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## TOPICS

Ask an American: cults; can versus could; will versus would; freedom versus liberty

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## GLOSSARY

**cult** – a religious group, usually with extreme beliefs that are different from those of other religions

\* While he was in a cult, Dan gave up all of his money and possessions.

**imaginary** – not real; existing only in one's mind

\* Many young children have imaginary friends that no one else can see.

**satanic** – evil; very bad; related to Satan and a love of Satan

\* Some people think she's in a satanic group because she only wears black and acts strangely.

**to spread** – to disseminate; to move across an area; to move over a large area; to grow

\* The news of the closing of the city's only college spread across the city.

**to brainwash (someone)** – to change what someone thinks and make someone believe something that isn't true, usually by repeating something many times

\* Do you think the men who fought for the ruthless dictator were brainwashed?

**megalomaniacal** – wanting to control other people's lives and liking the feeling of having power over other people

\* I hated my last job because I had a megalomaniacal boss who wanted to control everything I did.

**deluded** – tricked into believing something that isn't true

\* Many investors were deluded by the excitement of making money and didn't realize how much risk was involved in the stock market.

**to impose (something) on (someone)** – to force someone to do something, or to force someone to believe or accept something

\* They wanted to impose their way of living on Shannon, so she decided to move out on her own.



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**connotation** – something that one thinks about something else, usually beyond its basic definition

\* For most Americans who live in cities, an old pickup truck has connotations of someone who lives in a rural area.

**sect** – one part of a religious group

\* How many sects are in the Church of Christ?

**at a crossroads** – at a point in one's life where many things are changing and where one has to make an important decision that will affect the rest of one's life

\* She felt like she was at a crossroads when they offered her a good job that would have required moving across the country.

**structure** – routine; predictability; a fixed way of doing something that doesn't change over time

\* Some doctors think that babies need a lot of structure, waking up and going to sleep at the same time each day.

**unpaid bill** – a piece of paper that you get from a company, asking you for money for some product or service that you've used

\* We pay our unpaid bills on the last day of each month.

**mainstream** – common and normal; used or believed in by many people

\* Are you going to buy a really expensive car, or something more mainstream?

**predominant** – very common; the most common and powerful or important

\* The predominant major for young people at this university is biology.

**wide open** – very open-minded; willing to accept new ideas that might seem unusual or uncommon; without restrictions or limitations

\* You're so smart and talented that your career choices are wide open. You can become whatever you want to be.

**constraint** – limitation; restriction

\* They'd like to have a nice, long vacation, but right now they have too many financial constraints.

**innovation** – the process of inventing or creating new things that didn't exist before, or that people hadn't even thought of before

\* A lot of technological innovation comes from Silicon Valley in California.



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**freedom** – the condition of being free; the condition of being allowed to do, say, and think what a person wants

\* The idea of freedom of the press means that no one should be able to tell U.S. newspapers what they can or cannot write about.

**liberty** – the condition of being free; the condition of being allowed to do, say, and think what a person wants

\* They moved to the United States because they wanted to have more liberty than they had in their own country.



## **WHAT INSIDERS KNOW**

### **Charles Manson and the Manson Family**

Most people would agree that Charles Manson is the most well known and most feared megalomaniacal, deluded cult leader in the United States. He was born in Ohio and had a “troubled childhood” (many problems while he was a child). By 1967, when he was 32 years old, he had spent more than half of his life in “jail” (prison).

In 1967, he moved to California and began creating what would be known as the Manson Family. The people in the Manson Family weren’t actually relatives, but instead were friends and other people who wanted to be around Charles Manson and believed the things that he told them. The Manson Family became a dangerous, frightening cult.

Charles Manson had many strange ideas and was “obsessed with” (thought often about) the music of The Beatles. He thought that The Beatles’ songs had “coded” (hidden, where certain words or symbols mean other ideas) messages that would help “bring an end to” (finish) “racial tensions” (problems between blacks and whites and other races or skin colors) in the United States.

