

Understanding Cults and Occult in the Modern Christendom

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Abstract

This paper examines the concepts of cults and occults within contemporary Christianity and explores their growing influence on Christian believers and church communities. The study highlights the confusion that often exists between cults and occults, clarifying that while cults are religious movements that distort core Christian doctrines through additional revelations and alternative sources of authority, occults involve hidden spiritual knowledge, supernatural practices, and esoteric beliefs. The paper discusses the key characteristics that distinguish cults from occult groups and identifies several factors contributing to their spread, including family background, human curiosity, personal crises, the desire for quick solutions, inappropriate religious teachings, and religious schisms. The study further analyzes theological perspectives that can help Christians understand and respond to these phenomena. Key theological themes examined include the Theology of the Cross, living sacrifices, the grace of God, Jesus as the Light of the World, salvation by faith alone, and the vision of the New Jerusalem. These biblical teachings are presented as foundational principles to guide believers away from deceptive teachings and practices and to promote spiritual maturity and sound doctrine. The paper concludes that cults and occults pose significant spiritual, psychological, social, and moral challenges to Christian communities. Consequently, churches and Christian leaders should actively engage in biblical teaching, discipleship, and pastoral guidance to equip believers with the knowledge and discernment necessary to remain faithful to Christian truth and resist misleading spiritual influences.

Keywords *Cults, Occults, Christianity, Christian Theology, Spiritual Discernment, False Teachings, Salvation by Faith, Church Leadership, Religious Schism, Biblical Doctrine.*

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1. Introduction

Christianity today is going through a tough season where it has to balance between religion, cults, and occults. Many Christians today are in church but at the same time in cults and occults, yet they themselves do not understand. This has caused untold suffering while many church leaders have gone silent on the issue, yet it is causing a major shipwreck in Christendom. Many Christians today are suffering not because they want to, but because they are searching for the truth. This suffering is either physical, psychological, mental, or social. Every human community has always sought to find out what or who causes this human pain and suffering.

Some believe in some malevolent gods, demons, or evil spirits who cause this suffering. Others believe in physical causes such as viruses or diseases. Still others attribute suffering to destiny¹.

Occult- is a term that lumps together the “various theories, practices, and rituals based on esoteric knowledge, especially alleged knowledge about the world of spirits and unknown forces”. It is also a body of traditions concerning religious practices preserved and practiced outside of an organized religion, and includes alternative means of inducing religious ecstasy, contacting supernatural beings, healing, as well as foretelling the future². Or rather, simply occult can be summarized as hidden or secret knowledge, practices, or supernatural phenomena that are beyond the realm of normal understanding.

Cult- refers to any religious movement which claims the backing of Christ or the bible but distorts the central message of Christianity by an additional revelation and by displacing a fundamental tenet of faith with a secondary matter³. A cult deviates doctrinally and in behavior from a parent or host religion, and it grows out of and deviates from previously established religion⁴.

A cult has an extra spiritual source of authority, it denies the justification by grace alone, it devalues Christ, and the sect group believes itself to be the exclusive saved community alone. It is believed that the first four major cults were: Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, and Seventh-day Adventism⁵. Cult members use terms such as "*redemption*" only to assign them meanings quite different from those used by Christians⁶. It should also be noted that the term "cult" is sometimes used synonymously with "sect". And there is a very big confusion in Christendom today where some ‘sects’ regard themselves as true churches, and the question that truly creeps out is, what is the real definition of a church? The Roman Catholic Church believes that there is only one true visible church, and that is the Roman Church, and thus designates all non-Roman denominations as sects because it believes itself to have the sole right to being called a church⁷. On the other hand, Evangelicals also refer to sects/cults as those Christian religions not regarded as evangelical. To them, any church that does not hold to evangelical principles is not a church but a sect/cult⁸. This might be why Seventh-day

¹ Kunhiyop Wanje Samuel, *Suffering and the Persistent Nature of Witchcraft Belief*, <http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/section/witch-accusations/>, April 24, 2015.

² Reuben Kigame, *Christian Apologetics Through African Eyes* (Posterity Publishers Ltd, 2018), 408.

³ Edmond C. Gruss, *Cults and the Occult*, Rev. ed (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co, 1974), 3, Text.

⁴ John Mbugua Kariuki, *The Impact of Cults and Sects on the Spiritual Growth of Christians in Africa Inland Church Naivasha*, Thesis (M.Div.Missions)Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology(Kenya) (Nairobi: NEGST, 2006), 5, Text.

