



# AREOPAGUS PROCLAMATION

Volume 20 • No. 2 • Mar—Apr 2010

A bimonthly thoughtletter  
published by the  
AIIA Institute  
PO Box 262  
Monson, Maine 04464

## What Is a Cult? Who Decides?

by Robert T. Pardon

Bob Pardon has been an AIIA Resource Associate since 1995. He is founder and executive director of the New England Institute of Religious Research. He and his wife, Judy, also direct MeadowHaven, the only long-term transitional facility in the world designed to help individuals coming out of groups correctly referred to as cults. Contact info: [www.meadowhaven.org](http://www.meadowhaven.org)



In his new book, *Christianity in Crisis*, Hank Hanegraaff makes a distinction between the terms 'cult' and 'cultic.' Other experts refer to 'aberrational' groups. For this original Proclamation article we asked Rev. Pardon to define the term 'cult' and to tell us exactly when one is correct in applying the term.

**CULT is out of vogue as a term for high pressure faith.** So reads the title for a news article by Ray Waddle in 2008. This is part of an ongoing controversy surrounding the term for the last decade that has served to obscure a greater goal: calling a spade a spade.

The words we utilize as descriptors are extremely important. They convey a reality and can impart or dismiss moral content. For example, the wanton violence and mayhem of terrorists is deflected when they are re-labeled *jihadists*. The terms *jihad* extends a sense of honor and respect.

Political correctness has caused much of the media to retreat to the word

allowed the testimony of witnesses that demonstrate the impact of "undue influence and mitigating circumstances."

A few years ago I worked with the defense on a high profile second degree murder case that was successfully litigated on that basis. The use of such terms as sect, New Religious Movement, high control group, totalistic, and authoritarian only obscures the often psychologically paralyzing, spiritually devastating, and sometimes violent nature of these groups. In some instances the courts and the news media have been fooled. But generally the public has understood what is meant by the term *cult* and *cultic control* for decades.

In 2008 the British Crown Prosecution Service ruled that the term cult was neither "abusive nor insulting." A man had been picketing Scientology headquarters with the word 'cult' on his picket sign. Scientology sued, citing defamation, and lost the case. This was a victory for freedom of speech and against the re-definition of words. Just as terms like terrorism, suicide bomber, and global warming are internationally understood, so too the term cult has a solid academic foundation. One can find similar descriptions for the term in the social sciences: sociology, criminology, political science, social psychology, and psychology. The same is true for the humanities: history, religious studies, American and European studies. It's just that there is currently a small, albeit vocal, minority of cult apologists and academics who claim that there is no such thing as mind-control or cults.

In *Bounded Choice*, noted academic Janja Lalich defines a cult in broad, concise terms: "The combination of char-

'sect' in most news reporting. Some courts have been fooled by so-called experts in the litigation of cult-related cases. However, other courts have seen through this and

*ismatic leadership, a transcendent belief system, personal commitment, and social and psychological pressure...*" This toxic convergence of characteristics fundamentally transforms the individual from devoted follower to unthinking devotee. Sometimes this transformation is gradual over time; in other instances it is dramatic. This broad definition encompasses not just overtly religious groups that often break into public awareness via some cataclysmic tragedy, e.g. Jonestown, Branch Davidians, Heaven's Gate. It also allows for the political group, UFO club, self-help psychotherapy group, door-to-door multi-level marketing scheme, small family environment, etc.

Now this does not mean that everything is clear cut. Great care needs to be exercised when using the term 'cult.' Great care and patience needs to be used in defining the term so that misunderstandings are minimized. If you want to make somebody look bad, just call them a cultist! However, that does not mean that we should retreat from the correct and judicious use of a term that has such a long and generally understood meaning. To do so would be to give legitimacy to groups and organizations that perpetrate some of the worst atrocities known to man.

As directors of **MeadowHaven**, where survivors of cults can come to heal from their overwhelming trauma, my wife and I obviously see the worst of the worst. But they are representative of the destructive power of such groups.

Most of those coming to us suffer massive trauma, complex post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorders, adjustment disorders, loss of identity, loss of sustaining faith, etc. Many have physical problems that require urgent medical attention. All are destitute, and many are suicidal. Many have been hospitalized. This is the legacy of cults and cultic groups! This kind of damage is not the consequence of just some benign 'sect.'

Let us be careful how we use the term 'cult.' But let us also not shy away from using it when appropriate.



**More Evidence in Defense and Confirmation of the Christian Faith**