Charles Manson “instructed” (taught; told someone what to do) the members of the Manson Family to “commit” (do something against the law) nine murders, including that of a famous American actress, Sharon Tate, who was more than eight months pregnant at the time. People were “horrified” (shocked, angered, and saddened) when they learned the details of these murders.

Charles Manson himself never killed anyone; he made other people do it. However, when the murders “came to trial” (were discussed in a legal court), Manson was found responsible for the killings as an “accomplice” (someone who helps a crime be committed). He and some of the members of the Manson Family were put in jail “for life” (until they die) and the cult ended.



## **COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT**

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 162.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast number 162. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

Our website is [eslpod.com](http://eslpod.com). On it, you can visit our ESL Podcast Store, which has some additional courses in business and daily English that you will enjoy, I think. You can also download the Learning Guide for this episode, and every current episode. The Learning Guide contains a lot of additional information, including a complete transcript of this episode, vocabulary words, definitions, sample sentences, cultural notes, and a short comprehension quiz on what you're listening to right now.

On this Café, we're going to have another one of our Ask an American series, or segments, where we listen to other native speakers talking at a normal rate of speech – a normal speed. We're going to listen to them and explain what they are saying – what they are talking about. Today we're going to talk about cults, what a cult is, and what some of the more famous cults in the United States have been in recent years. And as always, we'll answer a few of your questions. Let's get started.

Our topic on this Café's Ask an American segment is cults. A "cult" (cult) is a religious group, usually one with extreme beliefs that are very different from those of other religions. Many Americans are "fearful," or afraid, even scared of cults and most Americans think that they are wrong. Cult is definitely a negative way of describing a religious group. This is, in part, because there have been some very bad and dangerous cults in the U.S. in the past 34 or 40 years.

Most Americans became fearful of cults in the 1960s and 1970s, when I was growing up. There was a man named Charles Manson who started a cult and got his "followers," or people who were members of his cult (people who followed him, who did what he said), he got these people to murder (or kill) other people. That happened right here in Los Angeles. Also, around this time, in 1978, a cult that was in Jamestown, Guyana, which called itself the People's Temple committed mass suicide, meaning that all of the members killed themselves. After reading these stories in the news, Americans became fearful that cults would influence their children, or take power over their children, and change what their children believe.



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We're going to start this Ask an American segment by listening to Phillips Stevens, who's an anthropologist at the State University of New York. He's going to talk about how people felt about cults in the 1980s. We'll listen first. Try to understand as much as you can, and then we'll go back and explain what he said.

[recording]

And then in the 1980s, this imaginary danger of satanic cults spread across North America, and the word "cult" was permanently changed. It had become defined as a group of people who had been brainwashed by a megalomaniacal, deluded person who imposed severe restrictions on his followers, and most of these negative connotations are false.

[end of recording]

He begins by talking about an imaginary danger. Something that is "imaginary" doesn't really exist. It's just in your mind – in your imagination. He says that in the 1980s there was an imaginary danger of satanic cults. The word "satanic" (satanic) refers to "Satan," who is, in the Christian religion, the opposite of God. He, or she, is an evil creature, an evil part of the universe. So, it's a very negative thing, in most cases. Satan is evil, and many people picture Satan – they have this image of Satan as a monster, someone that lives in hell where there are many hot fires and where bad people go. A satanic cult, then, would be a religious group that follows Satan and thinks that what most of us call evil is, in fact, good.

According, then, to Stevens, the man speaking here, the imaginary danger of satanic cults (that is, it wasn't really true – it was imaginary) this danger began to "spread" or move across North America as more and more people began to believe these things. The word "cult" was permanently changed, or changed forever. The word had become defined as a group of people who have been brainwashed. To "brainwash" (brainwash – one word) someone means to change what someone thinks and make someone believe something that isn't true, usually by repeating it many times.

