

Cult Apology: A Modest (Typological) Proposal

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INTRODUCTION

When Benny first approached me to be on this panel, I wasn't really sure what I could offer. The ongoing debates over "scholarly sin"—who takes money from whom to write about what; how deeply one gets involved with a group before one is *too deeply* involved—as well as the implicit (and sometimes not so implicit) suggestion that scholars who disagree on these have crossed some egregious ethical or methodological line, is not really a fight I wanted to step into—despite Benny's kind invitation to the fray. I didn't want to get involved not least because scholars whom I respect and admire line up on both sides of the issue. So, rather than take sides in what is obviously an ethical debate which will occur, presumably, for some time in our field of study, I would like to offer instead a modest typology to help us more usefully conceptualize one of the terms that I suspect will become more and more a part of that debate.

That is: the *cult apologist*.

I begin with a couple of observations, the first grounded in David Bromley's 1999 ASR presentation, which appeared in *Misunderstanding Cults* as "A Tale of Two Theories" (Bromley 2001). Though he was speaking specifically about the controversy over the brainwashing hypothesis, David pointed out that these are political divisions as much if not more than they are scholarly. And, as political divisions they are unlikely to disappear quickly or quietly precisely because of the political act's ability to polarize issues, to disguise aspects of those issues which

do not serve the various poles or positions, and to highlight an array of other domains which are often invoked by the politicization of scholarship—economics, law enforcement, and the judiciary, to name just a few.

I am, of course, not really saying anything new here. As Johannes Fabian remarked in the opening paragraphs of *Time and the Other*, there is no knowledge of the Other—whether the “Other” is a people group in West Africa, the various cultures of an entire hemisphere, or a small but controversial religious group in central Texas—“there is no knowledge of the ‘Other’ which is not a temporal, historical, a political act” (Fabian 1983: 1).

Likewise, I think, in these various ethical and methodological debates, the politically charged, polarizing quality of a term like “cult apologist” suggests that we might be dealing with it for quite some time to come. While a number of us gathered here have been labeled “cult apologists” at one time or another, only a very few attempts have been made to clarify precisely what is meant by the term—and notably these attempts have come from the perspective of the evangelical Christian countercult movement. On the other hand, in other domains—that is, the secular anticult and the secular academic—the term is often used as though it is conceptually transparent, as though we all know what we mean by it. However, because I believe that it is not quite so transparent as it first appears, that there are nuances hiding in plain sight, as it were, I propose to unpack it just a bit here.

WHY DO THIS AT ALL?

Now, why would we want to do this? I can think of a few reasons.

First, *politically*, if we as a scholarly community have spent as much intellectual energy as we have over the past couple of decades trying to define usefully the word “cult,” or to decide whether we ought to dispense with it entirely (which, of course, has yielded a whole derivative debate over what ought to be used in its place) it seems similar energy ought to be spent on

“cult apologist”—because, the ideal of “scholarly neutrality” notwithstanding, and despite our attempts to conceptualize “cult” in a value-free manner, I am not aware of *anyone* who is using the term as anything other than a pejorative. When is the last time you heard someone castigated as, “You new-religious-movement-apologist, you!”? As I will point out in a moment, there are some who attempt to argue that the term, “cult apologist,” is itself value-neutral, that it is merely “a technical term...and not derogatory.” However, given the context within which it is so often used, claims like that strike me as quite simply disingenuous.

Second, *academically*, if “cult apologist” enters the lexicon of NRM scholarship on anything like a regular basis, and I rather suspect that it will, then it forms part of the evolution and the ongoing development of our discipline, and warrants study if for no other reason than that. There is, indeed, a growing literature surrounding both the implicit and explicit aspects of this debate (cf., for example, Beit-Hallahmi 2001; Bromley 1998, 2001; Dawson 2001; Introvigne 1998; Kent 2001a, 2001b; Kent and Krebs 1998a, 1998b; Lalich 2001; Richardson 1998; Robbins 1998, 2001; Zablocki 1997, 1998a, 1998b; 2001).

Third, *ethically*, if it does so enter our academic vocabulary, I suspect it will do so mostly as an ethical statement, if not almost entirely as an ethical indictment. Interest in *how we do what we do* can only grow in importance as the academic field of NRM research grows and changes, bringing the appraisal and indictment inherent in the term “cult apologist” into greater and greater focus. Conceivably, this could affect scholars in a fourth way:

Economically, if a scholar gains a reputation as a “cult apologist,” how would this affect his or her ability to secure grant funding, especially if grant reviewers come down “on the other side of the fence,” as it were? Blind, third-party reviews notwithstanding, our community is still small enough, I think, that it is not impossible to discern who’s working on what. And, if a scholar has been blocked from more traditional grant funding by the accusation of being a “cult

apologist”—the implication of which, of course, threatens the ideal of scholarly neutrality and creates the impression that the applicant is engaged more in advocacy than academics¹—then he or she might feel forced to turn to, shall we say, alternative sources of funding, like new religious movements. A scenario which does nothing but create a situation of deviance amplification within the discipline.

