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# *Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies*

## *Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies*

James R. Lewis, Editor

The *Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies* (WJCS) publishes articles, book reviews and review essays in the new religious movements (NRMs) field. From Scientology to the New Age; Western Esoterism to neo-Shamanism; from popular religion in Japan to new religions in Korea, we aim to cover the field at the most comprehensive level. The WJCS also includes studies of new movements within traditional religions, such as the Charismatic movement in Christianity, Guru movements in Hinduism, so-called *Xie Jiao* in China and millenarian movements in indigenous societies. Additionally, the WJCS publishes articles and reviews books on certain quasi-religious phenomena, such as implicit religion, yoga, qigong, UFO societies and spiritual healing.

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## Introduction

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Welcome to the first issue of the *Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies*. There were a number of precursors to the contemporary study of New Religious Movements (NRMs). These range from earlier sociologists of religion (e.g., Weber's church and 'sect'), to anthropologists who study third world millenarian movements (e.g., 'cargo cults'). Nevertheless, as a distinct field of scholarly endeavor, NRM studies came into being in Japan in the wake of the explosion of religious innovation following the Second World War – an explosion of emergent spirituality evocatively captured in the title of an early study, *Rush Hour of the Gods* (1967). Even the name "new religions" is a direct translation of the expression *shin shukyo* that Japanese sociologists coined to refer to this phenomenon. "Movements" appears to have been added by Western sociologists who approached new religions in terms of social movements categories.

What the end of WWII was to Japan, the demise of the 60's counterculture was to Western nations, when there was an explosion of religious experimentation in Europe and North America. In the 1970s, researchers were predominantly sociologists of religion who conducted demographic studies of NRM members, theorized about why people joined, and analyzed NRMs' conflict with the social 'mainstream.' These researchers presented papers at social-scientific conferences (e.g., the SSSR and the ASR) and tended to publish in journals like the *JSSR* and *Sociological Analysis* (renamed *Sociology of Religion* in 1993).

This situation gradually changed across the course of the next two decades. There was an influx of researchers from religious studies backgrounds, especially in the wake of a series of violent incidents in the 1990s (Branch Davidians, Solar Temple, AUM Shinrikyo, Heaven's Gate, and the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments), which helped to bring NRMs into the mainstream of religious studies. Specialist journals began appearing in Nineties. And CESNUR, an annual gathering of NRM researchers, was initiated in the late eighties.

Though NRM Studies has expanded enormously over the past two decades, there have been no significant, in the sense of field-changing new questions or new methodologies, since NRM studies was embraced by religious studies in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Rather, like religious studies more generally, individual scholars have made use of new approaches to internet research, new interest in so-called 'conspirituality,' theorizing about the material dimension of religion, cognitive-evolutionary approaches and the like. However, there has been no Copernican revolution in the

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field as a whole (though some might disagree). Researchers continue to conduct demographic studies, continue to analyze social conflict, and conversion remains a major research topic.

The first NRM textbook appeared in 1973, Robert Ellwood's *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America*. (In 1982, Lewis was a teaching assistant for an NRM course at Duke University which used this text.) There are numerous books that present surveys of NRMs but which are not textbooks in the proper sense. Textbooks include: George Chryssides's *Exploring New Religions* (1999), John Saliba's *Understanding New Religious Movements* (AltaMira 1997; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2003), Elijah Siegler's *New Religious Movements* (2007), Paul Oliver's *New Religious Movements: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2008/2015), Lorne Dawson's *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (OUP 1998; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2006) and Douglas Cowan's and David Bromley's *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History* (2007). This last title is a short book in Blackwell's Brief Histories of Religion series. More recent volumes that can be used as textbooks are anthologies; e.g., Olav Hammer & Michael Rothstein's, *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements* (2012) and George Chryssides and Benjamin Zeller's *The Bloomsbury Companion to New Religious Movements* (2014).

The reasons behind the ongoing expansion of NRM Studies are relatively straight-forward: Similar to circumstances that gave rise to the expansion of Islamic Studies in the wake of 9-11, NRMs continue to be viewed as potentially threatening, controversial phenomena. Because of this, more and more universities are offering classes on NRMs, prompting university libraries to build their collections in this area. Additionally, this is a topic in which other kinds of professionals as well as educated non-specialists are interested. The study of NRMs is also intrinsically interesting, prompting more and more researchers to specialize in this field; the growing popularity of NRM studies has effectively established New Religions as a major area of study.

Next to 'Introduction to Religion,' surveys of 'World Religions' and Bible (OT; NT) courses, New Religions is one of the most frequently taught courses in a typical religious studies curriculum. Lewis has taught NRM courses wherever he has held a university appointment: in the University of Wisconsin system, at DePaul University, at UiT-Norway's Arctic University, and at Wuhan University. (Note that courses on NRMs are so popular that Oxford University Press even publishes a guide to *Teaching New Religious Movements*).

The literature on NRMs is now enormous. High-prestige academic presses have been list-building in the NRMs area. There are currently at least five book series focused on NRMs or in areas related to NRMs – published by Palgrave-Macmillan, Routledge, Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press (Esotericism), and Brill. There was formerly a neo-Pagan series, but the demise of Altamira's Pagan Studies series has done nothing to staunch the flood of academic studies of contemporary Paganism.

In addition to the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* and *Nova Religio*, three new NRM journals have appeared in this century: *The Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review*, *The Journal of CESNUR* and the *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*. This latter periodical is the official journal of the International Society for the Study of New Religions (ISSNR), the first professional membership organization in the NRM field. Certain subfields have already

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constituted themselves as distinct fields of study with their own periodicals – e.g., Western Esotericism (*Aries*), Masonic Studies (*Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism*), New Age Studies (*JASANAS*), and neo-Pagan Studies (*Pomegranate*).

Literature-wise, there is thus an abundance of riches. So, why is there a need for a new journal on this subject? Though in a sense the academic study of New Religions began in Asia, contemporary specialist journals tend to be published in North America and Europe. It thus seemed appropriate to initiate an academic NRM journal that would be published in Asia, hence the *Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies*.

Our lead article, Jørn Borup's "Soka Gakkai International and Diamond Way Buddhism," explores the tension between the self-perceptions of two Buddhist groups that see themselves as traditional organizations, but which are, from an alternate perspective, new religious movements. While different in many ways, the two groups are also interestingly comparable with their transnational histories, local developments, institutional structures, charisma agency, sectarian consciousness and general popularity. Their characteristics and developments are analyzed individually and comparatively as both exemplars of modern Buddhism and of Buddhist NRMs.

While Buddhist groups are transparently religions, the field of NRM studies is flexible enough to encompass radical racist groups on the fringe of what most observers would classify as religion. In "Proud Boys, Nationalism, and Religion," Margo Kitts examines an opportunistic hate group whose message of white male chauvinism is infused with religious and nationalist symbols. They fit into a global trend of religious nationalism that has reacted to religious pluralism, that entertains atavistic yearnings, and that celebrate a founding hero, Donald Trump. Enthralled with fist-fighting, in both their initiatory rituals and their engagements with antifa groups, they delight in offending the genteel sensibilities they associate with the "white liberal elite."

Describing a distinct but comparable subculture, in "Canada's 'Freemen-on-the-land': The Timeless Quest for *Gnosis*," Susan Palmer lays out some of the basics of Canada's freeman. In particular, her study explores the Gnostic elements in the thought world of a contemporary Canadian anarchist movement known as the "Freemen-on-the-Land" (FOL), sometimes explained as the Canadian version of the U.S.'s Sovereign Citizens. Perhaps surprisingly, she demonstrates that these two philosophical schools, the Gnostics of early Christianity and the 21st century Freemen, despite a separation of centuries and geographical distance – espouse myths and doctrines that convey essentially the same message, which is the gospel of "gnosis."

In "Identity, Roles and Narratives of Ex-Members: Some Examples from the Swedish Religious Community Knutby Filadelfia," Liselotte Frisk shifts our attention from the macro to the micro by focusing on the narratives that ex-members of a small Pentecostal community relate in an effort to understand their membership period and to reconstruct their post-membership identity. Based mainly on the preliminary enquirer report, where three of the former leaders of the group were accused by six ex-members of physical and sexual abuse, Frisk demonstrates that the ex-members tend to identify with the Victim role and the Apostate role in relation to their former group. The role of therapists in the new identity construction is also discussed.

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While Frisk's discussion makes use of the distinction between academic treatments of new religions and the so called "anti-cult" approach, George Chryssides focuses on a detailed contrast between the two perspectives in his "Cult Critics and Cult Apologists: Can there be middle ground?" As he points out, the phenomenon of new religious movements (NRMs) or "cults" has given rise to two polarized camps – scholars who seek a value-neutral approach, and vociferous critics, often referred to as the "anti-cult movement." His analysis draws on a number of old controversies surrounding NRMs, in an attempt to consider whether there might be scope for resolving differences.

In our concluding article, "The Divine Mother of Carramar: The Motivations, Construction, and Stylistics of Caodaism's Second Sydney Temple," Christopher Hartney discusses the opening of the Temple dedicated to the Holy Mother of Caodaism (a Vietnamese new religion) in the South-western Sydney suburb of Carramar. This new temple serves as a complimentary temple to the one built for her consort Đức Cao Đài, or God the Father, in the nearby suburb of Wiley Park. The need in Caodaism for separate divine mother and father temples is a consequence of this religion's growth and development during the twentieth century. In this article, Hartney supplies historical background information and a theological overview of the Caodaist religion.



## **Buddhist NRMs – Soka Gakkai International and Diamond Way Buddhism**

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### **Abstract:**

Buddhism in the West has been studied by scholars from different fields using various concepts and models to analyze its diverse configurations. Focusing on the groups' relations to an old Asian religious context, transformations and adaptations have been perspectives for mainly historians of religion, while the focus on their 'newness' has made it obvious for sociologists of religion also to compare these with other groups within the category of 'New Religious Movements'. This article will describe two such Buddhist groups with Asian origin in a Western setting, namely Diamond Way Buddhism and Soka Gakkai in Denmark. While being different in many ways, the two groups also are interestingly comparable with their transnational histories, local developments, institutional structures, charisma agency, sectarian consciousness and general popularity. Their characteristics and developments will be analyzed individually and comparatively as both exemplars of modern Buddhism and Buddhist NRMs.

### **Keywords:**

Buddhism, Buddhist NRMs, Diamond Way Buddhism, Soka Gakkai, Denmark

### **Buddhist New Religious Movements**

It is rather understandable that neither the charismatic and controversial 'white lama' Ole Nydahl nor the followers of the Danish branch of Soka Gakkai International are interested in being characterized by the term New Religious Movement (hereafter NRM). While the 'newness' might signal dynamic innovation and for some religious groups have strategic relevance, most contemporary Buddhists would insist on belonging to the broader, time-transcending family of 'Buddhism'. Ole Nydahl's *Diamond Buddhism* and *Soka Gakkai Denmark* are thus in their own understanding not NRMs, but simply *Buddhism*, and even prototypical exemplars thereof.

Conceptual and classificatory clarity challenge also scholarly approaches. While sociologists of religion can legitimately focus on the newness and the obvious comparisons to other NRMs, historians of religion with equal legitimacy can refer to the historical continuations of a 2,500 years

old axial religion living by and transmuting into always new transfigurations of itself as a typical *traditional* religion. Buddhism in a (post)modern Western and global context is thus a field studied by both historians and sociologists of religion, anthropologists and (to a lesser extent) Buddhologists, typically each with their own theoretical and methodological research take.

The diversity of Buddhism has itself become a scholarly genre in the last couple of decades. Modernization and globalization have opened for hitherto unprecedented communication means and channels within the Buddhist worlds, but also produced new forms and groups. Western Buddhism – or Buddhism in the West – has become a research topic of its own, and B. R. Ambedkar's concept from 1956 to designate his new kind of boundary crossing Buddhism, 'Navayana' ('New Buddhism'), is occasionally used as a generic term for such modern Buddhism. The plural representations of the religion are sometimes just termed 'Buddhisms', and the diversity typically categorized according to sectarian traditions (Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, Nichiren, Zen, Kagyu etc.) or analyzed in relation to topics and phenomena (diaspora, migration, spirituality, secularization, globalization etc.) or historical developments (e.g. historical, traditional, modern, post-colonial, postmodern).

One often used designator to conceptually categorize the diversity of contemporary Buddhism in America (and later, the rest of the West) has been the so-called 'Two Buddhisms', analytically identified and characterized variously by ethnicity or religiosity. The immigrant or heritage Buddhists are thus those with an Asian origin as refugees, migrants, or descendants who practice a form of lived religion 'carried over' and transformed from its Asian origin, initially by some scholars termed 'ethnic Buddhism'. The transnational relations with the ancestral traditions are typically important as assets of diaspora or heritage preservation, sometimes sanctioned institutionally by missionary interests. Jan Nattier thus from a supply perspective called Soka Gakkai in America a form of 'export Buddhism' or 'evangelical Buddhism' (Nattier 1998), since its organizational setting with its proselytizing efforts can be seen as a strategic push factor of a typical modern Buddhist NRM.

The 'converts' on the other hand, are typically understood as being the 'white Buddhists' with a Euro-American ethnic origin and Christian-Jewish religious background, who use and practice Buddhism according to ideals filtering out elements considered 'cultural' or even 'religious' (e.g. magic, miracles, ancestor belief) and typically focusing on individualized self-development. This kind of Buddhism is based on a long reception history going back to enlightenment ideals of rationality and romanticist ideas of mystical experiences, balancing between a secularized and re-enchanting version of elite religiosity. The counter-cultural movement and post-modern individualization helped shape the contours of a popular religion also for the masses, not least in its psychologized version catering to contemporary cultural ideals of spiritual authenticity. Both Christians, Jews, spirituals and 'the none's' have thus appropriated and participated in elements of this kind of 'convert Buddhism', not always enthusiastically appreciated by the 'true Buddhists'.

