cultists



Cult Wars Erupt



- A good deal of name-calling went on between the vast majority of the academic specialist of new religious movements and anti-cultists during the so called “Cult Wars.” Several studies, starting from the seminal *The Making of a Moonie* by Eileen Barker (1984), proved that “cults” accused of using the so called “brainwashing” techniques obtained a very low percentage of conversions, proving that these techniques, if they existed at all, were not very successful

The 1990 *Fishman* Decision

- ▶ In 1990, in the case *U.S. v. Fishman*, a federal court in California concluded that “brainwashing” was not a scientific concept and that testimony about “cults” based on the brainwashing theory was not admissible in American courts of law. *Fishman* was the beginning of the end for the American anti-cult movement’s social relevance, The notion of “brainwashing” still inspired some laws, in France and elsewhere, but they soon proved difficult to enforce

U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California - 743 F. Supp. 713 (N.D. Cal. 1990)
April 13, 1990

743 F. Supp. 713 (1990)

UNITED STATES, Plaintiff,
v.
Stephen FISHMAN, Defendant.

No. CR-88-0616 DLJ.

United States District Court, N.D. California.

April 13, 1990.

***714** Robert L. Dondero, Asst. U.S. Atty., N.D. Cal., San Francisco, Cal., for plaintiff.

Marc S. Nurik with the law firm of Nurik & Kyle, Miami, Fla., for defendant.

“Cults” after the Cult Wars

- However, the Cult Wars poisoned the well, introducing yet another, even more controversial, notion of “cult”

Different communities	“Cult” is a religious group that...	Are Oneness Pentecostals part of a “cult”?
Criminologists	commit crimes	No
Theologians	denies doctrines shared by mainline Christian churches	Yes
Sociologists	includes a majority of first generation members	Depend in which countries and historical periods
Anti-Cultists	uses brainwashing	Who knows? (almost any group can be accused of practicing “brainwashing”)



“New Religious Movements”

- ▶ Another consequence of the Cult Wars was that the majority of academic scholars decided not to use the word “cult,” because of its heavy judgmental and criminological implications, replacing it with “new religious movements,” a new label created by Eileen Barker (left)

But What About the “Bad” Groups?

- ▶ Anti-cultists accused scholars of new religious movements of being “cult apologists,” for which all “cults” were by definition inoffensive. This was never the case, as these scholars always acknowledged that some religious movements, *both outside and inside* mainline religious traditions, advocated and committed very real crimes such as terrorism, homicide, rape, and child abuse, not to be confused with the imaginary crime of brainwashing



Above; A ceremony of the Order of the Solar Temple, which between 1994 and 1997 organized three mass suicides and homicides in Switzerland, France, and Quebec

Waco and the FBI



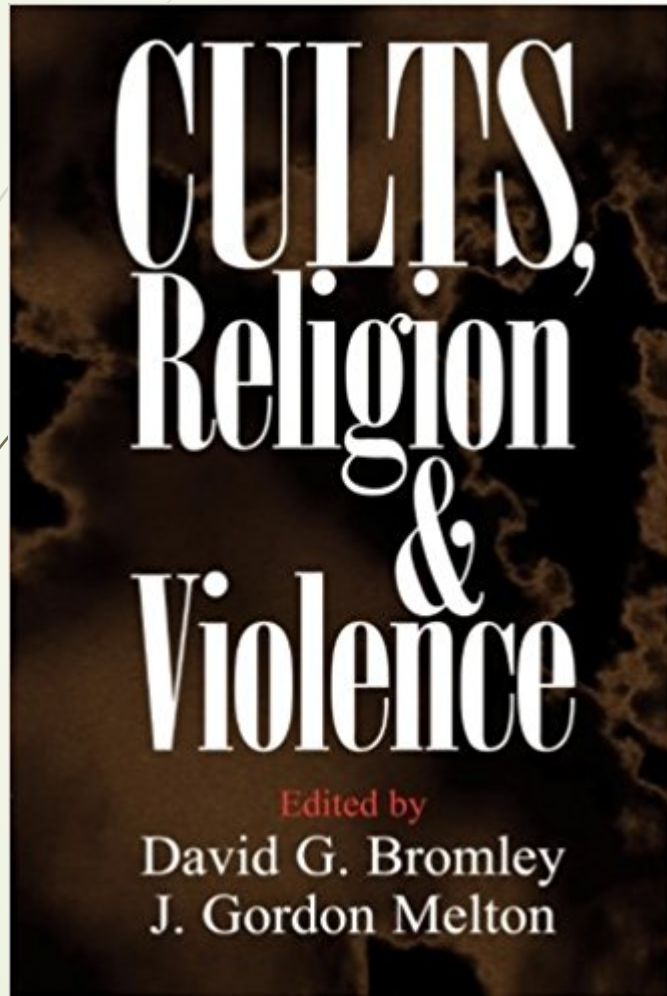
- In 1993, the FBI siege of the headquarters of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, ended up in the death of 80 members of the group, including 22 children (left). The FBI's Critical Incidents Response Group started studying what went wrong in Waco, seeking the cooperation of academic scholars of new religious movements. I myself co-organized and chaired a seminar for FBI agents in 1998 in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where Eileen Barker and Gordon Melton also spoke