Finally, *personally*, having been called a “cult apologist” quite a bit over the past couple of years, I have become interested in unpacking just what it is people might mean by that. By way of a caveat, though, I want to note that this paper is *very preliminary*. Nevertheless, I think it points the way towards some fruitful theorizing about the scholarship of new and controversial religious movements. Thus, I regard this paper as a research direction, as opposed to anything like a finished research project. And, as with all typologies, the ones I will elaborate are hardly discrete categories, but are organized here for heuristic purposes only.

WHAT “CULT APOLOGIST” MEANS: THE RANGE OF OPINION

There are three basic domains into which the concept of the “cult apologist” has been inserted: (a) secular scholarship; (b) the secular anticult; and (c) the evangelical Christian countercult. Not everyone within these domains uses the term, or, if they do, uses it in precisely the same way or for precisely the same reasons. That is, depending on who you’re talking with, different behaviors or perceptions can trigger the label. In the time I have remaining, I would like to deal briefly with each domain—in reverse order—and then offer some concluding comments.

¹ All this is not to say that this does not happen regularly in academics. Consider, as just one example, Loretta Orion’s “ethnography” of the North American Neopagan community in *Never Again the Burning Times*, in which Orion states quite bluntly: “In my own estimation, the success of this work will be measured by the extent to which it dissolves fear of a maligned aspect of Western culture, its own spiritual (occult) tradition, and opens the minds of the fearful and conservative minded who resist the kinds of shifts of awareness that the Neopagans are trying to make” (Orion 1995: 10).

The Evangelical Christian Countercult

Within the evangelical countercult, Anton Hein is surely one of the most ardent proponents of the “cult apologist” concept, arguing repeatedly for its use on various Internet discussion fora, and butting heads over its utility with a number of his countercult colleagues. While the regard with which Hein is held in the countercult varies widely, he does, however, make what I think is a useful distinction at the beginning of the rather lengthy discussion of “cult apologists” that he includes on his website. That is, he begins by noting that “there are two kinds of cult apologists: those who themselves belong to a cult (and who promote their group’s teachings and practices, while defending them against outside criticism), [and] those who do not belong to any of the groups they defend.”²

In this paper, I am not at all concerned with Hein’s first group. It seems to me a little silly that if you belong to a religious group you *wouldn’t* be willing to defend your religious choice.³ After all, “Why are you a Christian, a Buddhist, a Druid, a Scientologist, a whatever?” is at some level an apologetic question and demands some manner of apologetic response. While we might contest the overly broad net that Hein casts with his particular use of the term “cult,” the notion of a religious adherent defending his or her adherence is not a part of the debate I am seeking to unpack. Rather, I am interested in Hein’s second group: “those who do not belong to any of the groups they defend.”

Hein’s list of cult apologists includes, among others, David Bromley, Jeff Hadden, Jim Lewis, Massimo Introvigne, Eileen Barker, Andy Shupe, and Catherine Wessinger. Over the

² <http://www.gospelcom.net/apologeticsindex/c11.html>.

³ I think here of what Hugo Meynell wrote in the opening paragraphs of *Is Christianity True?*: “If anyone does not maintain that her own beliefs are rationally defensible, she is dishonest. If she thinks that they are not only rationally defensible, but of some importance and value, she will be blameworthy if she does not try to show their reasonableness and value to others” (Meynell 1994: 1).

past few years, however, his favourite target for criticism has been Gordon Melton, and, not infrequently, I have been favoured to be included in Gordon's "cult apologist" company.