While the 'Two Buddhisms' model has worked as an analytical tool to describe and explain the apparent existence of separate communities and kinds of religiosities, in recent years it has been criticized both from scholars and the Buddhists themselves (in the U.S. quite often being the same).

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The concepts are too vague (e.g. many ‘converts’ have not converted) and essentialized (how many generations does it take to become an American rather than ‘an immigrant?’), and often based on problematic normative assumptions (e.g. the spiritual convert Buddhism being more ‘authentic’ than the ‘cultural Buddhism’ of the immigrants). It is a fact, however, that there tends to be separate religious communities, especially so in European contexts with a much shorter history of migration from Asian countries. Thus, typically Thai immigrants and descendants go to Thai temples, Vietnamese to Vietnamese temples, while ‘whites’ go to Zen centers or Tibetan temples (primarily because these cater to contemporary spirituality and because there are very few Japanese and Tibetans to use them).

Typically, it is the individualized, spiritualized, globalized ‘convert Buddhism’ rather than the ‘heritage Buddhism’ which is compared to other NRMs. It is, however, very difficult to apply the generalized models directly to the empirical landscape, and several of the ‘immigrant Buddhist’ communities (such as Dhammakaya, Foguangshan or even some of the ‘traditional’ groups) share as much of the defining characteristics of NRM, as do the ‘convert’ groups. Some focus on hagiographically legitimated charismatic leadership in organizations based on membership of new or transformed traditional religions. Some of them display various degrees of sectarian exclusivism pointing to religious innovation, but also opposition to existing religious orders with new authority structures and highly committed members. While some of the latter might have been ‘seekers’ in ‘movement milieus’ (Lewis 2013), specific Buddhist networks, practices and values have established its own tradition of what could be termed ‘Buddhist milieus’.

This article investigates two specific lay Buddhist groups in Denmark, one (*Diamond Way Buddhism*) based on a Tibetan tradition originating in Denmark before globally expanding, and the other (*Soka Gakkai Denmark*) with an origin in Japan having transnational trajectories throughout the world. Both groups insert themselves into the Buddhist tradition but are at the same time also exemplars of NRMs with mutually corresponding but also interestingly distinctive characteristics. Both groups were established in Denmark in the 1970s at a time, where ‘foreign’ religions were very rare in a religiously and ethnically homogenous nation with a *de facto* Protestant state church. They were granted official status as ‘recognized religious groups’ in 1989 (Diamond Way, under the name of Karma Kadjy Skolen) and 2019 (Soka Gakkai Denmark) which 16 Buddhist groups have acquired in 2020.<sup>1</sup> Both groups were also typical products of what Colin Campbell called ‘Easternization’ (Campbell 2007), being representations of ‘Eastern spirituality’ with its relevance and symbolic capital for both (early) counter-cultural hippies and (later) spirituality seeking postmaterialist individuals. The two groups’ identities as Buddhist groups and their characteristics of also being Buddhist NRMs will be the main aim of the article. The historical developments and transformations will be described before analyzing and comparing them as

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<sup>1</sup> Recognized religious groups outside the Evangelical-Lutheran Church have the right to perform legal marriages and to get access to indirect state subsidies. Not all religious communities in Denmark have or are interested in getting this official recognition, which mainly function as a ‘blueprint’ of being a ‘real religion’. On legal rights of religious communities in Denmark, see [https://www.km.dk/fileadmin/share/Trossamfund/Freedom\\_of\\_religion.pdf](https://www.km.dk/fileadmin/share/Trossamfund/Freedom_of_religion.pdf). On Buddhism in Denmark, see Borup 2019.

typical Buddhist NRMs. Both Danish and English primary sources will be used, as will references to previous research projects conducted by the author and Center for Contemporary Religion at Aarhus University.<sup>2</sup>

### **Diamond Way Buddhism**

[Diamond Way teachings] are, above all, in well-educated Western societies an enormous enrichment for the people who bravely want to shape their own future.

Ole Nydahl 2005, 10 (*my translation*).

#### *Charismatization of a Viking Buddhist*

After Ole Nydahl (b. 1941, hereafter ON) with his late wife Hannah (1946–2007) in 1968 went to Kathmandu on honeymoon, a youth life with fast motorcycles, boxing and drug experiments was gradually changed into a religious life after meeting Tibetan Buddhism. Ole's conversion was characteristic for also his later emphasis on sensory experiences with mystical insights:

“Then the lama leaned forward, laid his hands on our heads, and gave us his blessing. He transferred the power of the Kagyupa lineage to us, and I still sweat so many years after just by remembering this: everything became light, and a powerful energy went through us. We shook from head to toe and everything was perfect.”

(Nydahl 1983, 38-39, *my translation*)

Their meeting with the Karma Kagyu lamas Kalu Rinpoche and the 16<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa were institutionally rubber-stamped by the latter giving both of them the Buddhist refuge and Bodhisattva vows. The Karmapa also asked him to spread the Vajrayana tradition in the West, sending the Queen of Denmark a recommendation letter.<sup>3</sup> In ON's own account this was the fulfilment of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century guru Padmasambhava's prophesy "When the iron bird flies and the fire horse rides and the Tibetans are scattered like ants in the world, then Buddhism will come to the land of the red faces".<sup>4</sup> The Nydahls did not spend the traditionally required three years' ascetic training in Tibetan monasteries. This has since been a point of critique from other more traditionally oriented Buddhists in the Tibetan lineages, but ON has often referred to Karmapa's acceptance of this as unnecessary and in accordance with his wishes. Eventually, the official bestowing the title of 'lama' to ON came after the death of the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa by the lineage holder

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<sup>2</sup> Center for Contemporary Religion (<https://samtidsreligion.au.dk/>) has mapped and analyzed religion in Denmark since the early 2000s, and I have been responsible for investigating Buddhist perspectives in all projects. While Ole Nydahl and his Diamond Way Buddhism is sporadically mentioned in other research, surprisingly very little thorough analysis has been done. Bee Scherer's work in particular is valuable, not least since he as an 'insider' (until 2012) and scholar-practitioner has followed the group from both the inside and outside, the latest years also from a more critical distance. Eva Saalfrank has done ethnographic fieldwork amongst Tibetan Buddhist groups in Germany, including Diamond Way (1997). While Soka Gakkai has not previously been studied in its Danish and Scandinavian context (see, however, Borup forthcoming), its Japanese (e.g. McLaughlin 2019) and global (e.g. Métreux 2013 and Porcu 2018) presence has received quite a substantial attention.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.lama-ole-nydahl.de/dokumente/k\\_letter\\_01.pdf](https://www.lama-ole-nydahl.de/dokumente/k_letter_01.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> The quote has been used in several of Nydahl's writings and talks. It is directly aimed at in the title of the Danish book *Når jernfuglen flyver* ('when the iron bird flies') from 1983.

the 14<sup>th</sup> Shamarpa.<sup>5</sup> ON's intimate belonging to the tradition has later been asserted by his proclamation of being an emanation of the protector deity Māhākala and by seeing his life as a modern version of the master Milarepa – auto-hagiographic elements of spiritual authority suggested to be examples of “self-mystification and self-aggrandisement”.<sup>6</sup>

Achieving status as a lama is part of a tradition based on esoteric transmission from previous enlightened masters, with the religious authority being recognized by the institution. But his ascribed charisma from his later followers was also based on characteristics blending traditional ‘religious’ traits with modern, often controversial, attributes. He inscribes himself into a long Tibetan tradition of enlightened masters, and throughout his career has had a network of important representatives from the tradition around him. But he is also quintessentially a modern, Western lama. His hippie background is still portrayed positively in his talks, and his individualized spirituality proclaiming freedom and self-development fits well with the appearance of a strong, healthy, masculine white man who also in the prime of his life enjoys fast motorcycles, parachuting and women.<sup>7</sup> The charismatization of him as a religious rock star entering the scene for devoted followers is also a performance of the aura of religious power.

Stephen Batchelor, another influential Western (British) Buddhist, describes ON as a “sun-tanned Viking” having an “ecstatic, sensuous version of Tantric Buddhism” with “fundamentalist and sectarian overtones” (Batchelor 1994: 114). The Viking image has been used by ON himself; in recent years, he has increasingly seen his own role as a religious warrior fighting against Muslims and defending Western freedom<sup>8</sup> with controversial anti-Muslim utterances having made the German Buddhist Union (Deutsche Buddhistische Union) expel the Diamond Way group. The image of a strong Viking Buddhist not being constrained by – or rather defending what he sees as pure and uncontaminated - cultural values and norms has turned Western Buddhist away from the group, but it seems also to be a ‘selling point’ attracting others.

The composite figure of the Buddhist lama and charismatic leader of a NRM is inherent also in its teachings and practices. It is very modern and Western, with its proclaimed democracy, gender equality, instrumental relevance and individualized spirituality having ‘filtered away’ irrelevant Asian and premodern elements. But it is also very traditional with transferal of magic power (through amulets, telepathy and *phowa* rituals), devotion to gods and lamas, religious paraphernalia, and belief in supernatural cosmologies (including miracles). The devotees see themselves as belonging to an “elite of the most capable people who in past lives accumulated good karma [with] the possibility of using spiritual methods at one’s disposal in everyday

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.lama-ole-nydahl.de/dokumente/kenpo\\_choedrak.htm](https://www.lama-ole-nydahl.de/dokumente/kenpo_choedrak.htm)

<sup>6</sup> See Scherer’s informative article [https://info.buddhism.com/Ole\\_Nydahl\\_and\\_Diamond\\_Way\\_B\\_Scherer.html#DiamondWayBeginnings](https://info.buddhism.com/Ole_Nydahl_and_Diamond_Way_B_Scherer.html#DiamondWayBeginnings). Scherer also quotes Saalfrank 1997: 131–132 for such critical remarks.

<sup>7</sup> ON’s view on gender is rather traditional and has been critiqued by Scherer as ‘macho Buddhism’ (Scherer 2011).

<sup>8</sup> ON’s critique of Islam has increased in the last decade, but it has been part of his worldviews throughout his career. He is fond of the mythological figure Holger the Dane who was said to stop Muslim invasion in the Pyrenees, and in recent years he has met with people considered to be part of the far-right movements in Europe. That Buddha was Arian with Ukrainian immigrants parents (and thus also had blue eyes) was apparently explained by ON in a now deleted newsgroup (but referred to by Trimondi 2002, 618n 250).

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situations” (Klingorová & Vojtíšek 2018, 296). The primarily young seekers are ‘structurally available’ (Dawson 1999) for institutional belonging into a very accessible religion offering self-discovery and conversions with the possibility of also ‘tapping into’ the experiences and charisma of ON. The most experienced students even get the possibility of being ‘empowered’ by the lama as teachers and ‘ombudsmen’ of the group.<sup>9</sup>

### *From Danish NRM to global religion*

When Ole and Hannah Nydahl in 1972 established the first Buddhist center in Denmark, they probably had not in mind that they had begun the journey a global religious organization 50 years later having more than 650 centers worldwide. The first center was expanded to three villas in the ‘embassy quarters’ of Copenhagen, inhabited by lay Buddhists (after an initial test period with monks and lamas). It has since spread to eight local centers nationwide, and since 1989 with the help of anticult leader Johannes Aagaard (who had an interest in defining and defending ‘true religion’) the group has been an officially approved ‘recognized religious community’ as the Danish representation of the Tibetan Karma Kagyu lineage. Danish members, the number of which has been stable for many years with only a few hundreds, like their international co-members get access to the whole package with institutional fellowship with committed followers, a worldwide network, and an active media organization strategically publishing and filtering information about ON and the religious group.<sup>10</sup>

Diamond Way Buddhism has often presented its universality as simply ‘Buddhism’, and for many years, ON was in Denmark often portrayed in the media as ‘the Danish lama’.<sup>11</sup> ON’s promotion of a ‘Western’ Buddhism can, however, also be seen as a process of de- and re-culturalization, with many of his followers even insisting that Buddhism is not a religion, but rather a spiritual technique pointing to – as also one of ON’s books is titled – ‘the way things are’.<sup>12</sup> The welcoming spirit at the centers (for also temporary visitors) combined with making lay Buddhism relevant in modern societies through accessible programs and activities contribute to underlining the success of a contemporary, global Buddhist group. The many young and predominantly ‘white’ members - by ON simply referred to as ‘friends’ - are probably not even aware of the sectarian conflicts within the Karma Kagyu school over the recognition process of choosing the right

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.diamondway-buddhism.org/diamond-way/>.

<sup>10</sup> The group is very active in presenting its own versions in SoME. Their own homepages are very professional and informative, and the lack of critical information on Wikipedia sites seems to legitimate the often-voiced criticism from ex-members of pro-active censorship. On critical investigations of ON and the Diamond Way, see Tenzin Peljor’s blog <https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2014/06/30/propaganda-the-making-of-the-holy-lama-ole-nydahl/>.

<sup>11</sup> Some years ago, they even succeeded in having a text book on (their) Buddhism published as (general) Buddhism for Danish school children, and a Danish TV documentary in a public service station on Buddhism was seen through the perspectives of the group. In 2004, Ole Nydahl was the official representative of Buddhism as spiritual supervisor in the Olympic Games in Athens and in 2015 he received an award for dialogue, coexistence and peace from the UNESCO Association for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue.