⁵ Gruss, *Cults and the Occult*, 4.

⁶ Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, *Understanding Cults and New Religions* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1986), 1, Text.

⁷ John H. Gerstner, *The Theology of the Major Sects*, 3rd ed. (Michigan: Baker Book House; Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1960), 9, Text.

⁸ Gerstner, *The Theology of the Major Sects*, 9.

Adventism is regarded as a sect: since it came into being a century ago, evangelicals have usually treated it as a sect rather than a church. Today, Adventists are vigorously contending that they are evangelical, but many believe that the old classification as a sect should not be changed⁹.

Cultism exists because of the two main forces in the world that tend to oppose each other. One is the force led by God, and on the other hand, the force led by the devil. The devil's call is to keep all Christians in a state of blindfold and a deceitful state.

Cults and occults are sometimes confused to mean the same, but clearly, they are very different as expressed in their definitions, though it is possible for cultic communities to possess some occultic tendencies and characteristics. The sense in which a cult is 'planted' and 'cultivated' is in view of specific founders stepping out of mainline spiritual groups to establish a new faith, complete with its carefully crafted doctrines and practices¹⁰. The parable of the weeds in Matthew 13: 24-30 forms a perfect example of what a cult is. It talks about a perfect religion born out of good seeds planted by God himself in the hearts of people, but while they went into slumber and failed to be persistent in their faith, the devil took advantage and sowed weeds (cults) in their hearts, and they began to question what their religion really stood for. The danger of uprooting this grown cult in the hearts of people is expressed in Verse 29, "No, he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them.....'" NIV. The main similarity between the two is that both cults and occults are clandestine and misleading for the most part¹¹.

The table below will help us understand the main differences between cults and occults:

Table 1: Main differences between cults and occults

Attribute	Cult	Occult
Definition	A system of religious or spiritual beliefs and practices, often centered around a charismatic leader or group.	Relating to supernatural or mystical phenomena, often associated with secret knowledge or practices.
Origin	Derived from the Latin word "cultus" meaning "worship" or "adoration".	Derived from the Latin word "occultus" meaning "hidden" or "secret".
Focus	Emphasis on devotion to a specific deity, ideology, or person.	Emphasis on esoteric knowledge, hidden powers, and supernatural phenomena.
Membership	Can range from small, exclusive groups to large, organized communities	Varies greatly, from individual practitioners to organized groups
Beliefs	Can encompass a wide range of beliefs, often centered on a	Beliefs often involve the existence of hidden or

⁹ Gerstner, *The Theology of the Major Sects*, 10.

¹⁰ Kigame, *Christian Apologetics Through African Eyes*, 409.

¹¹ Kigame, *Christian Apologetics Through African Eyes*, 409.

	core doctrine or set of teachings.	supernatural forces and the pursuit of spiritual or magical practices.
Practices	Rituals, ceremonies, and communal activities are common.	May involve divination, spellcasting, and other occult practices.
Perception	Can be viewed positively or negatively, depending on the specific cult and its actions.	Often associated with secrecy, mystery, and sometimes negative connotations.

N/B

1. Occult tents to include, but not limited to, witchcraft, magic, sorcery, divination, and mediumship, among others.
2. Cults, on the other hand, tend to have extra-biblical revelation of scriptures and that the bible is not only their source of authority, but they deny the fact that Jesus Christ is God, their leaders are self-proclaimed messiahs appointed by God to deliver and lead the people, they believe that salvation is by good works, and finally, they offer hope that is uncertain.
3. All cultic groups can be measured in the light of the scriptures, especially on the major doctrines. If they fail to pass the test, they can be classified as cults and sects.

2. Drivers to cults and occults

It is not a coincidence that people find themselves in cults and occults; there are usually very compelling forces behind the practice of these things, which are not limited to:

Family backgrounds

Children born out of families or communities practicing cults and occults are usually introduced to these acts, whether knowingly or unknowingly. John 3:19-21 talks of light coming into the world, but men chose darkness instead because their deeds were evil. “This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God” NIV. Evil family backgrounds deter people from the light, which is why God has called us to raise a godly generation that emanates from the family. Despite this revelation, there are those Christians who foolishly go on refusing to recognize the moral law of God. They choose rather to embrace a false doctrine that excuses their immoral or self-centered lives. They foolishly prefer the ever-diminishing pleasures of sin and self-will to the joy of Christ's forgiveness and life¹².