Identifying the “Bad” Groups

- At the seminar (right), it was immediately clear to the FBI that scholars would not use the word “cult,” yet the agents wanted to know which among thousands of religious groups were most inclined to commit serious crimes and should be kept under surveillance. Scholars proposed various tentative criteria, and the conversation continued for several years



Cults, Religion, and Violence



- ▶ In 2001-2002, several leading scholars of new religious movements from Europe and United States joined in a project called “Cults, Religion, and Violence,” which included seminars and sessions at conferences and culminated in 2002 in the publication of a book with the same title, of which I was a co-author, by Cambridge University Press. The project did take into account the earlier dialogue between some scholars and the FBI

The Aftermath of 9/11

- ▶ While the project ‘Cults, Religion, and Violence’ was developing, 9/11 occurred, with two important effects: it made somewhat obvious that “bad” groups existed within traditional religions as well (a notion reinforced by the scandals of Catholic pedophile priests), and it created a new urgency in governments all over the world to define the features of “extremist” religious groups, sometimes called – once again – “cults”



“Cult”, a Compromised Word?



- As long as certain activists and media would continue to connect the notion of “cults” with the discredited theory of brainwashing, it is unlikely that the word “cult” will regain in academic circles the “normal” use it had in the tradition of Weber and Troeltsch. However, most scholars recognize that law enforcement agencies and governments need criteria to identify dangerous, “extremist,” or “violent” religious movements that some of them would continue to call “cults”

Some Criteria

- ▶ Ultimately, it is perhaps not so important whether governmental agencies (whose aims are different from scholars') use the word "cult" as opposed to (and synonymous of) "criminal new religious movements" or others. Scholars can offer criteria for defining "cults" in the criminological sense of the world – which has, as we have seen, a long tradition



Above: The fictional, violent "cult" of Holy Blood in the 1989 movie *Santa Sangre*, directed by Alejandro Jodorowski

Avoiding Witch Hunts

"Call me old fashioned,
but I love a good
witch-hunt!"



- First of all, scholars can (and perhaps should) advise authorities what criteria they should *not* use to identify “cults” (a word I will from now on use to designate criminal or violent religious movements). They should not use the faulty notion of brainwashing, which, as decades of legal experiences show, would entangle them into intractable problems. And they should not use theological definitions of “cults” based on questions of belief, doctrine, and heresy. Whether a group affirms or denies the Trinity should not be the business of any secular state

A Faulty Notion of “Extremism”

- ▶ In the 2017 decision “liquidating” the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia a faulty notion of “extremism” was mentioned, regarding as “extremist” any group that argues that its is the only true religion and way of salvation and that all other religions are false. We find similar affirmations in the holy books of most religions, and religion in general is not where we can expect to find pluralistic and relativistic ideas of truth



A New/Old Definition of 'Cult'

- ▶ I would propose a new definition, grounded in the less objectionable part of the criminological tradition, of "cult" as *a religious movement that either, or both, advocates or consistently engages as a group in major violent or criminal activities, including terrorism, homicide, physical violence against members, dissidents, or opponents, rape, sexual abuse of minors, or major economic crimes.* Let's examine four key elements of this definition



Above: The Beasts of Satan, a small Italian Satanist "cult" that committed at least three homicides between 1998 and 2004