<sup>12</sup> From her fieldwork in the Netherlands, Wiering thus writes that “all practitioners stubbornly emphasize their ‘non-religiousness’” (Wiering 2016, 385). This has often been voiced to me in a Danish context, both from Diamond Way Buddhism members as well as from members of other Buddhist groups. It cannot be an official statement, however, since the advantages of the status of being a recognized religious organization demands fulfilment of criteria defining as a religion.

inheritor after the death of the (Tibetan) 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa in 1981. The controversies had reverberations in also Danish and European contexts, dividing the Tibetan Buddhist communities into two, one for and one against ‘the Ole Nydahl wing’.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, the group self-consciously also understands and promotes itself as a specific kind of Buddhism. It inscribes itself into a patriarchal lineage of previous masters going back to Buddha Shakyamuni with a continued transmission of authority from teacher (lama) to pupil (disciple) (<http://buddha.dk/buddhisme/diamantvejsbuddhisme/>). Diamond Way is described as a translation of Vajrayana, which is a common concept for one of the main Buddhist traditions mainly existing today in the Himalayan region. Vajrayana, being “the most direct of the three levels of Buddhist teachings” (<https://www.diamondway-buddhism.org/diamond-way/>) and “one of the old schools of Tibet” (ibid.), has thus been appropriated as an emblem for the specific global network of Ole Nydahl-adhering Karma Kagyu Buddhists with their European center being inscribed into the aforementioned prophecy as the new home in the Western world (<https://europe-center.org/history>). With centers also in Asian countries (Nepal, Thailand, Mongolia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, South Korea and Japan), the Easternization process beginning with counter-cultural hippie Buddhism has circulated and returned to its Asian context in a new, ‘Westernized’ and globalized form.<sup>14</sup>

Bee Scherer’s characterization of the group as a “‘neo-orthoprax’” Tibetan Buddhist lay movement” (Scherer 2012) with a “mixture of modernist features, old boy’s charm and apparent hedonist trappings” (Scherer 2018, 9) thus seems quite plausible. Blending and oscillating between an open, global and modern version of a universal Buddhism on the one hand and a sectarian exclusivist group with no relations to other Buddhist groups and strong demands of unilineal commitment<sup>15</sup> on the other hand are the main characteristics of the Diamond Way group. It is both a typical modern Western representation of a classical religion and a typical Buddhist NRM easily compared to other NRMs.

### **SGI Denmark**

“They shouted and screamed, and all wore the same black suit. I did not understand what they were saying or what was going on and felt like a dog in a game of skittles”

(Soka Gakkai Denmark 2012, 25: The present leader of SGI Denmark, Jan Møller, about his first experience of a Soka Gakkai meeting in Japan)

#### *From revitalistic prosperity NRM to global lay Buddhism*

The Japanese group Soka Gakkai (‘Value Creating Society’) has equally inscribed itself into the tradition of a classical Buddhist lineage. Nichiren (1222-1282) was a Buddhist monk living in

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<sup>13</sup> Apart from Diamond Way Buddhism (Karma Kadjy Skolen), there are today six Buddhist groups with Tibetan orientation in Denmark.

<sup>14</sup> On the circulation between East and West of Eastern spiritual traditions, see Borup and Fibiger 2017.

<sup>15</sup> In a letter to his students, ON warns against mixing methods and teachers <https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2016/03/20/a-warning-letter-from-lama-ole-nydahl-dont-mix-tantric-methods-and-teachers/>. Scherer speculates whether such ‘late-charismatic paranoia’ mixed with ‘Ole-ist’ sectarianism will define the future or not (Scherer 2018, 10).

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Kamakura Japan, reforming what he saw as degenerate Buddhism with his insistence on reading and reciting the Lotus Sutra as the main means of approaching enlightenment. In 1930, the educational reformers Makiguchi Tsunesaburo (1871-1944) and Toda Jōsei (1900-1958) joined the Nichiren Shōshū sect, and thereafter institutionalized Soka Gakkai as a semi-independent lay organization, legally functioning as a distinct religious group. Soka Gakkai in the post-war period later became Japan's largest NRM, further continuing its expansion with the establishment of Soka Gakkai International (hereafter SGI) and its charismatic leader Ikeda Daisaku (1928- ). In 1991, Soka Gakkai split from its mother organisation, and has since then become the world's largest lay Buddhist group with 12 million followers in 188 countries with own rituals, personnel, terminology and a structured organization. It can be characterized as both a nationalistic revitalization as well as a globalistic movement (Dawson 1998, 590), and its exchange models of economic and religious capital makes it suitable to also term it 'prosperity Buddhism' (Borup 2018). Levi McLaughlin refers to it as a "mimetic nation-state" (McLaughlin 2019, 19), since in Japan its institutions, activities, and ideologies are like nation-state enterprises. Soka Gakkai in Japan is listed by Agency of Cultural Affairs under 'other' as a NRM (*shin shūkyō*), rather than as a Buddhist group. It sees itself, however, as the true, living representative of Nichiren Buddhism, and internationally often simply as 'Buddhism'. As a globalized modern religion, it has been successful in "skilfully adapting their religious practices to each culture [and] the Buddhist teachings of SGI worldwide help to provide a sense of uniformity and unity worldwide among SGI members [...] applicable to everyone everywhere" (Métreaux 2013, 427, 428). While Soka Gakkai in Japan has been entangled in scandals and controversies and known especially in its early phase to be rather aggressive in its missionary approaches, this has only to a lesser extent been the case abroad. It does, however, have a "clear evangelist strategy" and a "clearly articulated recruitment strategy" (Waterhouse 2002, 111) making local and national SGI groups continue their exclusivistic isolation from other Buddhist groups. In most countries, SGI – like the Diamond Way Buddhist groups - does not participate in other trans-sectarian Buddhist families and activities. It provides its own members with an entire package not needing alternative approaches and practices. Many of its adherents do not have much previous knowledge about or interest in Buddhism and religion, although the characteristics and social backgrounds of the followers in Europe (as well as in Japan) has changed in the last decades.<sup>16</sup> Other Buddhist groups, on the other hand, will typically not recognise SGI as 'true Buddhism', placing them instead in a less prestigious terminological family of NRM.

### *From immigrant Buddhism to spiritual convert Buddhism*

"While he was [sightseeing] Copenhagen, he chanted *daimoku* inside with a fervent wish that bodhisattvas would also appear from the ground here" (SGI Danmark 2012, 19, my translation),

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<sup>16</sup> Lucas Pokorny's description of the social composition of SGI members in Austria is probably not unique: "the majority of practitioners throughout the 1970s and early 1980s belonged to the lower middle-class, which was in line with the contemporary situation in other overseas branches and in Japan, something which would gradually change in Japan and the West in the 1990s and 2000s with the emergence of a more upper middleclass basis" (Pokorny 2014 22).



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Ikeda wrote about his visit to Denmark in 1961, prophetically foreseeing or strategically planning later establishments of SGI in also Nordic hemispheres. Ikeda's travels around the world are legendary for his devotees and narrates the contours of a spiritual world-conqueror and globetrotter transcending cultural borders and expanding the religious empire of a successful religion. Ikeda is not promoted as an enlightened master and has not been ascribed the same attributes as Tibetans lamas of being part of an esoteric chain of patriarchs. He is neither a priest, since the lay group stresses the importance of a non-monastic community for the people. Ikeda, like his predecessors Makiguchi and Toda, is a professional lay person and a teacher (*sensei*) ambitiously propagating a 'human revolution' for the world. His ascribed charisma is typically attributed to his human skills as both a teacher, thinker, author, artist, musician and spiritual world leader. What has pejoratively been termed 'Ikedaism' does not, however, phenomenologically differ substantially from the almost superhuman characteristics, which the group's hagiographic descriptions imply. When Ikeda has visited a country, it is an institutional blueprint of recognition. And it is a sign of almost theophanic power.

The first phase of SGI abroad was typically constituted by Japanese families having emigrated from Japan carrying their religious affiliation into a new cultural and geographic context. As opposed to the imported 'convert Buddhism' of ON and the Diamond Way Buddhism, it was thus an 'immigrant religion' with focus on ethnic identification. In the U.S. it was part of the religious market with other diasporic Japanese religions, some of which were introduced already in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with working migrants in Hawaii and California (Porcu 2018), where the 'heritage religion' was a means cultural integration. Also Soka Gakkai members later in history saw their religion as a religious and cultural capital helping to build a sense of social cohesion in diaspora. With its expansion and global ambitions especially from the 1970s, the organization saw a missionary potential in supporting and propagating such 'export Buddhism'. Ikeda's visits abroad was part of such missionary activities in spreading the teaching (*kōsen-rufu*).

Most hippies and counter-culture youngsters interested in 'things spiritually Asian' looked for Zen, vipassana or Tibetan Buddhism with its monks, lamas, masters and self-developmental meditation techniques. Some seekers also found Soka Gakkai through different paths<sup>17</sup>, especially later when SGI turned global and books, rituals, and material elements of the religion became more accessible and international. Today, Soka Gakkai International is the largest Buddhist organization in Europe (Borup forthcoming).

Some individuals also travelled the other way, finding or re-inventing their 'own religion' abroad. One such example is Masaaki Kamio. In 1965 he landed in Helsinki with a one-way ticket. Fascinated by the Nordic countries and escaping Japanese society as a 21-year old life-explorer, he later ended up in a Danish folk highschool Askov Højskole. He changed his name to Mark, and was open-mindedly absorbing Danish and Western language, culture and religion. Kamio's family were Soka Gakkai members, and Mark did bring his own *gohonzon* (sacred object) with him, and occasionally he would chant in front of it in his room. After studying the tradition of Danish

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<sup>17</sup> See Borup forthcoming on Japanese Buddhism in Europe, including discussions of Zen and Soka Gakkai's different trajectories.

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education and *højskole* philosophy, including the teachings of the Danish educational Christian thinkers N.F.S. Grundtvig and Christen Cold he came to further deepen and appreciate his Soka Gakkai identity. He shared his growing enthusiasm with his roommate, Jan Møller, and after some years of practice and transnational travel to and from Japan, the two of them in 1983 established the Danish section of SGI. Kamio became the first national leader, followed by Møller in 2002, neither of whom having expressed personal competences of a charismatic nature. Kamio retrospectively describes himself as “an ordinary member” who only later really understood his responsibility of spreading Buddhism in Denmark (SGI Denmark 2012, 27).

Before the establishment of the group, a few Japanese Soka Gakkai members gathered in small groups for practice or social meetings. They spoke Japanese, and no ethnic Danes were invited or interested in joining the groups, whose commonality was cultural as much as religious, with a diversity also containing “fanatics, moralists and hippies” (SGI Denmark 2012, 39). With a strong “missionary spirit” (ibid., 85), new propagation ideals, easier access to an alter (*gohonzon*), and an interest in engaging children in the “future group” (ibid., 88) the membership increased substantially. In 2020, there are more than 1,300 members participating in events in the main headquarters (*kaikan*) at Nordisk Kulturcenter in Copenhagen, or in one of the organisation’s six main regions and almost 70 local groups. In 2018, the group gained status as a recognised religious organisation, signalling its identity as a ‘true religion’. While there are still some of the Japanese members ‘from the old days’, the vast majority today are ‘convert Buddhists’ of ethnic Danish origin. The teachings, meetings, activities and publications are all in Danish, with transnational relations to Japan being one of the factors making also the Danish group participate in the global family.

Like Diamond Way Buddhism and other NRM Buddhist groups, Soka Gakkai Denmark adheres to a worldview and practice oriented towards progress. Ikeda’s ideas of a human revolution are cherished, as are the overall global and societal potentials for development. Reaching out to society has increasingly been an ideal. The group arranges exhibitions and seminars related to peace, participates in interreligious dialogues and activities for young people at museums and music festivals. Askov Højskole, where Møller and Kamio met before establishing the group, has since been a center of exchange between Soka Gakkai in Denmark and Japan, and mutual educational ideals have been voiced also in the media by some of the school’s teachers. Societal ideals of a ‘human revolution’ are also reflected at individual level for self-developing spiritual seekers, whom Ikeda calls ‘the earth’s bodhisattvas’.

“An inner motivated change in the individual person has an extremely positive effect on their surroundings and life as a whole, resulting in the rejuvenation of the whole society”

(<https://sgi-dk.org/pages/soka-gakkai-international-sgi>, my translation).

A leader in one of the group’s magazines described 2019 as

“the year of soka victory. Soka victory means that everyone rises and wins. The victory is to find the courage to challenge the part of the heart that is trying to hold

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back our lives. The victory also lies in continuing along the path we have decided to follow, and sticking to our decision. The most important thing is to remain faithful. If we continue, we will definitely win.”

(Green 2019, 3, my translation)

Both at meetings and in their periodic journal *Soka Renaissance* commitments to such ideals are expressed through personal conversion stories and narratives of how the practice with chanting the *daimoku* (the Soka Gakkai ‘mantra’ *namu myōhō rengekyō*) and reading Ikeda’s books bring transformative values into the members’ lives. While societal upward mobility was a main driving factor in the groups early phases in Japan, it has increasingly been a global NRM re-enchanting also a postmodern world with ‘world-affirming’ values based on ideals of personal self-optimization. As such, it caters to contemporary individual seekers, who do not necessarily have much previous interests in or knowledge about the Japanese cultural and religious backgrounds. Members in Soka Gakkai in Denmark as in most European countries (Borup forthcoming) typically see their specific kind of Buddhism as simply ‘generic’ and universally applicable Buddhism. They are, however, also consciously belonging to an exclusivist family of ‘special’ Buddhists, being also from other Buddhists pejoratively ‘othered’ as such. Like Diamond Way Buddhists, they are thus typically expressing characteristics of belonging to a NRM Buddhist group insisting not to be classified as such.

### **Conclusion**

After a long process of cultural translation, Buddhism in the West has matured and institutionalized as part of the growing religious diversity of a globalized world. While many groups keep transnational relations with their Asian roots, individualized identities have increasingly formed also new networks and organizational formations. ‘Westernization’ with its local interpretations and representations have given such groups a historical context in which their status as NRMs has developed into also the existing mainstream religious landscapes.