Curiosity of human nature

It is said that human beings are a very interesting creature created by God. Apparently, only humans were given the will to choose life or death at creation. The will, however, has

¹² Dave Breese, *Know the Marks of Cults*, An Input Book (Victor Books; Wheaton, Illinois, 1975), 17, Text.

sometimes been misused by going against the will of the maker, God Himself, whereby man may willingly choose to worship the devil out of willingness. This is the reason why, even after knowing that cults and occults are bad, they still go ahead and engage in them. They are curious to know what really happens in cults and occult groups, and, without realizing it, they find themselves deeply engaged in them. This is sometimes orchestrated by spiritual immaturity, which is why Paul in 1st Cor. 8:4-8 urges believers not to eat food offered to idols for the sake of young Christians who might fall away or dwindle in their faith. In the same manner, it is good to read this paper and to learn, unlearn, and relearn about cults, but please do not go out there to dig deeper into them or their research unless you consider yourself spiritually mature. The study of holy scripture and the consequent development toward Christian maturity are imperative to you as a Christian. The key to spiritual growth is the study of the word of God, which produces the knowledge of sound doctrine¹³.

Existing scenarios and circumstances

Sometimes, life experiences can cause someone to start engaging in cultism and occultism. For instance, some people, after undergoing painful and consistent losses in their lives or families or unending diseases, end up seeking to know the truth behind all the atrocities. This might sometimes lead them to cultism and occultism as a way of seeking answers. Sometimes it might not be for answers, but to seek peace, closure, or healing through consultation with the dead and other spirits¹⁴.

Desire for quick answers

In society today, where institutions fail or are slow to deliver justice, some people are driven by the assurance of quick answers and ‘absolute’ justice by taking war through occultism, e.g., witchcraft. This is evident, whereby we often hear news of people eating grass or having items embedded on their backs as a result of the atrocities they have caused to the doer of revenge.

Inappropriate religious teachings

Some religious teachings make people adopt the idea that some happenings in society are being controlled by the occult. For example, there are people in church who see demons in everything, including someone falling asleep during a sermon, the malfunctioning of a public address system, forgetfulness, road carnage, or the death of family members¹⁵. It is like they have carried over the old Traditional African Heritage belief that nothing happens on its own; rather, it is caused by someone living, a spirit, or both.

Religious schism

Schism simply refers to a split or division between strongly opposed sections or parties, caused by differences in opinion or beliefs. The first schism that led to the first occult is where Lucifer brought about different teachings in the kingdom of God, aiming at self-exaltation and going contrary to the will of God. He sought to create sympathy for himself by representing that God had dealt unjustly with him in bestowing supreme honor upon Christ. He claimed that in aspiring to great power and honor, he was not aiming at self-exaltation but was seeking to

¹³ Breese, *Know the Marks of Cults*, 19.

¹⁴ Kigame, *Christian Apologetics Through African Eyes*, 410.

¹⁵ Kigame, *Christian Apologetics Through African Eyes*, 411.

secure liberty for all the inhabitants of heaven, that by this means they might attain a higher state of existence¹⁶. In this schism, Lucifer uses divisive politics where he portrays God as an unjust leader who did not care and treat all the heavenly inhabitants of heaven equally, but rather exalted some, like Christ, while declining others, and that by his coming on board, he is to ensure that all the inhabitants of heaven will attain a higher equal state.

3. Theological Entry Points to cults and Occult

The Theology of the Cross

The cross to us Christians is an expression of Christ's free acceptance of painful, ignominious death on behalf of man in order to take away man's sin and the penalty of death that had been placed before him according to Genesis 2:17. One of the main sins at the time of Genesis was to become like God and be able to discern good and evil. Not that God did not want man to discern good and evil, but rather he wanted him to live a free life, totally unaffected by evil, as he kept on visiting man and teaching him his ways. The devil, through the serpent, came with a reverse ideology of discernment of good and evil, whose purpose was to cut the tie between God and his creation. Had Satan revealed himself in his real character, he would have been repulsed at once, for Adam and Eve had been warned against his dangerous foe; but he worked in the dark, concealing his purpose, that he might more effectually accomplish his object¹⁷. It is for this reason and the fall that all men were considered to have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God according to Romans 3:23, and thus Christ had to come and die in order to redeem and restore us back to the kingdom and the love of God. Christ's death, therefore, is taken as a maximal expression of human evil and as a maximal expression of God's goodness. The cross portrays human sin and divine love in the most vivid possible contrast.