Who is doing this brainwashing? Well, according to the new definition of "cult" that became popular in the 70s and 80s, the people in a cult are being brainwashed by a megalomaniacal, deluded person. The word "megalomaniacal" is used to describe someone who wants to control other



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people and other people's lives, someone who likes having power over other people. Someone who is "deluded" has been tricked into believing something that isn't true. So a megalomaniacal, deluded person is someone who believes something that isn't true and wants to control other people's lives, probably by making them believe the same false things. Most people would want to stay far away from a megalomaniacal, deluded person, but cult followers don't see it that way.

Stevens goes on to say that most people think of a cult as having this megalomaniacal, deluded leader who imposes severe restrictions on his or her followers. To "impose" something on someone means to force someone to do something, or to force someone to believe or accept something. That's what many Americans thought about cults in the 1980s, but Stevens says that many of these negative connotations are false. A "connotation" is like a definition, but it goes beyond the basic definition. It's additional ideas or opinions that we have about something that go beyond just the definition you would find in the dictionary, what we would call the "denotation." For example, if you had a happy childhood when you were growing up and your home always smelled like spaghetti sauce. Well, then, you might have positive connotations (or positive associations) with the smell of tomatoes and garlic. Stevens is talking about people's negative connotations with the word "cult" because instead of thinking of a cult as just a small religious group, they think that it is a dangerous, satanic group of people who have been brainwashed by a megalomaniacal, deluded leader. Well, that sounds scary to me, too! Despite what Stevens says, I think that this is still people's impression, because sometimes that is true. In fact, we consider a cult a cult now because it does meet these characteristics.

Let's listen again to Stevens' quote:

[recording]

And then in the 1980s, this imaginary danger of satanic cults spread across North America, and the word "cult" was permanently changed. It had become defined as a group of people who had been brainwashed by a megalomaniacal, deluded person who imposed severe restrictions on his followers, and most of these negative connotations are false.

[end of recording]

Some psychologists believe that the actual or true definition of a cult is a religion that is not "indigenous" to an area or a culture, meaning that it isn't local, it isn't



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from that culture. Here in the United States, the word “indigenous” is often associated with Native Americans (or American Indians), people who were here first, before the European settlers arrived. They are in other countries sometimes called “indigenous populations.” But here, we’re using the word “indigenous” to mean simply not from that culture or not from that location. Again, this is what some psychologists would like to say, but it’s not a definition that would be accepted by many Americans. For example, the Hare Krishnas is a religious group that came to the United States from India. At first people saw them as a cult, because they weren’t from here, because they looked different. They were new and unusual. In India, however, the Hare Krishnas were not a cult. Rather, they were called a “sect” (sect), which was a part of a particular religion – a particular kind of belief system, in this case, Hinduism. So, in one country they may be called a cult, in another country they’re called a religion or a sect (or part of a religion).

Some researchers believe that people who join a cult are at a crossroads in their life. To be “at a crossroads” means to be at a point in your life where many things are changing and where you have to make an important decision about your life. For example, when you graduate from high school or college, you are at a crossroads in your life. You have to decide which path – which road in life you’re going to take. Or if you’re like me, you just turn around and go back to school! People who join cults are often looking for answers in their life at these critical moments – at these important moments.

One professor explains why people join cults in order to get a sense of meaning and purpose. Let’s listen, and then we’ll go back and talk about what he said.

[recording]

These movements often meet a real psychological need for people who want meaning and purpose and structure. And many people have said that cults represent the unpaid bills of the mainstream religions, that these people did not find the religion in which they were raised or the religion that’s predominant in society satisfying to them.

[end of recording]

This researchers says that these cults – these movements – meet a psychological need for people who want meaning and purpose and structure. “Structure,” is a fixed way of doing something that doesn’t change over time. Someone who has a lot of structure in his or her day might always wake up at the





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same time, buy the same drink at the same coffee shop, park in the same place, begin work exactly at the same time of day, and so forth. Some people have a hard time creating structure on their own, so joining a cult for these people may help them find that structure.