1. A Religious Movement

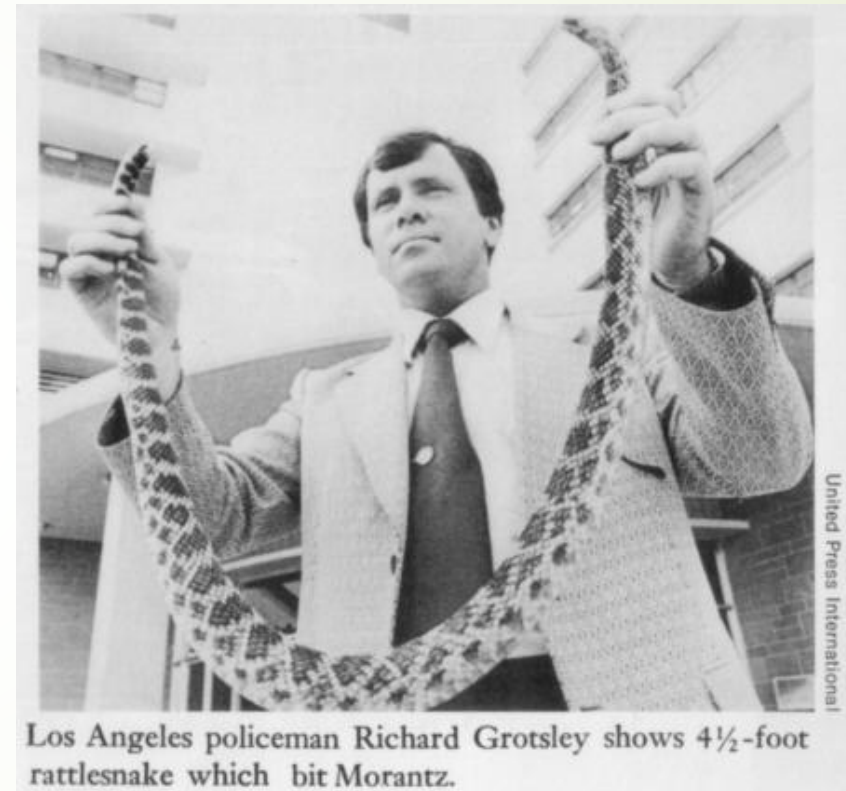


Above: A ritual in the Order of the Solar Temple

- ▶ The definition stays away from attempt to label criminal “cults” as “pseudo-religious” groups, which would either be based on the naïve notions that all religions are by definition benign, or lead to very difficult questions about what is a religion. For the functional purpose of the definition, a religious group is a group characterized by religious beliefs and practices, without investigating their orthodoxy, quality, or “strangeness”

2. Advocates or Consistently Engages as a Group

- ▶ It is not enough that some members of the group commit crimes. That some Catholic priests are pedophiles does not make the Catholic Church a criminal “cult,” as the institution’s doctrines do not condone pedophilia and the vast majority of Catholics and priests abhor it. The definition implies that the movement as a *group*, in its corporate capacity, either or both advocates in its doctrines and consistently (systematically) commit crimes



Above: Placing a rattlesnake in the mailbox of attorney Paul Morantz in 1978 was one of several crimes perpetrated by Californian “cult” Synanon against its opponents

3. Major Crimes



Above: Charred remains of members of the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, an Ugandan “cult” that self-destructed itself in 2000 in a frenzy of homicides and suicides, which made more than 700 victims

- ▶ The definition implies that crimes should be major ones, such as terrorism, rape, homicide, child abuse, physical violence, and even serious and consistent economic crimes, such as international money laundering. Many religious groups are accused in some countries of tax elusion or evasion and administrative wrongdoings. This alone should not lead to the conclusion that the group is a “cult”

4. Clearly Defined Crimes

- The definition insists on *well defined* crimes, punished by *existing laws* and not by new laws created for the specific purpose of acting against the “cults.” As such, it focuses for example on *physical* violence rather than on elusive notions of *psychological* violence, on beating or murdering opponents rather than on threatening them with the flames of hell in the afterlife, and so on – although it recognizes that *advocating* physical violence and inciting others to commit violent acts is also a real form of violence