As far as the evangelical countercult is concerned, Hein's definition of "cult apologist" is useful for three reasons: first, as I've already noted, within the countercult he is its most ardent proponent; second, if they consider the phenomenon of "cult apologists" at all, rather than writing their own descriptions, dozens of countercult and anticult websites simply link to Hein's page. And, finally, (c) because of this multiple linking, it is his conceptualization of the "cult apologist" problem that is becoming the most dominant in evangelical countercult discourse. He writes:

A cult apologist is someone who consistently or primarily defends the teachings and/or actions of one or more movements considered to be cults—as defined sociologically or theologically . . . Cult apologists generally defend their views by claiming to champion religious freedom and religious tolerance. However, they tend to be particularly intolerant toward those who question and critique the movements they defend.⁴

This, it seems, is a very basic position from which to start. In broad strokes, the dependent variables in this definition are, of course, what the countercult means by "defense," and, more importantly, what it means by "cult." In the countercult, the operating definition for "cult" ranges from those groups traditionally regarded by evangelical Protestants as "cults"—e.g., Mormonism, the Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientology—to world religious traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Roman Catholicism. Practically speaking, "defense" means anything which might mitigate countercult criticisms of these groups.

⁴ <http://www.gospelcom.net/apologeticsindex/c11.html>.

In spite of very trenchant criticism from many of his countercult colleagues about the pejorative and often *ad hominem* nature of some of his “cult apologist” characterizations, Hein insists that he does not mean by it anything derogatory. While he doesn’t really explain precisely what he means by “defends the teachings and/or actions” of NRMs—another point on which he has been challenged by his colleagues—he does import into his construction a more covert definition of the “cult apologist.”

That is, why does Hein consider me a “cult apologist”? That’s an important wrinkle in the countercult construction of the term. While I am quite happy to be counted among the august company of “cult apologists,” especially when that group contains some of the people I’ve mentioned, and although I am now working on a project related to the New Age and Neopaganism on the Internet, what countercultists like Hein have apparently failed to notice is that I have not published once on a particular NRM. My work to date has been limited to an analysis and critique of the evangelical countercult itself. Like most of us, I’ve given numerous media interviews about a wide variety of NRMs, but Hein doesn’t mention those at all.

So, in the context of the evangelical countercult, it seems that one does not actually have to “defend cults” to be labeled a “cult apologist.” Rather, in the manner of “the one who is not for us is against us,” as a second indicator simply critiquing the critics is sufficient.

The Secular Anticult

While the evangelical Christian countercult has very little use for the brainwashing or thought control hypothesis, the secular anticult movement’s deployment of “cult apologist” is almost exclusively concerned with maintaining either the viability of that hypothesis or the validity of ex-member testimony as part of its anecdotal mainstay.

Tilman Hausherr, a prominent German anticultist, builds on the basic countercult definition of “supporting cults and defending their unethical activities,” but he adds to it from the

academic debate over the validity and usefulness of ex-member testimony. Principally, writes Hausherr, for “cult apologists,” “‘apostates’ are considered unreliable because they ‘have a motive’.” For his part, though, Hausherr offers five motives for “cult apologists,” four of which are: (a) money (“Cults can pay good money for friendly opinions”); (b) a fundamental misconception of religious freedom (here Hausherr cites at third-hand remarks attributed to Ben Zablocki that “the great majority of American sociologists of religion...can be called cult apologists”)⁵; (c) self-promotion (“Some cult apologists create fancy ‘institutes’ to get into the media”); and (d) academic stupidity or laziness (which is, incidentally, also the meat of Janja Lalich’s position, cf. Lalich 2001; also Singer and Lalich 1995: 217-19).

When it is used by the American Family Foundation, “cult apologist” usually refers to those who challenge or critique the validity of the brainwashing hypothesis. Citing, but not naming Eileen Barker’s *The Making of a Moonie*, AFF executive director Michael Langone refers to “cult apologists [who] maintain that mind control doesn’t exist because most cult recruits don’t become members.”⁶ In a 1994 *Cult Observer* article, Margaret Singer wrote that “cult apologists have attempted to create the impression that the scientific community has rejected the concept of thought reform.”⁷ In *Cults in Our Midst*, Singer also accuses “cult apologists” of recruiting for new religious movements: “Co-opted academics not only defend the cults but may also serve as recruiters.” While she consistently challenges the logic of “cult apologists,” in this Singer displays little awareness of how courses on cults, sects, and new religious movements are actually taught in colleges and universities. “Students are sent by professors on field studies to cult groups or referred as interns in cult businesses. Being referred

⁵ Hausherr is citing anti-Scientologist Rod Keller, who “attended a session with Dr. Ben Zablocki at CultInfo 1999” (http://home.snafu.de/tilman/faq-you/cult_apologists.txt).

⁶ <http://www.csj.org/studyindex/studycult/cultqa3.htm>.

⁷ http://www.csj.org/infoserv_freeinfo/cso_free/thoughtreform.htm.

in this way tends to make students all the more vulnerable to cult recruitment as they believe that the group has the teacher's approval" (Singer and Lalich 1995: 219).