Religion in Europe, as opposed to the ‘market’ in the U.S., has historically been framed through its position to national churches, and although Denmark is often considered a rather secular country, religious minorities at the same time are part of a religious and cultural context primarily defined by a de facto state church. Both Diamond Way Buddhism and Soka Gakkai originated in Asian contexts, and gained status and accordingly specific privileges as officially recognized religious communities under the names Karma Kadjy-skolen (in 1989) and Soka Gakkai Denmark (in 2018). They both ascribe to a religious self-understanding as specific Buddhist groups with an exclusivist agenda having formed communal bonding not least in light of previous controversies. Just like the break from the Nichiren group in Japan sparked a sectarian commitment throughout Soka Gakkai’s global institutions, the Karmapa conflict originating in the Himalayan region had strong repercussions in the Danish and European contexts within the Karma Kagyu lineage. Neither Soka Gakkai nor Diamond Way Buddhism relate to other Buddhist groups in Denmark, and ex-members are not reluctant to voice their criticism of the communities they were formerly devoted to. On the other hand, neither of the groups have appeared in the general public or amongst representatives

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of the dominant religion as "unacceptably different", a key characteristic Melton (2004, 79) finds for NRMs. Both groups have culturally accommodated their versions of Buddhism into European and Danish contexts, where Buddhism in general has become popular with a high degree of symbolic capital. Both groups offered re-enchantment in times challenged by secularization, then and now being accessible for individuals seeking religious experiences and communal bonding in an otherwise 'world-affirming' worldview.

With different religious and cultural origins, they are of course also characteristically different. While being the most global religious movement originating in Japan, SGI everywhere in the world is mainly focused on Ikeda's thoughts, writings and personality. Ikeda is not a religious master blue-stamped by a clerical hierarchy. He is considered a noble superhuman with a spiritual agenda open to all, and translated through a committed group of members. The processual change in Japan from a blue-collar middle class 'prosperity religion' to a mainstream religion with also ambitions of transferring the institutionally acquired religious capital beyond sectarian boundaries has also begun to show its contours abroad. The Danish group has increasingly appeared as a Buddhist group with interests in also promoting social, educational and cultural activities, while still focusing on the instrumental value of ritual chanting as a means of cultivation. Originally being a religion for ethnic Japanese, its function as 'export' or 'immigrant/heritage' Buddhism has changed into mainly having become a religion for 'convert Buddhists'.

Tibetan lamas are thought of as religious virtuosos, some of whom are also considered human manifestations of celestial beings. The different lineages have all appeared in the West, also the Karma Kagyu lineage with the Karmapa lamas, the 16<sup>th</sup> of which encouraged Ole Nydahl to spread the teaching and the 17<sup>th</sup> of which (the one recognized by the Diamond Way tradition) gave him the title of lama. ON's personality as an individual not constrained by norms and cultural constraints is far from the image of SGI's Ikeda, but harmonizes well with both the narratives of previous Tibetan yogis and other 'Westernized' Tibetans such as Trungpa and his 'crazy yoga' image of the 1970s. His 'white Viking Buddhism' caters to individuals not concerned by accusations of 'political incorrectness' who are mainly interested in personal (rather than societal or cultural) transformation.

Both groups have become older since their beginnings in Denmark in the 1970s. In the present 'late-charismatic' period with an ageing ON, the future of the group will be a main issue in the years to come. Will his charisma be routinized, and will the effervescence of exclusivistic bonding and the 'energy of the margin' be transferable to new people in new times? Ikeda has not been seen for years, and speculation of continuation of his office is part of both media gossip and member conversation. Will its success continue also with a less charismatic future figure, or if mainly administered by national and local offices? Will Buddhism's status and brand as a popular kind of spirituality catering to postmaterialist individuals outlive the attractions of institutionalized religiosity so characteristic for Buddhist groups appearing in the 1970s deserving (also) the emblem 'NRM'?

Buddhism in the West has been analyzed through models and concepts serving to comprehend its characteristics in historical, social and institutional contexts. The groups self-definitions

typically have focused on their Buddhist universality or sectarian particularity. The question of authority has been almost inherent to most of these, not least when described by others in the ‘same family’. ‘New religious movement’ is thus a term never used by the groups themselves, but sometimes applied by other groups self-identifying as more genuinely Buddhist. Both Diamond Way Buddhism and Soka Gakkai have been ascribed such pejorative terminology by other Buddhist groups. Other categories and concepts such as ‘convert’, ‘immigrant’, ‘heritage’, ‘import’, ‘export’, ‘postmodern’ or ‘global’ have been suggested as allegedly more neutral and specific to the transfigurations of Buddhism in the West. While these naturally also have their explanatory limitations, they do have potential functionality as both contextually specific or universally comparable concepts. Models are plastic, and are applicable and changeable according to an ever-changing reality. Some scholars prefer to avoid what they see as too generalized typologies, insisting instead on singular focus on particularities. In the comparative study of religion, analytical concepts and models are necessary. Using NRM as a category with which to analyze specific Buddhist groups and compare them to other NRMs through the theoretical and methodological apparatus developed primarily within the sociology of religion is of course obvious, just like the specific Buddhist cases can contribute to the general analyses of NRM. This also applies for the two groups described in this article, both of which specifically in a Scandinavian context need more future research, not least in the years to come with the challenges of generational changes.

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# Proud Boys, Nationalism, and Religion

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## **Abstract:**

The Proud Boys are an opportunistic hate group whose message of white male chauvinism is infused with religious and nationalist symbols. They fit into the global trend of religious nationalism in that they are driven by a reaction to religious pluralism, entertain atavistic yearnings, and celebrate a founding hero, Donald Trump. Enthralled with fist fighting, in both their initiatory rituals and their engagements with antifa groups, they delight in offending the genteel sensibilities they associate with the "white liberal elite." They are proudly anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, and anti-feminist, but their list of enemies appears to be ever shifting, suggesting a toxic virility run amuck. While they are but one expression of an enduring European-American chauvinism, their celebration of masculinity resembles the masculinism and misogyny that arose in response to the Victorian era in the US.

## **Keywords:**

Proud Boys, hate group, religious pluralism, white nationalism, religious nationalism, misogyny

It is impossible not to notice the upsurge in religious nationalism world round. From the Middle East to Asia, we hear of a rise in impassioned religious identities, not just the familiar Jewish Zionists and Salafi-Jihadi Muslims, but the Hindutva movement in India, the Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka, the 969 and MaBaTha movements in Myanmar, and many others which attract fewer headlines. Europe and the United States have their own nationalist groups, of course –The Five Star Movement and AfD winning notoriety in Europe and Identity Evropa and countless Neo-Nazi offshoots being notorious in the US.<sup>18</sup> Although each is rooted in complex historical contingencies, and their group dynamics are not equally insular, all of these movements do share three features: a yearning for some kind of lost golden age, a lionization of classical heroes, and a repulsion from the dilution of culture that inevitably accompanies globalization.<sup>19</sup> Another feature these

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/identity-evropa>

<sup>19</sup>On contemporary Asian nationalist movements, see excellent summaries by Jaffrelot (2007 and 1999), Schonthal and Walton (2016), Jerryson (2016), and Frydenlund (2017).



movements seem to share is that their rhetoric slips frequently into that of religious hatred and cultural chauvinism.

In the United States there is a new contender for the label of most notorious nationalist group: the Proud Boys. Similar to other nationalist movements, the Proud Boys exist to oppose contemporary religious pluralism. Like Hindutva and the Bodu Bala Sena movements they have explicit cultural foes (Jews, Muslims, feminists), have civilizational heroes (Donald Trump), and have constructed a romanticized historical legacy: Make America Great Again, which of course is Donald Trump's motto. Although by all accounts they were born the night of the US presidential election in 2016, the Proud Boys yearn for an era when, as founder Gavin McInnes puts it, "men were men and girls were girls," which is to say the pre-feminist era of the 1950s and the nuclear family. As Noel Kent put it about the Oahu chapter, they long for "a mythical golden age that's never existed" and "basically want to take us back to the pre-civil rights days and the social hierarchy that existed then."<sup>20</sup> While these may not seem to be explicitly religious goals, entwined with their nationalist rhetoric is, they say, a loyalty to Judeo-Christian ethics, Western civilization, and the Greco-Roman tradition of the Republic.<sup>21</sup> But anyone who knows history at all can see how little informed are their conceptions of these.

The purpose of this essay is to summarize Proud Boy ideology as one among the ever multiplying and fluid alt-right ideologies in the US. Below are discussed the Proud Boys in brief, their ritual traditions, their promotion of misogyny and Incels, their enthrallment with violence, and their embrace of western cultural chauvinism, with a highlight first on superficial Christian ideas and second on the metapolitical background that informs Proud Boys and other alt-right movements.

### **Proud Boys in Brief**

"White men are not the problem" is a key motto of the Proud Boys. They claim that the targets of their loathing are not exclusively racial or ethnic,<sup>22</sup> and that anyone can join as long as s/he agrees with the basic motto that the ills of contemporary society are not due to white men. Despite that claim about inclusivity, their adulation of Western civilization is distinctly hostile to multiculturalism, particularly to sharing the label of Western civilization with Jews and Muslims. They are hostile as well to feminism which, in their view, has eroded the natural gender order and the nuclear family, seen as the backbone of Western civilization. In terms of self-proclaimed identities, Proud Boys are a mixed bag of titles and slogans, ranging from Incels (involuntary celibates),<sup>23</sup> who rage against women's liberation and their own lack of sexual opportunity, to Catholic Proud Boys, who fashion themselves white knights defending conservative Catholic social teachings.<sup>24</sup> There are some too who identify with Odinists and Asatru, although with a

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.hoaoahu.com/proud-boys-in-paradise>

<sup>21</sup> <https://officialproudboys.com/uncategorized/what-is-a-western-chauvinist/> Lloyd Somerset, contributor to Proud Boy Magazine).

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/from-alt-right-to-alt-lite-naming-the-hate>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/25/raw-hatred-why-incel-movement-targets-terrorises-women>

<sup>24</sup> <https://twitter.com/cathproudboys?lang=en>.

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limited awareness of how broad or historically deep those affiliations can be.<sup>25</sup> In the same vein, some tout neo-Nazi and skinhead symbols, replete with hand gestures such as the A-OK sign, but indicating not A-OK, but rather, with three fingers up, A-KKK, for the Ku Klux Klan. Overall, with its variety of affiliations and ever shifting list of enemies, the Proud Boys can be understood as a quirky hate group eager to promote a storybook picture of Western society that few of us have seen in our lifetimes.

Religiously speaking, while the Proud Boys do extoll the "sacred roots, mythic symbols and eschatological values" (Stern 2020) of the West, they show few signs of actual religious literacy. Instead, what is unmistakably religious about the Proud Boys is what they oppose. Proud Boys are in the main anti-Semitic and Islamophobic, proclaiming the superiority of white Western civilization, conceived as male, and, as noted above, with a fairly limited awareness of what Western civilization is and how it was built. There are no classical historians among them, for instance, nor religious historians.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, few of their most visible members are old enough to have earned PhDs. Gavin McInnes, their founder, is currently 49, but in age he is an outlier and he has only a bachelor's degree.

There has arisen something of a cult of personality for McInnes, who is delighted to scandalize what he considers the white liberal elite. Although he claims now to disapprove of violence, Proud Boy rallies have been full of it, as crowds thrilled to his overtly racist and misogynistic tropes and incitements to physical altercations. Most notable of these incidents are the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in August of 2017, where one of his boys killed Heather Heyer by car, a Patriot Prayer march in June of 2018 in Portland, where Proud Boys and others of similar ilk came to blows with antifascist groups, and another in New York in October 2018, where nine of his Proud Boys were arrested for beating up counter-protesters, and two sentenced to four years in prison. You can still hear him in his podcast *Get Off My Lawn (GOML)*, which is back again on YouTube, surprisingly, as he was banned from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for inspiring hate. The signature taunt in his current program is: "We tried their way. We tried apologies, capitulation, and shame. Now its time for them to try something. GET OFF MY LAWN."<sup>27</sup>

In sum, the Proud Boys are an opportunistic hate group in that just about every hate is permitted. To promote hate, they stage publicized marches in major cities, inaugurally in February 2017 when Breitbart acolyte Milo Yiannopoulos was disinvited from speaking on UC Berkeley's campus. This led to a brawl of Proud Boys versus students. There is now even a group in Honolulu, which is usually a beacon of multiculturalism. The Oahu chapter is distinguishable from mainland groups because members are somewhat ethnically mixed, yet united by support for Trump and by iconic

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/04/far-right-white-supremacists-berkeley-protests-antifa-trump/>  
<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2016/principals-race-war-plot-said-practice-neo-pagan-asatru-religion>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/asatru-heathenry-racism/543864/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/from-alt-right-to-alt-lite-naming-the-hate>

<sup>27</sup> <https://getoffmylawnpod.libsyn.com/>; <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>. See his latest on the Floyd riots: "The Race War is Here." [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW414m4F\\_2c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW414m4F_2c), in which he in fact says little about the race wars, and much about erection supplements.

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chants such as "Black Lives Don't Matter" and "Build the Wall"<sup>28</sup>—neither of which is particularly relevant to the island of Oahu. Still, due to their hate filled rants, they managed to be expelled from a local university campus after they barged into a meeting of the Ethnic Studies department and refused to leave. By Oahu's ohana standards, the local chapter seems cartoonish. If they weren't violent, they would be laughable.

### **Ritual Initiations**

Before we get into their religious targets, let us explore their peculiar initiation rituals. Yes, they have initiation rituals, which suggests they are deliberate in building up group spirit. Because of their violence, Proud Boys initiations are reminiscent of adolescent initiation rituals in groups prone to war, as studied by anthropologists.<sup>29</sup> But they are also reminiscent of college fraternity initiations from decades past, that is, they are sensational and sophomoric. The steps are four.