The researcher says that many people have said that cults represent the unpaid bills of the mainstream religions. An “unpaid bill” is a piece of paper – or nowadays, an email perhaps – that you get from a company, asking you for money for something that you’ve purchased (something that you bought) or something that you’ve used. If you haven’t sent money to the company yet, then the bill is unpaid; it’s not paid. I may have unpaid bills for electricity and for the telephone on my desk, but I’ll pay them tomorrow, and after I pay them then they will be paid bills. If cults are the unpaid bills of the “mainstream,” or common, normal, large religions that people typically believe in, it means that they are a consequence of mainstream religion and its inability to reach out to people who are looking for answers in life. So, these are people who didn’t find what they wanted in more mainstream, popular religions. When those people can’t find those answers they turn to, or join a cult.

This researcher says that people may join a cult because they do not find the religion in which they were raised or the religion that is “predominant,” or most common, in society satisfying to them.

Let’s listen to this quote again:

[recording]

These movements often meet a real psychological need for people who want meaning and purpose and structure. And many people have said that cults represent the unpaid bills of the mainstream religions, that these people did not find the religion in which they were raised or the religion that’s predominant in society satisfying to them.

[end of recording]

Some people may wonder why these cults are so popular, or least numerous, in the United States. One researcher explains that it’s related to the American view of religion. Let’s listen to her comments, and then go back and explain them.

[recording]



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We have such a wide open sense of freedom about religion. There aren't the kind of legal constraints that there might be in other parts of the world and there's such a history of religious liberty and religious innovation in this country that there's reason to believe that we probably do have more than other countries do.

[end of recording]

She begins saying that there is a wide open sense of freedom about religion in the U.S. The phrase "wide open" means very open-minded, or willing to accept new ideas that might seem unusual or uncommon. She says that there aren't many legal "constraints," or limitations (restrictions) legally in the U.S. on religions as there are in other parts of the world.

She also says that the United States has a history of religious "liberty," or freedom, and religious innovation. "Innovation" (innovation) is the process of inventing or creating new things that didn't exist before, or that people hadn't even thought of before. The first computer would be an example of an innovation, because it was something that no one had thought of before. Religious innovation, then, means creating new religions. The researcher says that the United States has a lot of religious innovation, and that's why she thinks the U.S. has more types of religions and more cults than other countries do.

Let's listen to her one more time:

[recording]

We have such a wide open sense of freedom about religion. There aren't the kind of legal constraints that there might be in other parts of the world and there's such a history of religious liberty and religious innovation in this country that there's reason to believe that we probably do have more than other countries do.

[end of recording]

Most of the time cults are in the news (you can read about them or hear about them) when they have done something bad – something wrong. Most of us hear about cults only if their followers perhaps have killed someone or, as was the case here in the United States last year, when men are marrying more than one woman – having more than one wife at the same time. One wife is certainly enough, at least here in the United States! But there are other cults that don't do these kinds of things, and choose to live together because they share religious beliefs.



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So, that's American cults and their place in American society. Thanks to the Voice of America for providing the recordings and the story that we talked about today.

Now let's answer a few of your questions.

We have time for one question today. This one comes from Yuanjun (Yuanjun) in Germany. The question has to do with the difference between "liberty" and "freedom," when we use each of these words.

Both "freedom" and "liberty" refer to the condition of being free, or being allowed to do, say, and think what you want. "Liberty" is often considered a little more formal than "freedom." "Liberty" is often used to talk about more abstract ideas, as you might in government or politics or philosophy. In most cases, however, people use "freedom" and "liberty" in very similar ways.

"Liberty" comes from French, and "freedom" comes originally from German. Often words that are from French – Norman French, words that came into English as a result of the Norman conquest of 1066 are often used in a more formal way. These words from the French were spoken by the ruling class in England during the time, and they have always kept something of a higher status. The "ruling class" refers to the people who are running a country – the leaders of a country.

You don't have to be a leader of a country to email us and ask a question here at ESL Podcast. Just send your email or comment to [eslpod@eslpod.com](mailto:eslpod@eslpod.com). We don't have time for all of your questions, but we'll try to answer as many as we can.

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us next time on the English Café.

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