Finally, echoing Hausherr, Singer provides a bridge to the concerns of the third category, the secular academic, when she writes that some "procult apologists" "have been given trips to exotic places by large, wealthy cults," while others "fear revealing critical findings because certain cults have paid for research and underwritten trips to professional meetings" (Singer and Lalich 1995: 217).

Secular Scholarship

My analysis of the "cult apologist" controversy in the domain of secular scholarship, I admit, is the least developed section of my paper, in part because in our little academic bailiwick, the precise term "cult apologist" is more often implied than it is stated as baldly as one finds it in either of the two preceding domains. And, when it is used, it is used more often by those who have been accused of being "cult apologists." Nonetheless, it is very strongly implied, however, in terms such as "collaborationism," and refers to the same methodological and ethical phenomena as one finds criticized in the other two domains.

As just a few examples of this same phenomenon, consider the exchange between Ben Zablocki and David Bromley in the first two issues of *Nova Religio* five years ago over Zablocki's analysis of the career enjoyed by the brainwashing hypothesis (Bromley 1998; Zablocki 1997, 1998a, 1998b). Or, consider the exchange at that same time in *The Skeptic Magazine* between Stephen Kent, Theresa Krebs, and their various targets—Gordon Melton, Andy Shupe, and Jim Lewis, among others—over "when scholars know sin" (Kent and Krebs 1998a, 1998b). Or, finally, consider the most recent round of exchanges on these same issues that has taken place in Zablocki and Robbins' *Misunderstanding Cults* (2001).

As Tom Robbins notes in his contribution to *Misunderstanding Cults*, “the attack on ‘cult apologists’ has been building up for some time”—at least twenty years, to this point (Robbins 2001: 72). And as I said in the beginning, there is little indication it is going to go away soon. Domains of evidence differ, and what is likely to convince someone who is already predisposed to believe either the worst or the best about new and/or controversial religious movements, is of a different qualitative order than that which is required by someone who is not so disposed. Put differently, as David Bromley remarked in “A Tale of Two Theories,” those who are already committed to one side of the debate or the other are unlikely to be persuaded otherwise. With that in mind, I would like to close with a few thoughts on how the discussion might be more usefully carried forward.

First, I take it as a simple axiom that we, as a scholarly community, are probably not going to come to consensus on most of these issues. We are not going to agree in our assessments of new and controversial religious movements, and in our own personal scholarly scales, the balance of freedom of religion vs. the potential danger posed by groups or “types of groups” is going to weigh differently.⁸

Following from that, as so many “cult apologists” have stated in the past, defending the right of a group to its religious beliefs and practices is not the same, and ought not be confused with, defending the “rightness” of those beliefs or practices. I think this is a distinction that often gets blurred in the service of the political polarization embedded in the concept of “cult apologist.”

⁸ On this, I remember the last question asked during my doctoral defense. I wrote my dissertation on the evangelical Christian countercult, and Irving Hexham, my supervisor, asked what I would do if I came across a group that I genuinely believed was dangerous. After looking at my watch and marveling at how late the hour had gotten, I was forced to admit, “ I don’t know. I’d have to see how I reacted when faced with the situation.”

Second, as it is currently configured, I think that the debate over “cult apologists” uses the concept in the same way Stark and Bainbridge criticized the scholarly community for using “cult”—that is, as an “un-ideal type,” as much the product of emotion and predisposition as dispassionate research, and, therefore, organized according to conceptual correlates rather than empirically measurable attributes (cf. Stark and Bainbridge 1985). In the face of this, unpacking the concept to make it more empirically accessible seems like a good idea to me.

With that in mind, a number of the constituents in the typology that I have suggested here do lend themselves to empirical investigation. That is, they can be framed as questions, or in terms of hypotheses which are open to disconfirmation. Who *actually* paid for research trips, and what was the *purpose* of those trips? In “When Scholars Know Sin,” Kent accused Lewis of sabotaging publication of an article on David Berg. OK—did Lewis actually do that, or is this simply a way for an author to feel better about an unfortunate situation?

Finally, as Tom Robbins points out so trenchantly in his essay, the *j'accuse* mode in which the debate has been conducted thus far is ultimately unhelpful in either resolving the issues or moving the debate itself forward. “The *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* did not become the *Red Channels* of the 1980s” (Robbins 2001: 83). I’m not suggesting that we all need to get along, but spending at least part of the intellectual energy conceptualizing and interrogating the notion of “cult apologist” that we spent on “cult” it seems to me can only impact our discipline in a positive way.

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