First, one must publicly declare oneself a Proud Boy, "boy" being the operative word here. Part of the Proud Boys mission is to foster masculine identity. Although there is a fledgling Proud Boys' Girls organization, to date they are quite low profile, although, as explored below, there are a few recent European female members with emerging online personalities.<sup>30</sup> In the past, McInnes has said that women were not allowed to join Proud Boys, and also that women tended to be lazy and wanted to be downright abused, which is why he had to "stop playing nice with them."<sup>31</sup>

Second, a new initiate must allow himself to be pummeled by fist by other members while the initiate shouts out five kinds of breakfast cereal. Why? While the breakfast cereals may be arbitrary – presumably a trope for Americana culture – McInnes says there is a motive behind enduring physical abuse: "[T]his is all to train for "better 'adrenaline control'." "Both physical fighting and arguing require you to maintain your composure and not get petty... Defending the West against the people who want to shut it down is like remembering cereals as you're being bombarded with ten fists," he said.<sup>32</sup>

Another aspect to this component of endurance is that one must vow to stop masturbating and to shun pornography. The claim is that masturbation increases one's sense of solitude, and detracts from two goals of the group: (1) the pursuit of ideal relationships with a significant female other and (2) enhancement of one's sense of belonging to a "pro-West fraternal organization" comprised of men who "refuse to apologize for creating the modern world."<sup>33</sup> Proud Boys approve of heterosexuality, provided women "know their place." In the meantime, the fraternal bonds are to replace whatever pleasure Proud Boys used to take alone, through masturbation.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.hoaoahu.com/proud-boys-in-paradise>

<sup>29</sup> For an anthropological analysis of violent bonding rituals among adolescent males, see Alcorta and Sosis (2005), Whitehouse (2007) and Kitts (2018).

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/post/proud-boys-hawai-i#stream/0>.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/15/17978358/proud-boys-gavin-mcinnis-manhattan-gop-violence>.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.myrecipes.com/extracrispy/why-the-proud-boys-initiation-ritual-involves-cereal>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.myrecipes.com/extracrispy/why-the-proud-boys-initiation-ritual-involves-cereal>

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Third one must get a Proud Boys tattoo. Although some of these have images of roosters, the primary thing appears to be the words Proud Boy on one's forearm or chest.

Fourth, according to the Daily Dot,<sup>34</sup> one must engage in physical violence with members of Antifa, a label loosely applied to antifascist protesters. In Proud Boy thinking, the two groups inversely define each other. Proud Boys must "serve the cause," says McInnes, by engaging in a physical brawl with the far-left and anarchist antifascist movement.<sup>35</sup> It is apparent to anyone who follows them that the group is thrilled with violence. After nine Proud Boys were arrested and two convicted for fighting in New York in December 2018, McInnes claimed he was done with violence. However, in February of 2017 he had argued, "I want violence. I want punching in the face." And "violence doesn't feel good, justified violence feels great, and fighting solves everything."<sup>36</sup>

### **Misogyny and Incels**

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of Proud Boy ideology is its open misogyny and longing for 1950s era gender roles. Nick Ochs, Proud Boy founder in Hawai'i, proclaims they are "alt-lite, proud Western Chauvinists," who "venerate the stay-at-home housewife."<sup>37</sup> McInnes himself believes that "95 percent of women would be happier at home," "I'm fine with being perceived as a misogynist. That's fine. [But] extreme radical hate group... that's nuts." "Maybe the reason I'm sexist is because women are dumb. No, I'm just kidding, ladies. But you do tend to not thrive in certain areas — like writing."<sup>38</sup>

Of course, the anti-feminist sentiment is mixed into a soup of other sentiments. McInnes says that Proud Boys are pro-life, pro-free-speech, pro-drug legalization, and pro-Trump, while they stand against Islam, Nazism, and feminism. He manages to hit two birds with one stone when he says that Muslim women don't really mind rape: "It's such a rape culture with these immigrants, I don't even think these women see it as rape. They see it as just like having a teeth [sic] pulled. 'It's a Monday. I don't really enjoy it,' but that's what you do. I wouldn't be surprised if [rape] doesn't have the same trauma as it would for a middle-class white girl in the suburbs because it's so entrenched into their culture."<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, Proud Boys approve of heteronormative marriage, and tie this to the taboo on masturbation. Masturbation fosters self-indulgence, private pleasure, and prevents men from connecting with partners. Ostensibly, the taboo promotes finding a mate, and also promotes male bonding, because masturbation distracts from the Proud Boy mission. This is part of their push back against a decadent liberal culture, with its internet porn and hook-up sites, all of which is taken to be lamentable modern-day hedonism. The anti-masturbation platform is not so surprising as some of them adore the Catholic Church, also a traditional pillar against private pleasure. One

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.dailydot.com/layer8/proud-boys/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.dailydot.com/layer8/proud-boys/>

<sup>36</sup> [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/gavin\\_mcinnes\\_955883](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/gavin_mcinnes_955883)

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.hoaoahu.com/proud-boys-in-paradise>

<sup>38</sup> <https://podbay.fm/podcast/1309316469/e/1529080817>

<sup>39</sup> <https://podbay.fm/podcast/1309316469/e/1529428354>

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article points out that Proud Boys are to limit masturbation to once every 30 days. Even then they are not allowed to climax unless they are within one yard of a woman and with her consent. This policy has a name: #No-Wanks.<sup>40</sup>

Then there are the Incels. Officially predating Proud Boys, they intersect with Proud Boys in their distaste for women who insist on autonomy and in their fixation on sex, in their case on not having sex. "Incel" is short for "involuntarily celibate," used to describe young men who claim to feel ignored, even berated, by women. They are active mostly on social media,<sup>41</sup> where they can complain without risk of face to face engagement with women. According to Vox:

Incels have developed an elaborate sociopolitical explanation for their sexual failures, one that centers on the idea that women are shallow, vicious, and only attracted to hyper-muscular men. They see this as a profound injustice against men like them, who suffer an inherent genetic disadvantage through no fault of their own. A small radical fringe believes that violence, especially against women, is an appropriate response — that an “Incel Rebellion” or “Beta [Male] Uprising” will eventually overturn the sexual status quo.<sup>42</sup>

We might think this a joke, except that in April 2018 Alek Minassian rented a truck in Toronto and rammed it into a crowd, killing 10, injuring 15, proclaiming on facebook that "The Incel Rebellion has already begun!" Minassian, it seemed, was following in the wake of sexually frustrated Elliot Rodger, who, in 2014, killed six and wounded 14 in a shooting spree in Santa Barbara, California, because he was still a virgin. According to his online manifesto, this was retaliation against women en mass because they refused to have sex with him, despite the fact that he was a supreme gentleman. Rodger was praised by Minassian as a “Supreme Gentleman” on Facebook just before the Toronto attacks.<sup>43</sup>

How do proud boys and Incels link up? According to Sarah Diefendorf in *The Cut*, paraphrased in an article by Thomas Mcbee, the manosphere and opposition to feminism are the links. The "manosphere," blogs dedicated to men's rights, lately promote abstinence from marriage, sex, and dating because, they claim, feminism has ruined it all. There are forums for MGTOWs, Men Going Their Own Way, who feel they are losers in a gender war and prefer to just stay out it. And of course Incels are mad that they get no sex. Together they promote a hatred and disgust with women that many of us have not seen in our lifetimes. As Diefendorf sees it, Incels feel a loss of power, which she ties with Proud Boy defiance.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.thecut.com/2018/12/a-sociological-investigation-of-nowanks.html>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/14/the-red-pill-reddit-modern-misogyny-manosphere-men>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/4/25/17277496/incele-toronto-attack-alek-minassian>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43892189>; <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/4/25/17277496/incele-toronto-attack-alek-minassian>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.thecut.com/2018/12/a-sociological-investigation-of-nowanks.html>

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### **Violence**

It is surely cheap psychology to pin Proud Boy violence on a sense of powerlessness and sexual frustration. We religious historians argue that ideas truly move people, quite alongside any sociological or psychological frustrations, which is not to say the two cannot coincide. The violent ideology among Proud Boys is decidedly atavistic: they long for a return to an era when, as McInnes said, men were men and girls were girls. A toxic masculinity is on display particularly in the open thrill in fist fighting, in the face of a society which shuns it. Two prongs of the aforementioned initiation rituals, the cereal fighting and the antifa fighting, attest to this thrall with fighting. McInnes's motto – "I want violence. I want punching in the face"<sup>45</sup> – apparently captivates other Proud Boys as well, even the Hoa Proud Boys on Oahu, where, one would think, a more aloha mentality would be appealing. But, as chapter leader Nick Ochs grudgingly admits: "We're not averse to breaking your nose, if you attack us," he said. "People think that's controversial to say. I don't find it to be such. I'm not personally itching for a fight. I don't enjoy fighting. ... But it's not the worst thing in the world."<sup>46</sup>

The Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights, or FOAK, is a Proud Boy fighting wing. It apparently took flight when, during a pro-Trump march on the UC Berkeley campus in 2017, Kyle Chapman was filmed slamming antifascist protesters with a stick. When he was arrested, Proud Boys crowdfunded his bail money. Chapman calls FOAK the Proud Boys' "tactical defensive arm." According to McInnes, FOAK is strictly a defensive shield against antifa or black block activists.<sup>47</sup> But we have already heard his opinions on the thrill of fighting.

Rich Lowry in the *National Review* made a few good points about the "marketable product" that McInnes is selling. He compares McInnes and Proud Boys to British soccer hooligans, as described by Bill Buford in *Among the Thugs*. Buford claims that despite his search for reasons for hooliganism, the mayhem of violence seems to be its own point. "Violence is one of the most intensely lived experiences and, for those capable of giving themselves over to it, is one of the most intense pleasures."<sup>48</sup>

It would be a mistake not to take seriously the Proud Boy enthrallment with violence, particularly in June of 2020 (the time of this writing). Because of their appetite for violence overall and their agitation for civil conflict in particular, the Proud Boys are rumored to see the Black Lives Matter protests as a stage to raise mayhem with the ultimate goal of promoting civil unrest, enticing governmental forces to respond forcefully against civil rights activists, and ushering in what has been called the "boogaloo."<sup>49</sup> The Proud Boys may not be identical with the "Boogaloo Bois," but their aims are similar: to disrupt our multicultural society, launch a civil war, and restore Western

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/10/gavin-mcinnnes-proud-boys-poisonous-violence/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.hoaohu.com/proud-boys-in-paradise>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.dailydot.com/layer8/proud-boys/>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/10/gavin-mcinnnes-proud-boys-poisonous-violence/>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.adl.org/blog/the-boogaloo-extremists-new-slang-term-for-a-coming-civil-war>. See too <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/security/twitter-takes-down-washington-protest-disinformation-bot-behavior-n1221456>

civilization as they envision it.<sup>50</sup> Notably, McInnes announced on his May 29, 2020 youtube show, "the race war is here."<sup>51</sup>

### **Western Chauvinism**

#### *White Christian Culture versus Everyone Else*

The one thing that defines Proud Boys above all is the endorsement of Western chauvinism. As noted in Proud Boys magazine, a Western chauvinist "is a proponent of Western Civilization, someone who supports a secular government whose legal code is informed by Judeo-Christian ethics and whose origins lie in the Greco-Roman tradition of the Republic."<sup>52</sup> Despite this proclamation of Judeo-Christian ethics, many Proud Boys members are outrightly anti-Semitic and apparently blind to the contradiction. As Brian Brathovd put it in his podcast *The Daily Shoah*, if the Proud Boys "were pressed on the issue, I guarantee you that like 90% of them would tell you something along the lines of 'Hitler was right. Gas the Jews.'"<sup>53</sup> Founder McInnes, after a recent trip to Israel, got down and dirty: "Hebrew is "spit talk" and "whole language is clearing your throat, it's like Gaza, they're launching little tiny missiles from your mouth onto your shirt." Israelis, he said, have a "whiny paranoid fear of Nazis that's making them scared of Christians and Trumps who are their greatest allies."<sup>54</sup>

What is astonishing about the overt anti-Semitism is that, until the last decade, most US citizens thought they had transcended the anti-Semitic vitriol of a century ago. Then they heard the chant at the Unite the Right march in Charlottesville: "Jews will not replace us" (alternatively "You will not replace us"<sup>55</sup>). It may seem obvious that this was a fabricated fear, as Jews comprise just 1.9% of the US population, according to the Pew Research Census.<sup>56</sup> Yet anti-Semitic incidents are surging all over the US – the Anti-Defamation League counts nearly 2000 each in 2018 and 2019, and those are just reported incidents.<sup>57</sup> As for a reason behind the fixation of Proud Boys on Jews, one can only guess that having a declared ethnic enemy, even an imaginary one, consolidates the base.

*McInnes is certainly the mouthpiece for this vitriol. Among "Ten Things I Hate about Jews," recently amended to, "about Israel," he includes that Jews are not grateful enough about America defeating Nazi Germany, that they can't get over dwelling on the past, "[a]nd this whole nation-state is talking about 'Seventy-five years ago, my people were killed.' Always the Jews, always*

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<sup>50</sup> <https://www.adl.org/blog/the-boogaloo-extremists-new-slang-term-for-a-coming-civil-war>;  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW414m4F\\_2c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW414m4F_2c),

<sup>51</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW414m4F\\_2c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW414m4F_2c),

<sup>52</sup> <https://officialproudboys.com/uncategorized/what-is-a-western-chauvinist/> (Lloyd Somerset, contributor to Proud Boy Magazine).

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/vice-co-founder-lists-the-10-things-he-hates-the-most-about-jews-1.5449718>

<sup>55</sup> The rallying cry seemed to shift back and forth. <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/you-will-not-replace-us>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.adl.org/what-we-do/anti-semitism/anti-semitism-in-the-us>

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killing us, we are the scapegoats."<sup>58</sup> He also astonishingly blames Jews for the deaths by starvation of millions of Ukrainians under Josef Stalin. "I think it was 10 million Ukrainians who were killed. That was by Jews. That was by Marxist, Stalinist, left-wing, commie, socialist Jews."<sup>59</sup> Further he blames "Jewish intellectuals" for influencing the treaty that ended World War I and paved the way to World War II.<sup>60</sup> This cabal of conspiracy theory resembles the hysteria of the old Protocols of Zion, which is to say that its seeds are not fresh, but persistent.<sup>61</sup>

As for what is Christian about this group, on the surface it appears to be Christian only insofar as it detests what is not Christian. There is a vast history to this apparent ignorance. To US historians, Christian identity is eminently pliable. As Daniel Lee points out:

In the colonial era, for instance, religion differentiated Puritans, Quakers, Catholics, Mennonites, and other sects from one another. Yet religion was also used to consolidate all Christians against the "savage" Native Americans. On the plantations of the antebellum South, masters and slaves were "united in Christ." Nonetheless, racially segregated congregations developed exclusive modes of religious expression. Blacks and Whites were clearly aware that they worshiped the same God in different ways. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, White Americans rallied around their common Christianity in a desperate attempt to organize themselves against the growing population of non-Christian, non-White Americans. (2004:2).

