Although the news chatter may finally have died down, the comments the Rev. Robert Jeffress made about Mormonism following his introduction of Republican presidential candidate Rick Perry at the Values Voters conference earlier this month overshadowed not only his own introduction but Perry's speech as well. Jeffress stated quite baldly that Mormonism was a "cult" and that Perry's rival Mitt Romney, a prominent Mormon, "is not a Christian."

Although Jeffress was essentially saying what most Evangelical Christians believe, the news and the blogosphere went ballistic. Mainstream outlets treated the remarks with incredulity or scorn, while Christian news and opinion debated the accuracy of the remarks, with most of the Evangelical writers agreeing with Jeffress.

What is a "cult"? If you look up the word in a dictionary, you will find a list of eight to 12 different meanings. If you dig further, you will find that academic fields such as religious studies, anthropology and sociology each give the term several more meanings. The many definitions provided the impetus for the news stories. Which one did he mean, they often asked?

Back in the 1970s, Evangelical Christians were just beginning to become prominent in the Republican Party and faced their own accusations of "cult" behavior. At the time, Professor Jacob Neusner, an internationally known expert on world religions, observed that the accusation of being a cult conveys no real meaning. What is important was the rhetorical impact: It is an insult.

To call someone else's beliefs a cult is to say, in effect, "I belong to a real, valid religion; your beliefs are illegitimate and heretical." It comprises the religious equivalent of playground name calling.

Another answer to the question, "What is a cult?" is that a cult is a successful religion.

Religions aim to define not only the beliefs of their followers, but their entire world view and way of life. That is, religions provide a cohesive, unified way of understanding "life, the universe and everything" which puts everything in its place, gives a reason for why events happen, and, of course, places each believer in a privileged location within that scheme.

The problem for religions is that there are competing world views. We hear about them all the time. Not only are there other religions and other versions of one's own religion, but there is science, secularism, and even atheism. Science is a particularly powerful competitor, providing non-religious views of everything from creation and the formation of the natural world and its living creatures to human medicine, human sexuality and human psychology. Science's power comes from its evidence-based approach to understanding.

Most people today adhere to several world views at once, or at least parts of them. They may attend church and worship, but they may also follow secular practices at work, and undergo scientific medical practices when they get sick. From football and skiing to baseball and bass fishing, they often relax in non-religious ways. Their preacher may encourage them to read their Bible in their spare time, but instead they watch TV.

In other words, American culture consists of numerous world views, all competing for adherents. Religions are just competitors like all the others. When religious figures make statements about what members of their religion believe, their remarks are more an advertisement or an admonition calling on people to agree with them than a statement of fact. The frequent clarion calls about religious issues from contraception to gay marriage to abortion to stem cell research are as much intended to convince or remind the flock to follow the religious view as they are to persuade others.

In this context, a cult is a religion that managed to block out all competing world views. The cult determines all beliefs and activities for its members. Its adherents organize their daily behavior, their jobs, their family life and even their recreation according to the cult's world view. In other words, a cult is a religion that has successfully persuaded its followers that it is right about everything and that no other view is valid. The followers of Jim Jones in Guyana or David Koresh's Branch Davidians are good examples of these.

Of course, nearly all Americans look at these examples of cults and are repulsed. It looks like brain-washing. If this constitutes a successful religion, then we do not want it in our society.

American culture likes religions, often changing from one favorite to another, but religions should not be too successful. They should be part of the options available, but every person should mix and match what aspects of their lives they draw from religion(s) and what they take from the variety of competitors.

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