Speaker 1: Thank you for calling 1-800-REL-HELP. Your question is very important to us. A scholar will be with you shortly. Every question is an important one and the scholars on call at 1-800-REL-HELP are eager to provide information on your requested topic. Thank you for choosing 1-800-REL-HELP for answers to your most burning questions about religion. Our scholars are more than well equipped to answer any questions you may have.

Brad: Thank you for calling 1-800-REL-HELP. This is Brad. How may I help you?

Speaker 3: Yeah. At dinner last night, my daughter and my dad had a heated argument over former president Donald Trump. It seems my daughter's contempt for Trump rivals my dad's support for him.

Brad: Oh, I'm so sorry. Well, how can I help you?

Speaker 3: Well, the conversation began when my dad said a prayer before dinner and ask God to bless Trump. My daughter let her grandfather finish the prayer before she asked why God or anyone else would bless Trump. About a minute later, they were screaming at each other and then my father threw down his silverware and walked away from the table as he muttered something about liberals being brainwashed by the lame stream media into the cult of liberalism. My daughter followed him screaming that it was actually Trump supporters who were the cult. So I guess I'm calling you to ask, which side is really a cult?

Brad: Before I answer your question, can I ask why it matters? Why does it matter which side is truly or really a cult?

Speaker 3: Well, it matters because cults are dangerous, it matters because cult members are brainwashed, it matters because I need to know whether my dad or my daughter needs potentially life-saving intervention.

Brad: Got it. Thank you for the clarification. So instead of answering your question directly, let me instead take a different route and ask you to think of the history of the term cult itself.

Speaker 3: Okay.

Brad: Very good. Can we agree that words change popular meanings over time? When you were a child, for example, what was a web?

Speaker 3: A web was something that spiders made.

Brad: Fair enough, ask someone today what it means and what might they say?

Speaker 3: I guess the internet.

Brad: Exactly. Second point. You think all people around the world think of the same thing when they hear the word web?

Speaker 3: I mean, probably not. There're probably some places where they don't have the internet, but spiders still build things they call webs but really why are we talking about spiders and webs?

Brad: Great question. I would suggest that we can apply the same logic to the word cult.

Speaker 3: What?

Brad: Well, much like the word web, the word cult, one, changes popular meanings over time and two, means different things to different people at any point in time.

Speaker 3: Okay. I think I'm following you.

Brad: Are you familiar with the history of the word cult?

Speaker 3: I assume it's a word that's as old as civilization.

Brad: Well, that is a very common and popular position. However, consider that the word cult first appeared in the English language in the early 16 hundreds where it only referred to worship within the Christian context.

Speaker 3: Okay. I assume that people use the word to refer to dangerous types of Christian worship though, right?

Brad: Not quite. They use the word cult to reference different types of Christianity really free from any moral or ethical judgment. This continued to be a common usage of the term cult for several hundred years. Then in the late 18 hundreds and early 19 hundreds scholars began to use the term differently. Sociologist, Emile Durkheim for example, wrote about different subsets of people within a particular religion, referring to them as cult. Durkheim used the term positive cult to refer to the aspects of religion that convey among other things, blessings and anointings. The negative cult, according to Durkheim, referred to abstentions and prohibitions. Durkheim believed that every religion contained these groups and he used the term cult to characterize what he deemed these elements common within every religion.

Speaker 3: But he didn't cast moral judgments on these groups, right?

Brad: Exactly. Instead, these terms, they're kind believed, described common aspects of religious groups all over the world. Other scholars, primarily sociologists, soon used the word cult differently as they adapted it to define different types of religions. We should note up front that these scholars simply wanted to organize and classify the types of religions and they found the word cult to be a useful term in a very highly technical sense. For example, if I tell one of my children that I need a flathead or a Phillips screwdriver, I'm not casting moral judgment on the screwdriver.

Speaker 3: Okay. All right. That makes sense.

Brad: Great. So sociologists applied a similar distinction to the groups they designated as cult. That is, they define these groups in a technical sense free from moral judgments. Later in the late 1970s, sociologists, Rodney Stark and Williamson's Bainbridge famously divided religious groups into [inaudible] churches, sex and cults. They borrowed the first two terms in this taxonomy from sociologists Benton Johnson, who wrote, "a church is a religious group that accepts the social environment in which it exists. A sect is a religious group that rejects the social environment in which it exists." Stark and Bainbridge thought this distinction helped classify an organized religions, but they had one major problem with it, Stark and Bainbridge believed that some religious groups have different tensions or different degrees of tension with the social environment in which they exist. So Stark and Bainbridge then used the term cult to refer to groups that had a higher degree of tension within the social environment in which they exist.

Speaker 3: Okay, but when did the term acquire as such a negative connotation?

Brad: Good question. The problem for scholars like Stark and Bainbridge is that, scholars were not the only people using the word cult. In the 1960s and seventies for example, many Americans used the term cult in the pejorative sense, these people saw religions like Buddhism and Hinduism coming to America. They also saw their children join new religions or versions of established religions that differed considerably from the parent religion. Some of these groups did commit acts of violence. A former minister named Jim Jones, for example, fled to the United States to Guyana, picking many followers with him. The community ended tragically in 1978, when over 900 people committed the largest act of group violence or murder in American history. The important thing to keep in mind is that the overwhelming majority of the new religions however, were not violent, but the isolated few who did commit violence, scared many Americans who believed that all of these new and small religions were dangerous, both to group members and to the country itself. They labeled these group cult, implying all the pejorative or negative connotations that most people associate with the word today.

Speaker 3: Okay. I think I'm with you, but how does this help me answer my original question?

Brad: I'm suggesting that you actually ask a different question or maybe questions. Instead of asking if group A or group B is a cult, instead, ask why someone might label the group a cult. That is, what do members of each group gain by labeling each other a cult. Dare to answer that?

Speaker 3: Well, it seems that by labeling the group a cult, they're implying many of the things that I assumed earlier in the call, they assume that they can dismiss the group, that the group is brainwashed and isn't thinking for themselves.

Brad: Exactly. We'd suggest you focus on the word cult as a rhetorical strategy to denigrate a group one doesn't like, from this perspective, neither your daughter, nor your father belong to an inherently dangerous cult, instead they have different beliefs and ideas and they want to discredit each other while validating their point and they use the word cult to accomplish that goal without substantively engaging one another.

Speaker 3: Huh, I guess that makes a lot of sense. Thanks so much. It doesn't make my dinners any easier, but thank you.

Brad: You're welcome. Thank you for calling 1-800-REL-HEALTH.

Speaker 4: 1-800-REL-HEALTH is an American Examples production in the department of religious studies at the University of Alabama and is funded by a grant from the Henry Luce foundation. This episode was produced by Brad Stoddard, Jack Bernardi, and Erika Bennet. A video version of this podcast is available on YouTube, just search American Examples. Find out more about American Examples at our website, americanexamples.ua.edu, also follow the department of villages studies on Twitter and Instagram at the handle studyreligion, for on Facebook at facebook.com/REL@ua. If you enjoyed this episode, please subscribe to our podcast on Spotify or Apple Podcasts and give us a rating and review. Music credits to www.bensound.com

Speaker 5: What?