Thus, religion has both united and divided citizens since the colonial era and remains a flag to wave over identity and difference for the Proud Boys in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Although few Proud Boys likely have studied it, Proud Boy anti-Semitism is rooted in a concept called Christian supersessionism. Supersessionism decries the religious openness of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), and especially its dictum of *Nostra Aetate*, which stipulates that Jews were and remain God's chosen people. Hard supersessionists claim that the Jews can no longer claim to be the Chosen people because God has retracted the covenant of chosenness stemming from Abraham, and has chosen the Christians instead.<sup>62</sup> Christians are cosmically destined to lead, a destiny which will come to fruition in history. One may see this sentiment among, for instance, Zionist Christians, who support the Jewish claim to the promised land of Israel, but only until the messiah comes.<sup>63</sup>

In the face of globalization and multiculturalism, another conspicuous Proud Boy theme is the fear of lost identity and a sense of victimization. As Jason Kessler, avowed white nationalist, pointed out on the *The Gavin McInnes Show*, "What's really under attack is if you say, 'I want to

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<sup>58</sup> <https://www.cjnews.com/news/canada/rebel-media-star-gets-flak-10-things-hate-jews-video>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.cjnews.com/news/canada/rebel-media-star-gets-flak-10-things-hate-jews-video>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.cjnews.com/news/canada/rebel-media-star-gets-flak-10-things-hate-jews-video>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.wired.com/2017/03/internet-protocols-elders-zion/>

<sup>62</sup> Novak 2019. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2019/02/supersessionism-hard-and-soft>

<sup>63</sup> See Durbin 2019.



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stand up for white people. I want to stand up for western civilization. I want to stand up for men. I want to stand up for Christians,” to which McInnes nodded in agreement and added other examples: “I’m against immigration...I’m against jihadis. I’m against radical Islam.”<sup>64</sup> In a *New York Times* profile, McInnes is reported to have said, “I don’t want our culture diluted. We need to close the borders now and let everyone assimilate to a Western, English-speaking way of life.”<sup>65</sup>

Anti-immigrant voices have become notably shrill since the election in 2016, and, here is something perhaps novel, Proud Boy spokespersons now include three female European media personalities who agitate against the diffusion of white culture: Tara McCarthy, Brittany Pettibone, and Lana Lokteff. McCarthy hosts the Reality Calls podcast (subtitle: Let’s Make Western Civilization Great Again) and partners with Pettibone in another, *Virtues of the West*, which extolls the nuclear family, motherhood, patriotism, and traditional gender roles. Lokteff with her husband hosts a radio show *Radio3Fourteen* which celebrates European identity and culture, from Sweden and the US.<sup>66</sup>

However, the ideology of the Proud Boys seems to be ever fluctuating, as are its targets. It has been pointed out that founder McInnes plays a duplicitous rhetorical game in rejecting the label of white nationalist and alt-right while espousing many tenets associated therewith.<sup>67</sup> He claims the group is not racist nor homophobic, but, as pointed out, all members must adhere to the belief that “white men are not the problem.”<sup>68</sup> Although he has promoted racial eugenics in the past, on the subject of African Americans his furor lately is directed against white liberals.

I don’t dislike minorities. I hate white liberals and the good news is, their days are numbered. The myth of “diversity is our strength” is contingent on nobody trying it. When we’re all forced to live side by side, we’ll quickly realize we are incompatible, and agree to disagree. The blind utopians at the *New York Times* will be crushed and the rest of us realists will be dancing in the streets.<sup>69</sup>

Elsewhere he claims that white liberals infantilize African Americans by depriving them of full responsibility for their failures in school and their surplus in prison populations:

This does way more damage to black youth than the KKK. When you strip people of culpability and tell them the odds are stacked against them, they don’t feel like trying. White liberals make this worse by then using affirmative action to “correct” society’s mistakes. When blacks are forced into schools they aren’t qualified for

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<sup>64</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.hoaoahu.com/proud-boys-in-paradise>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/from-alt-right-to-alt-lite-naming-the-hate>. Lokteff’s *Radio3Fourteen* is affiliated with Red Ice, a media platform for alt-right propaganda.

<https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/10/21/youtube-takes-down-red-ices-main-channel>

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.dailydot.com/layer8/proud-boys/>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.amren.com/news/2014/06/america-in-2034-7/>

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they have no choice but to drop out. Instead of going back a step to a school they can handle, they tend to give up on higher education entirely. Thanks to the Marxist myth of ubiquitous equality, this ‘mismatch’ leaves blacks less educated than they would have been had they been left to their own devices.<sup>70</sup>

Whatever the merits or demerits of these racial claims, McInnes's Islamophobia is indisputable. For one thing, he claims the label, Islamophobe: “I’m not a fan of Islam. I think it’s fair to call me Islamophobic” (*Gavin McInnes, NBC interview, 2017*). And “Palestinians are stupid. Muslims are stupid. And the only thing they really respect is violence and being tough.”<sup>71</sup> However spurious, he also quips, “Why don’t we take back Bethlehem? Why don’t we take back Northern Iraq? Why don’t we start our own Crusades? That’s what the Crusades were. They weren’t just someone picking on Muslims for no reason — they were a reaction to Muslim tyranny. We finally fought back.”<sup>72</sup> One is never sure if one should take McInnes's ignorance seriously, but if he means what he says, *he does not appear to know that western Christians initiated the Crusades and lost all but the first one, a surprise attack on Jerusalem which rid the city not just of Muslims, but of Christians and Jews. He knows nothing about Charlemagne or Bernard of Clairvoux, the schools of crusader knights and commoner pilgrims, or for that matter that it was Muslim Saladin who opened the city of Jerusalem to all Abrahamic religions. As pointed out earlier, few if any Proud Boys are highly educated.*

*To be fair, McInnes's xenophobia does not appear restricted to Muslims or Jews. In "Ten Things I Like about White Guys," he said “We brought roads and infrastructure to India and they are still using them as toilets. Our criminals built nice roads in Australia but aboriginals keep using them as a bed. The next time someone bitches about colonization, the correct response is ‘You’re welcome.’”<sup>73</sup>*

### *Underlying Metapolitics*

*But there are deeper roots to the Proud Boys' ideological platform. However sensational, Proud Boy ideology is rooted in a European chauvinism at least two centuries old, which we can barely cover here. Yet we would be remiss not to acknowledge some key ideas and the relatively sophisticated deployments of them to advance an insidious ideology of Western cultural supremacy. Recently Stern has described this religious rhetoric in terms of white nationalist "metapolitics," metapolitics being to politics like metaphysics is to physics<sup>74</sup>:*

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<sup>70</sup> Gavin McInnes, “America in 2034,” *American Renaissance*, June 17, 2014.

<https://www.amren.com/author/gavinmcinnes/>

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XS-sniVi3IU>

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XS-sniVi3IU>

<sup>73</sup> [https://www.takimag.com/article/10\\_things\\_i\\_like\\_about\\_white\\_guys\\_gavin\\_mcinnes/](https://www.takimag.com/article/10_things_i_like_about_white_guys_gavin_mcinnes/)

<sup>74</sup> Typically the notion of metapolitics is ascribed to Gramsci, although there are disputes about that ascription.

<http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/praxis1313/karl-ekeman-on-gramscianism-of-the-right/?cn-reloaded=1>

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To study the "meta" required forays into the transcendental and religious dimensions of politics, which in turn often translated into a foregrounding of "sacred roots, mythic symbols, and eschatological values" (Bosteels 2010). Metapolitics was distinct from, if not antithetical to, materialism; it rejected classic Marxism or structuralism and was outside the epistemological margins of empirical disciplines such as sociology or history. (Stern 2020:13).

Bosteels, in turn, describes metapolitics thusly:

Metapolitics, in this first broad sense, is the study of the ultimate founding ideas, myths, and values behind all concrete forms of political practice. It signals both a movement by which political science becomes increasingly self-reflexive and the possibility of rooting the empirical and mundane in *transcendent or transcendental—frequently divine or eschatological—principles*. As such, the term frequently acquires a pejorative connotation, for example, in Peter Viereck's study into the dark cultural and spiritual roots of Nazism. (Bosteels 2010: 2) [italics added]

The emphasis on "sacred roots, mythic symbols, and eschatological values" over materialism and conservative political action (voting, campaigning, supporting political candidates, etc.) highlights identity-myths and ethnonationalist atavism, which capture the ideological leanings of the Proud Boys and other proponents of the Alt-Right. Relevant metapolitical notions include the aspiration that heroic white men – in some treatises the chosen descendants of Adam (Gardell 2006) – are destined to defeat the variegated forces of darkness and to lead the world [back] to a divinely sanctioned golden age. While this notion is in some ways informed by 19<sup>th</sup> colonialism and praise poets such as Rudyard Kipling ("white man's burden"<sup>75</sup>), there are also mystical, transcendental ideas elaborated in 20<sup>th</sup> century treatises. Savitri Devi (1905-1982), Julius Evola (1898-1974), and René Guénon (1886-1951) are a few European intellectuals who championed racist eschatologies and predicted an apocalyptic moment of truth which would establish a stable civic life with a right racial hierarchy based on innate aptitudes (Stern 2020:33-44, 75).

Lest this white longing be seen as merely the fascist fantasies of a few extremists, we should point out that there remain some enduring and influential organizations in Europe which publicly lament the disintegration of European heritage and actively promote a European Renaissance, in the form of the New Right (an unstable term, per Casadio (2014)). The French Group for the Research and Study of European Civilization (GRECE) is one cultural association which extolled Hellenic origins and pride as early as 1968 (Casadio 2014, Stern 2020). According to GRECE, cultural power is a necessary prelude to political power – a staple notion of metapolitics— and therefore the GRECE elite strives to promote classical philosophies (e.g. Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas) and literature in order to reinvigorate European self-awareness and to discourage any

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<sup>75</sup> See Rudyard Kipling: "White Man's Burden" at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5478/>. See too his exaltation of rugged manliness: "If" at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46473/if-->.

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leanings toward cultural egalitarianism.<sup>76</sup> There are of course similar groups in Italy (Casadio 2014) and elsewhere. It is a huge topic.

Transposed to US soil in the last few centuries, such ideals promote a dream which, if less than classically informed, is romantic and tinged with apocalypticism. Gardell reflects on white racist religions in the US:

Knightly values such as courage, strength, honesty, honor, and valiance are hailed as primary Aryan virtues. ... they can rise above the trivialities of the everyday commoner and emerge in shining armor at the battleground for the final conflict, lifting their swords for race, nation, blood, and honor. (Gardell 2006:5)

It is disputable whether Proud Boys study their ostensible European roots, but it is not hard to imagine that they respond to the heroism implicit in the idea of defending an endangered white identity. Fed by a victimization narrative and the craving for a white patriarchal ethnostate, the Proud Boys are but one expression of the social disintegration so apparent now within our multicultural and religiously pluralistic society. Their identitarian sentiments are fed by clever internet sites and memes, such as "the red pill" (from the Matrix trilogy) to refer to the moment of true awakening to white identity and destiny.<sup>77</sup> But however more edgy and creative, the Proud Boy narrative today continues a 20th century pining for a climactic battle of ideas to restore European patriarchal hegemony over culture and civic life.<sup>78</sup>

### **Conclusion: Why Now?**

Although McInnes claims the Proud Boys were meant to be a sophomoric group of hoodlums promoting politically conservative antics and a lot of beer drinking, they have also become a political force. Even though the group was only born with the 2016 election of Trump – which McInnes called the greatest night of his life – it now claims anywhere from 6000 to 20,000 members,<sup>79</sup> its own national anthem ("Proud of Your Boy," from the musical *Aladdin*), a fighting wing, explicit sexual taboos, ill-defined but nonetheless evident atavistic longings, and a wide range of declared enemies: Antifa, Muslims, Jews, Blacks, women, and white liberals being chief among them. McInnes says that his boys are just normal. They want to return to an era when men's groups played a larger role in American society, to have families, live in the suburbs, and love America. But as Lowry points out, the atavistic impulse of the Proud Boys is straight from the movie *Fight Club*, in which a violent men's group revolts against a banal, overly feminized bourgeois society by holding clandestine fistfights.

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<sup>76</sup> According to Casadio, GRECE explicitly chose to abandon militant and activist ambitions in order to nurture an ideological platform with two themes: anti-egalitarianism and the definition of an authentically European identity (2014: 51)

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/14/the-red-pill-reddit-modern-misogyny-manosphere-men>

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/04/the-french-origins-of-you-will-not-replace-us>

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>

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So the question is why now? A plurality of reasons seems plausible, but two which are easy to identify are a response to the feminization of society and a reaction to globalization, as seen in the chorus of voices proclaiming identity in the face of difference.