Translated into relevant cultism and occultism terms, the theology of the cross can point to the contrast between the altogether positive, self-sacrificial expression of love on the cross and the negative use of cults and occults to destroy God's divine message of salvation to the human race. Theology of the cross places a question mark before the use of harsh spiritual condemnations of those people engaging in cults and occult methods that are violent and coercive. At the cross, God – through Christ – did not choose to force or manipulate humanity, but rather to appeal to humanity. He gave Christ a name that was above all names, that has the power to deliver us from cults and occults. It is the most powerful name under heaven¹⁸.

Living sacrifices

In st. Paul's teachings on living sacrifices, according to Romans 12, encourage the Romans 12 and the whole Christendom at large to offer our bodies as living sacrifices by not conforming longer to the evil patterns of this world. Some of these evil patterns include the spread of cults and occultism, which can only be defeated not by physical force or condemnation, but by the renewal of one's mind. This is because the will of God can be found in a person's mind. According to Paul, to win the battle against cults and occults, we, as Christians, need to work

¹⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy: Past, Present, Future, How Will It End?* (Ellen G. White, n.d.), 264.

¹⁷ White, *The Great Controversy*, 285.

¹⁸ Diane Freeman, *Say My Name: Equipping the Saints for His Kingdom* (Acw Pr, n.d.), 7.

on people's minds by teaching and practicing the right doctrine so they can see and understand it.

Theology of grace

The grace of God is found in the love of God, which is a free, unmerited gift. This grace, as Titus 2:11 tells us, brings salvation and has appeared to all men, whether righteous or unrighteous. God has given it freely to all, withholding nothing. If this grace is embraced, it teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, godly, and upright lives in this present age, where malice and evil doctrines have thrived. This, therefore, is a critical call to us Christians to always embrace the grace of God in order to remain and operate in godliness.

Jesus, the light of the world

John 8:12 NIV, "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'" In this passage, Jesus clearly reveals to the world that He is the light, and that if anyone wants to walk in the light, they should follow Him. He tells us in the same book of John 12:35-36 that we should walk while we have the light before darkness overtakes us, meaning that if we still have Jesus, let us walk in him, lest darkness and the evil of the world overtake us. Those who do not have him are walking in darkness and do not know where they are going. They are trying to be justified by their own philosophies and thinking, which have no basis in truth or light. These are the present-day cults and occults.

Salvation by faith alone

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen or even heard of. For us humans, we have never seen God, but we believe by faith that God exists and one day we shall see him according to his word. Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians at one time he was mad at the church in Galatia and called them foolish because they had begun in spirit but had later on shifted to flesh. Gal 3:3, "Are you so foolish, after beginning with the spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" NIV. He was so bewildered by their character and wondered if they were in their senses or had been bewitched, which can only happen through cults and occults. As Christians, we are therefore called to live by faith and by the Spirit alone. Human intuition and the desire to know things outside the circle of God can lead us to bewitchment, as Paul expresses it. God's justification is therefore not by good works; it is by faith. The scripture says that Abraham believed (trusted) God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Paul says, "Abraham did not think he could be saved by doing good works. Instead, he believed in God. He trusted in God for salvation, not in his own efforts at living a good life¹⁹." In a nutshell, salvation by faith leads to justification by faith, which is a judicial declaration by God that the penitent sinner, through faith-union with Christ, is righteous and free from the guilt of sin through the perfect obedience and death of Christ on his/her behalf²⁰.

¹⁹ Bussey Martin, *The Message of Romans*, 3rd ed. (Kenya: Africa Christian Textbooks, n.d.), 34.

²⁰ Roger Weil, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (UK: Grace Publications, n.d.), 142.

The new Jerusalem

Apostle John, on the island of Patmos, saw how the end would be, and he said that he saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. This new heaven and earth were one, for there was no sea that initially separated them. After them being one, the glory of God (the New Jerusalem) came down out of heaven from God, and once again God and man dwelled together as one. It is therefore prudent for us, as Christians, to understand that we need to win our brothers and sisters in cults and occults, as God wants us all as one. When we become one, we profess one faith, one baptism, and one doctrine, which is the will of God for us now and in the future.

4. Conclusion

Cults and occults have nothing good to offer; they encourage disrespect for the parent religion, parents, and leaders. We have evidence of people who have gotten into depression as a result of cults and occults, others abandoning their families, education, and even their homes. Others have sacrificed their children. As believers, we should not live as if cults and occults have no effect on us, but rather live with the belief that God is in full control and we should abide in him for him to abide in us. God is sovereign over all evil forces, and we should proclaim this without fear. We have victory in Christ.

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