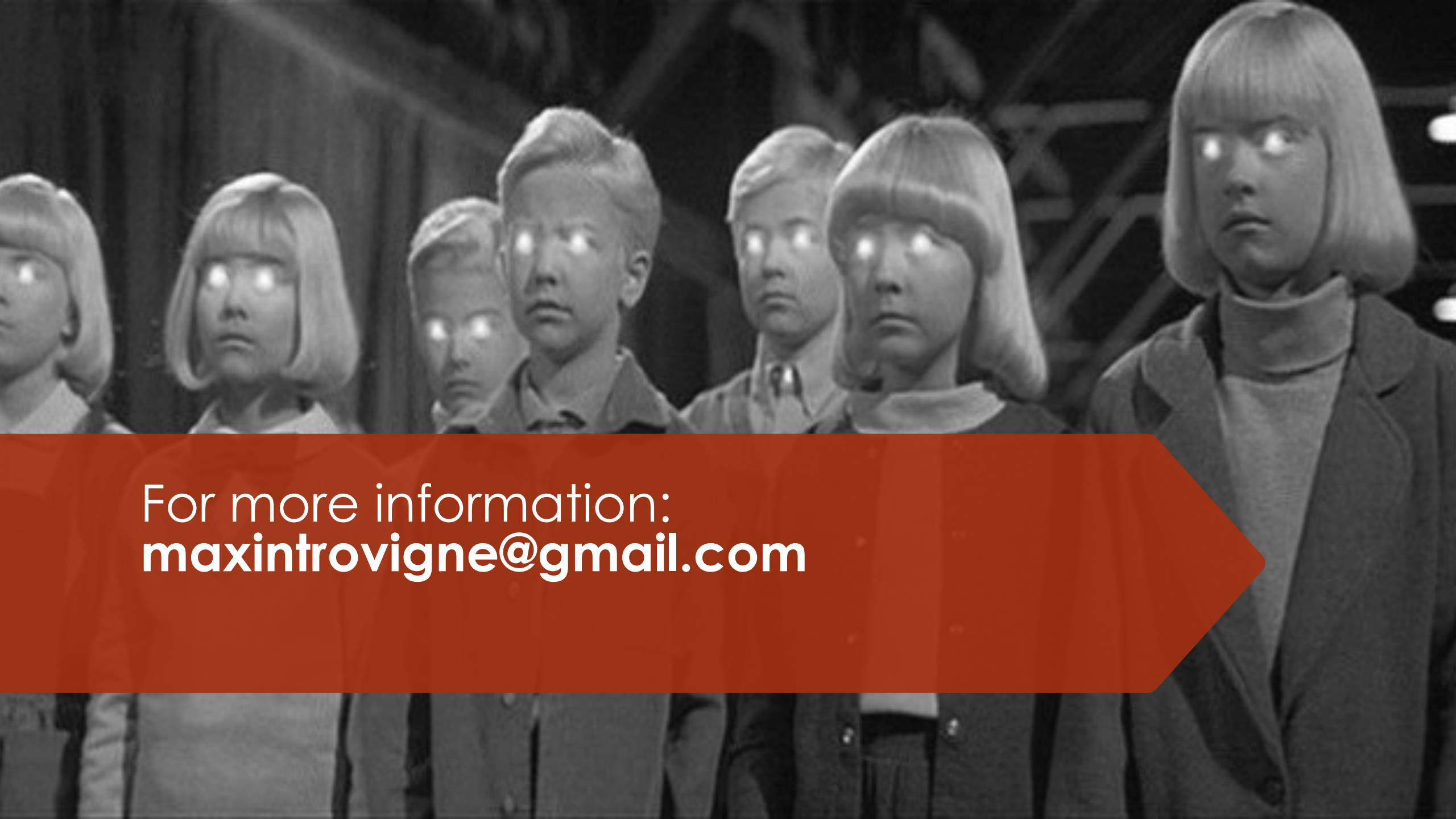
Above: Japan's Shoko Asahara had ordered the murder of opponents of his group Aum Shinrikyo before organizing a deadly gas attack with sarin gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995, although most members of his movements ignored his criminal activities

Continuing a Dialogue

- I am *not* advocating that scholars of new religious movements start using again the word “cult.” My proposal simply acknowledges that some governmental agencies would probably continue to use the word. Definitions are not “true” or “false,” they are just tools used to achieve certain results. Scholars can dispute the appropriateness of the word “cult,” but that should not prevent them from suggesting criteria to identify the real “bad” groups



Left: Members of a Utah polygamy “cult” protesting at the State Capitol, 2016



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