First, it should be noted that 1930s era paramilitary groups such as Blackshirts and Sturmabteilung often come up as parallels to the Proud Boys, because of their glorification of violence and targeting of Jews. But, depending on which of the Proud Boy targets one fixes upon, one could also compare the Proud Boy rebellion with an earlier era and culture: that of 19<sup>th</sup> century American masculinism and misogyny such as we see in the writings of Melville, Thoreau, and Mark Twain, all of whom were eager to reject the controls of a Victorian society they identified as feminine and suffocating. The origins of toxic masculinity in the overreach of 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian sensibilities have been noted by Ann Douglas (1998), Josh McMullen (2015) and Josephine Robbins (2017), who see hyper-masculinism as a reclamation of the frontier mentality of rugged individualism and as a rejection of the lack of virility and vigor associated with Victorian refinement.<sup>80</sup>

Since the 1960s and the second wave of feminism, unquestionably US culture has shifted complexly, integrating women and their concerns, and also inspiring extreme reactions against them. It is not a simple topic, but it is an astonishing truth that not only the Incels but the broader Proud Boys repudiate the women's movement, to the point of insisting on the label of "girls," venerating the stay at home housewife, and McInnes explicitly calling women "dumb." The Proud Boy women Tara McCarthy, Brittany Pettibone, and Lana Lokteff too repudiate the women's movement, blaming it for the decline in western civilization and ruination of the nuclear family. For that matter, just indulging in fistfighting is a repudiation of the genteel sensibilities we associate with cultural refinement and the stereotypically "feminine," however disputable the label. As noted earlier, the Proud Boys represent a toxic virility run amuck.

As for globalization, the Proud Boys are expressly against its effects, which are, among other things, multiculturalism and religious pluralism. Hence, as we have seen, they rant against Muslims, Jews, and even Hindus and Australian aboriginals. Not unlike the Indian Hindutva and Sri Lankan Bodu Bala Sena movements,<sup>81</sup> Proud Boys cherish a religious identity – ostensibly Judeo-Christian – defined less by history than by opposition to everything that is not them. They explicitly resent Islamic and Jewish influence. Proud Boys rallies and initiation rituals might even be compared to Hindutva Ghar Wapsi revivals, which strive to welcome home Indian Muslims and Christians, whom Hindutva perceives as lapsed Hindus, to true Hindu identity.<sup>82</sup> The ritual initiations of the Proud Boys, fistfighting and more, involve a similar zeal and nostalgia, in their case for a reinvigorated role for white men in US society, championed by their hero, Donald Trump.

If there is any generalization that may be taken away from this foray, it is that nationalist rhetoric, especially for movements cloaked with religious symbols, is currently at a fevered pitch.

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<sup>80</sup> See Swallowing the Red Pill, at <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/14/the-red-pill-reddit-modern-misogyny-manosphere-men>

<sup>81</sup> See., e.g., Frydenlund, Iselin. 2017a. Schonthal and Walton 2016. Rajeshwar and Amore 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Rajeshwar and Amore 2019.

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# Canada's "Freemen-on-the-land": The Timeless Quest for *Gnosis*

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"There is no such thing as 'kinda free'." – Robert Arthur Menard

## **Abstract**

This study will explore the Gnostic elements in the thought world of a contemporary Canadian anarchist movement known as the "Freemen-on-the-Land" (FOL), sometimes explained as the Canadian version of the U.S.'s Sovereign Citizens. I will attempt to demonstrate that these two philosophical schools, the Gnostics of early Christianity and the 21<sup>st</sup> century Freemen, despite a separation of centuries and geographical distance – espouse myths and doctrines that convey essentially the same message, which is the gospel of "gnosis". Lewis notes that Gnosticism "as a term, only developed in the eighteenth century as a way of talking about a philosophical movement that had its birth in the second century" (Lewis 2013:13). While scholars (Williams 1966; Brakke 2010; King 2005; Lewis 2013) still wrangle over definitions of "Gnosticism" and debate the issue of whether the early Gnostics in the second to fourth centuries might be considered as proto or parallel "Christians", the leading historians and theologians in the field (Jonas 1958; Rudolph 1977; Harris 1999; Kripal 2007; Lewis 2013; DeConick 2016) do agree on the "classic" characteristics of Gnosticism and the basic components of the Gnostic worldview.

## **Keywords**

Gnosticism, Hans Jonas, Freedmen, Canada, Pseudo-Law, Strawman, Robert A. Menard, Archons, Intoxication, Cultic Milieu

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As German scholar, Hans Jonas, notes in his seminal study, *The Gnostic Religion* (first published in English in 1958):

At first encounter with Gnostic literature the reader will be struck by certain recurrent elements of expression. [These] reveal something of the fundamental experience, the mode of feeling, and the vision of reality distinctively characteristic of the Gnostic mind. (Jonas 1963: 48).

This study will demonstrate that the main characteristics of the “Gnostic mind” are importantly present in FOL literature, a contemporary movement whose myths and doctrines correspond to the “Abstract of Main Gnostic Tenets” as outlined by Jonas (1963:42).

Although on first exposure to Freeman literature (available in online videos, blogs, handbooks and graphic novels) one might dismiss FOL views as mere “conspiracy theories” and “anti-government rants”, on closer examination one can detect spiritual elements in the myth and metaphors of FOL literature. These are unexpected because Freemen-on-the land are usually described (not only by journalists but by their own leaders) as political anarchists who espouse anti-government views. But the attentive researcher might hear the ancient voices of the Gnostics, whose radical, transformative worldview has permeated FOL literature and has surfaced, once again, in human history; this time under the guise of a contemporary Canadian working-class anarchist movement.

Jonas’ fellow German scholar, Kurt Rudolph (1987) offers a useful explanation as to why Gnostic spirituality has always tended to permeate other, alien religious traditions (or, in this case, a Canadian political protest movement). Rudolph (1987:55) declares, “Gnosticism has no tradition of its own but only a borrowed one”. The ancient Gnostics were masters of what Rudolph calls “a protest exegesis” (a means of expressing their own ideas under the cloak of an alien tradition (religious or philosophical, in order to present their train of “heretical” thought that ran counter to the external text and to the borrowed tradition). Rudolph goes so far as to label this quality as “parasitical”, since the Gnostic worldview has a habit of attaching itself to, or inhabiting, older, more “respectable” religious systems - “almost as a parasite prospers on the soil of its ‘host religion’” (Rudolph 54-55). Thus, while the mentors of the FOL movement are denouncing government agents who enslave Canadian citizens through deception and intimidation, one might observe how their seemingly “political” arguments are informed by a radical Gnostic worldview.

By “tasting” FOL ideas as “old wine” served in “new bottles”, we might gain new insights into the Freemen themselves. Casting them as “Neo-Gnostics” might facilitate a deeper understanding of their appeal and conversion processes, and shed light on the deeper motivations behind their controversial practice of “Pseudolaw” (Rooke 2012; Netolitsky 2016), as well as their defiance of the law while driving without a license or avoiding paying taxes.

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### **Philosophical Affinities**

One of the defining features of the “gnostic attitude”, according to Han Jonas, is the “radically dualistic mood, which...unifies its widely diversified systemic expressions”. The Gnostics’ dualistic doctrine rests on “the passionately felt experience of the self and world”. This experience is one of “alienation, estrangement from the cosmos and the social world” (Jonas, 1963:329).

The Freeman and the Gnostics alike perceive the world to be a prison; a deceptive reality designed to enslave human beings. Trapped in a prison that is deceptively “real”, the only hope for us humans (indeed our moral responsibility) is to “wake up” and recognize the deception we are living in. This “wake up call” usually comes from without, from a “Messenger of Light” or a “Saviour” whose revelation resonates with the “inner man” who then recognizes the truth of the soul’s condition, its origins, its mission and final goal. Hans Jonas writes: “The goal of Gnostic striving is the release of the ‘inner man’ from the bonds of the world and his return to his native realm of light.” This goal is expressed in a poem by Freeman Robert A. Menard (2011):

This prison fiction upon me brought,  
Enslaved my mind and all my thoughts.  
But now that everything is clear,  
You become nothing but a smear,  
A smudge upon a tainted glass,  
That I have wiped and cleaned, Alas!  
Released out of your mammon hands  
I AM A FREEMAN ON THESE LANDS

For the ancient Gnostics, the Messenger penetrates the barriers of the spheres, outwits the Archons, and awakens the spirit from its earthly slumber, by imparting the saving knowledge from without. For Freeman, these “Saviours” or “Messengers” are their teachers, trainers, mentors, who write the handbooks or offer webinars with legal advice, or offer “detaxer” sessions. Described by David Hofmann (2015) as “charismatic”, they are also the consultants and mock lawyers who provide expert advice to practitioners of “pseudo-law” in the courts. Chief Justice John D. Rooke of the Alberta Court of Queen's Bench branded these practitioners as “vexatious litigants” in his groundbreaking decision in the 2012 divorce court case *Meads v. Meads*, where he coined the term “Organised Pseudolegal Commercial Arguments” (OPCA) to describe the techniques and arguments used by Freeman in court (Netolitsky 2018).

For the Gnostics, the Saviour was a messianic figure; He who disguised Himself in a man’s flesh in order to conceal himself from the cosmic powers and outwit the Archons. Taking on flesh was a sacrificial necessity, but “almost by necessity a cause of self-alienation which imperils the whole mission” (Jonas 1063:119). For Freeman, their “gurus” have been known to impersonate lawyers in court, or Peace Officers on the highway; they assume fake uniforms, create fake liens

and other OPCA documents, and flash fake badges. Occasionally they are caught and face criminal prosecution and some spend time in prison.<sup>84</sup>

### **The “Strawman” Concept**

Perhaps the most striking affinity between the two philosophical schools is the notion that every human being is hindered by an attachment to, or identification with a sort of evil twin or *doppel ganger*. This dualistic “anthropology” (Jonas 1963) is one of the essential myths found in 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century Gnostic texts, and also found in the instructional manuals and videos produced by Canada’s Freeman-on-the-land.

The “real” self is tragically divided, bound to an inauthentic double self that obscures and weakens. For the Gnostics, this fake self was the physical body, symbolized by the “impure garment” or “garment of the Egyptians” in the “Hymn of the Pearl,” passage in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*. (Jonas 118-19).

But the Freeman, unlike the Gnostics, have a positive view of Nature and the flesh, and identify with the body as the authentic self, the “Natural Man”. But the Natural Man is compromised since he finds himself shackled (“joindered” in Freeman parlance) to an evil twin, a paper self; “a condition which allows the government to deceive, control and enslave its citizens” (Netolitzky 2018). This evil twin is called the “Strawman” (Perry, Hofmann and Scrivens 2016). Strawman theory holds that an individual has two personae, one is a real flesh and blood human being (as in “Robert-Arthur: Menard”) and the other is a legal personality or “Person” (usually written in CAPITALS) as in “ROBERT ARTHUR MENARD who is the “Strawman” Perry, Hofmann and Scrivens 2016; Netolitzky 2018d).

For Freeman, to become aware of the existence of the Strawman is the first step towards freedom. This “wake-up call” is the Freeman’s equivalent of *Gnosis*: “You have had a make-believe twin from the time your mother and father permitted a Birth Certificate to be filed for you.” (see the 2009 *youtube* video, *Meet Your Strawman!*).

Freeman instructional online manuals and videos track the term, “Strawman” back to the stuffed dummies used in military target practice (*Meet Your Strawman!* 2009); or to Dorothy’s fellow traveler in the *Wizard of Oz* (Menard 2011). In more rigorous, historical perspective, Donald Netolitzky (2018d) traces the “Strawman” concept back to 1999 when it was used as a component of U.S. Sovereign Citizen, Roger Elvick’s Redemption as “Accept for Value” theory. Elvick claimed the United States had gone bankrupt once it abandoned its gold standard, so it then “secured its currency by registering (as collateral) post-1936 Social Security Act birth certificates. These represent the work value of U.S. citizens” (Netolitzky 2018d:1072). Every flesh-and-blood human being whose parents have unwittingly registered their child with the government and who

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<sup>84</sup> Examples are: Dean Clifford who received a three year sentence for drugs and firearms charges (Netolitzky 2018c:440); Winston Shrout ([https://www.oregonlive.com/portland/2018/10/prominent\\_tax\\_dodger\\_winston\\_s.html](https://www.oregonlive.com/portland/2018/10/prominent_tax_dodger_winston_s.html)); and Robert A. Menard (<https://www.abc15.com/.../man-arrested-for-impersonating-peace-officer>).

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therefore owns a birth certificate has been saddled with their very own “Strawman”. Netolitzki describes the Strawman as, “a paper legal ‘person’, a non-corporeal doppelganger, identified by an all-capital name” (Netolitzky 2018d:1072).

Although Strawman theory originated in the U.S., a local, Canadian version was developed in the early 2000s by Robert Arthur Menard, who is credited with being the founder of the FOL movement in Canada, and one its leading activists and mentors (Netolitzky 2018: 1073). Discarding U.S. Sovereign Citizen notions regarding the American Constitution, Menard focused instead on “Common Law” and on the evils of the Canadian birth certificate.

Menard’s own personal conversion to Freemen-style anarchy might be traced back to his traumatic experience of losing a beloved adoptive daughter to the social services, after he had taken in a pregnant indigenous teenager under his wing and became the caretaker of her baby. Since he and the mother had already registered the baby, and he was not the biological father, he had no legal claim over her in his battle with the social workers (personal communication). In a desperate effort to reclaim his lost daughter, he embarked on an intensive study of what Netolitzky (2018d) terms “Otherlaw”. As he notes in his free online book, *Your Child or Her Life*<sup>85</sup> “Truth is hidden in plain sight,” but “to see their deception you have to dig past layers of twisty words”:

I sat down with their Act and I had Black’s Law dictionary on one side and Bouviers on the other. I looked up every single word. It took me three days. When I was done, I was stunned. I said one word “Sonofabitch”. Some of their words do not mean what you think they do. They expand definitions and they use a great deal of deception. It is much like those laser-engraved pictures which you can only see if you focus past the image. To see their deception you have to dig past layers of twisty words, but it’s there. (Menard n.d.:7-8)

Menard cautions Canadian parents against documenting their baby (Menard, *Timebomb* 2000). He explains why in his *youtube* video, “Bursting Bubbles of Government Deception”:

You are not obliged to register your child, if you do, you are creating a legal entity just like those businesses. You are associating that legal entity with your offspring and then the government seizes it, and under the laws of maritime salvage, it becomes their property. When they come to remove a child they are not acting on the living breathing child they are acting on that legal entity.

For adult Canadians already “shackled” to their Strawmen, Menard’s recommends they renounce their birth certificate contracts by sending out a Notice of Understanding Intent and Claim of Right to government authorities (See *13 Things the Government Doesn’t Want You to Know*, 2003).

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<sup>85</sup>. (<http://www.angelfire.com/planet/thinkfree/childorlife.pdf>)

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Freemen believe that by sloughing off one's Strawman, all one's debts, liabilities, taxes and legal responsibilities might be cancelled, since these inconvenient burdens belong to the Strawman rather than to the physical individual (*Strawman Explained - Legal Fiction Documentary*, 2016).

### **Alienation and Hostility towards Society**

One finds in the Gnostic and FOL literature themes of alienation from, and hostility towards, society. The early Christian heresiologists characterized the Gnostics as “having an attitude of social revolt” (Lewis 2013:14).

Gnostics did not feel they needed to play by the rules since rules were established by ignorant beings. They considered themselves to be a spiritual elite, separate from...the rules that govern society. (Lewis 2013:14)

Jonas (1963) considered Gnosticism as a philosophical movement akin to existentialism and nihilism, both of which emerged in response to various social and historical forces in antiquity. “[This] produced a sort of spiritual crisis in which people felt themselves to be alone in the universe. The classic Gnostic, therefore, was a loner intellectual with a sort of melancholy rebelliousness” (Lewis 2013: 16-17).

April DeKonig (2016) also emphasizes the transgressive nature of Gnostic spirituality, which confronted ancient spiritual systems that made human beings subservient to the gods.

Canadian journalists tend to focus on the transgressions and criminal activities of Freemen who exhibit “an attitude of social revolt” when they argue they are not obliged to carry a driver's license or pay taxes. Freemen reject the authority of the provincial and federal governments (which they regard as the illegitimate rule of “maritime” or “admiralty” law) and insist that they only respect Natural Law, God's law or "Common Law". Freemen will claim they are not bound by statute laws, since they never consented to those in the first place.

Kurt Rudolf (1987:225) shows how the Gnostics' rejection of earthly authorities reflected their Creation myth, in which the first cosmic ruler, the “demiurge”, enslaves humankind. He notes, “It is noteworthy that in undermining the legitimacy of the earthly order, the gnostics' systems considered these relations as ‘ungodly’ and inaugurated solely by the evil and ‘stupid’ creator of the world.” (Rudolf 1987: 265). Hans Jonas makes the same point: “The ancient system of rule has been divested by Gnosis of its sanctity...degraded from the alleged dignity of an inspired hierarchical order to a naked display of power” (Jonas 1967: 225). For Rudolf, “the whole counter-design of the Gnostics' system, as it confronts us in its soteriology and eschatology, effected for its advocates a practical devaluation and weakening of political conditions” (Rudolf 1987:266).

Just as the Gnostics perceived the physical world is an illusion, so contemporary Freemen insist that Canada is “unreal” in the sense that it is not a valid country, rather a “corporation”.

As Robert A. Menard (2011) so eloquently phrases it: “Canada, the Country that Ain't”

He goes on to explain:

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When we refer to our current alleged Canadian government as *de jure*, we no doubt mean *de facto*, since *de facto* means "in fact", but not "by law", which is what *de jure* means.... A government that exists by deception and fraud, and not by lawful authority, is a *de facto* government.... Canada is neither a federation nor does its government operate with legitimate authority.

Judging by politicians, and the legal community's visible conduct, their strategy seems to be one of perpetually...teaching and celebrating a Canadiana, pickled in bald-faced lies, with much ado and hoopla. It's practically impossible to believe that Canada is a legitimately sovereign and democratic federation, unless one is deranged or in the grasp of opiate dreams. Since most Canadians DO believe the impossible, what does this say about their mental and moral disposition?

No matter how we slice it the Canadian Federation remains a fiction. The federal government is a cabal of impostors; its authority to govern being non-existent until such time as Canadians wake up to the fact that EVERY TREATY ENTERED INTO ...ARE NULL AND VOID...just as null and void as the non-constitutional authority of Canada's community of bottom feeders...the judiciary and the Canadian Bar Association, including their bloated and subversive court procedures.

(Menard, *With Lawful Excuse*, 2011)

### **The Archons**

The main villains in Gnostic mythology are the Archons, who “collectively rule over the world and each individually within his sphere is a warder of the cosmic prison. Their tyrannical world-rule...aims at the enslavement of man” (Jonas 1963:43). The Freeman’s version of the “Archons” would be Canada’s judges, lawyers, notaries, bankers, policemen; the “cabal of impostors” and “bottom-feeders”, as mentioned above by Menard. These flesh-and-blood Archons keep Canada’s citizens imprisoned and sedated through the intoxicating power of words – the alien, bureaucratic language of the (fake) law.

### **The Theme of Intoxication**

Jonas (1963:71) notes the recurring theme in Gnostic texts of intoxication. He writes, “The drunkenness of the world...is induced by the ‘wine of ignorance’ which the world everywhere proffers to man.” He notes, “the metaphor makes it clear that ignorance is not a neutral state, the mere absence of knowledge, but is in itself a positive counter-condition to that of knowledge actively induced and maintained to prevent it.” (Jonas 1963:71). For Freeman, the “wine of ignorance” used to enslave can be found the specialized bureaucratic language used by the government. Menard reveals in his 2011 graphic novel, *With Lawful Excuse*, how fake English words are used to lull us into ignorance and slavery;

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[Their words] are in fact deceptive and misleading. Believe it or not, they are not even written in ENGLISH. They are written in the language of LAW, which only looks like ENGLISH, but it isn't.

The *youtube* instructional video called *THE STRAWMAN EXPLAINED* echoes this idea:

The beautiful part of this deception is that we are not part of this law society, so it doesn't apply to us. Within that society they have created a language that is deceptively similar to English."

In another *youtube* video, "Meet Your Strawman and Then Control It," the anonymous author uses metaphors of death, of tombstones, and the underworld to explain how "the poisonous glow" of "Dog Latin" (legal language or "legalese") is used to entrap us:

The secret foreign sign language hidden in plain sight. DOG LATIN.... It is a poisonous glow that corrupts the essence of the text. This story is about simple English text and a hidden text that has been usurped into the English language without your knowing... how a foreign alien text appears on contracts, court orders, your Driver's License, passports, etc. This trick is played upon the unsuspecting public administered by the true dogs of the underworld. The lawyers, judges, the Courts and their military Police are the administrators of this secret hidden deception played upon the masses to maintain control of such slaves. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CbErlm3JeAg>)

The anonymous author wanders away from the mere political into the metaphysical realm when s/he warns the public that "DOG LATIN" (spelled in upper case letters) is the "language of the dead", like the inscriptions found on "TOMB STONES", and cautions the viewer: "Beware lest you become the servant of the underworld, the Gods of the dead corporation."

### **Spiritual Dimensions of FOL Belief and Practice**

It might be objected that these two philosophical schools defy comparison, since one is essentially religious in its orientation and the other is radically political. Gnostics of the second to fourth century were part of an ascetic spiritual movement, condemned as heretical by what Lewis calls the "proto-orthodox" Christian leaders (Lewis 2013:23-26). Canada's Freemen are generally perceived to be members of a secular political movement. The media tends to portray them as potentially dangerous; as criminal or proto-criminals linked to hate groups. Freemen stories usually hit the headlines only after one of them has broken the law (Quan 2012; Parsons 2016).

That being said, a study of Freemen literature, accessible in the form of graphic novels, videos, blogs, webinars and Facebook posts on the internet, will reveal that vibrant strains of spirituality permeate their thought world. A striking example appears in the online 2011 graphic novel, *With*



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*Lawful Excuse*, by Robert A. Menard, one of Canada's original and leading Freemen-on-the-land. In response to the rhetorical question, "Who are you Really?" Menard tells his readers:

YOU are stardust... LIVING BREATHING, THINKING, FEELING STARDUST.  
YOU ARE COMPOSED OF THE SAME THING AS THE STARS. YOU CAME  
FROM THEM AND ONE DAY MUST RETURN THERE. YOU ARE BEYOND  
MAGICAL. DO YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE?

This passage might have been inscribed on a third century Coptic papyrus codex.

Many leading Freemen present themselves as staunchly irreligious, and some express anti-Catholic, anticlerical sentiments, such as the authors of *The Freeman's Handbook* (the founders of the "Real Eyes/ Realize/ Real Lies" group in Calgary). Manitoba Freeman, Dean Clifford, appears to be firmly agnostic in his training sessions. Some, like the Quebecois human rights activist Freeman, John Spirit, will make an occasional, oblique reference to God (<http://www.eternallyaware.com/index.html>).

But other Freemen appear to be "religiously musical" (Weber, 1909). At least four varieties of religiosity (some might prefer to call it "spirituality") are found in FOL speeches, literature and pseudolegal documents:

- Fundamentalist Christians (Protestants) stand out among the Freemen and cite the Bible to support antigovernment and detaxer arguments. Edward-Jay-Robin:Belanger and Fred Potvin, claim to be "Ministers of God" or "Ministers of Christ". Belanger in his 2012 speech, "Comments, regarding the man John Rooke's Slander, from minister Edward-Jay-Robin for C.E.R.I." (youtube) refers to the authority of God and to Her Majesty's "coronation oath to defend the Faith". He claims to represent "men and women of faith who follow Christ". Both Belanger and Fred Potvin call on "Yahuwah" in their speeches and affidavits (See Potvin (Re), 2018 ABQB 652 (CanLII)). Predictably, Christian fundamentalist Freemen make much of the preamble to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (also the introductory sentence to the Constitution of Canada's Charter of Rights and Constitution Act, 1982) which reads: "Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law".

It should be noted, however, that some Freemen will try on different religious "hats". Belanger, for example, started out as a "reformed druid" (see *Means v Meads*, 2012; Netolitzky 2018d). When he was stopped by the police in 2001, Belanger refused to get of his car, saying, "I am a Minister of the Church of Reformed Druids, and marijuana is our holy sacrament" (<https://www.cannabisculture.com/content/2001/06/01/1948/>).

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- Freemen often fall back on religious arguments or metaphors when making a stand against government regulations. Sometimes these are tongue-in-cheek: “You are all sinners....you have a social insurance number [S.I.N.] do you know what that means? ...the fact is your SIN means you are all government agents....That is your Original Sin. You are born into abundance into freedom and you gave it all up (Menard, *3 Ways to Break the Law*). In a more sincere and passionate vein, Freemen parents claim in a *youtube* video, “We have been granted irrevocable superior guardianship rights over our children by the creator of the universe.” (*Refusing to register a birth*).
- Other Freemen derive their inspiration from New Age or esoteric sources. The woman who writes her name as “Mary-Elizabeth: Croft” is the leading “Freewoman” in Canada, and was galvanized into resolving her debts after reading *Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects* (Néel and Yongden, 1967). She then wrote her highly influential Freeman book, "How I Clobbered Every Bureaucratic Cash Confiscatory Agency Known to Man" in which she quotes Werner Erhart, Tolle Eckhart, Chogyon Trungpa Rinpoche and Marianne Williamson. It is perhaps significant that the subtitle to her 2012 book (“a Spiritual Economics Book on \$\$\$ and Remembering Who You Are”) seems to points to the experience of Gnosis.
- Religious studies scholars have analyzed the “irrational” magical, ritualistic behaviour in the courts, as practised by the Justus Freemen (Wessinger 2000); the Moorish Science Temple (Dew 2016); and the United Nuwaubian Nation (Palmer 2010). Associate Chief Justice Rooke in *Meads v. Meads* (2012) describes in-court OPCA activities as a “drama that is more akin to a magic spell ritual than an actual legal proceeding.” Netolitzky goes further when he asserts. “this investigation shows that some OPCA activities are not 'akin' to a magical ritual — they *are* a magical ritual” – and then proceeds to demonstrate how Otherlaw “matches known and studied categories of ritual behaviour: sympathetic magic, cargo cult mimicry, and possession and exorcism” (Netoltzky 2018d).

The eclectic nature of FOL spirituality and myth-making would suggest that FOL beliefs have seeped into – or been contaminated by - the “cultic milieu” - a term coined by the British sociologist, Colin Campbell, to refer to a society's deviant belief systems and practices: “the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure” (Campbell 1972:122). The “cultic milieu” is the space where deviant science (or deviant politics) meets deviant religion. Netolitzky (2018d) has already demonstrated that Pseudolaw is embedded within

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a larger constellation of beliefs, and Michael Barkun (2013) places the Sovereign Citizens' "culture of conspiracy" within the larger information structure of the *cultic milieu*.

### **Freeman Gnosticism, Popular Culture and the Cultic Milieu.**

April DeConick (2016) has tracked the links between the imagination of the ancient Gnostic and the parallel "New Age" themes in North American popular culture. In *The Gnostic New Age* (2016) she explores the ancient Gnostic texts and tales that spring to life in the visions of contemporary cinema. our era. These New Age Gnostic themes have also permeated Freeman literature and folk art. While the charismatic Freeman preachers have yet to discover the evocative terms, "Gnosis" or "Gnosticism", they frequently cite literature that disseminates the Gnostic myth:

Will you continue to be conned by confidence men into worshipping the Wizard's light-show or will you look behind the veil? *Alice in Wonderland* and *Dorothy and Wizard of Oz* come with messages to wake us up. (Menard, *With Lawful Excuse*, 2011)

It is significant that the 1999 film, *The Matrix*, is wildly popular among Freeman and is frequently discussed, analyzed and cited in their literature. Lewis has observed that the "surreal fireside chat" between Morpheus and Neo about the illusory nature of the world (Morpheus: "It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.") "could have come directly from the pages of an ancient Gnostic document" (Lewis 2013:12). That iconic scene, where Morpheus transmits the Gnosis to Neo ("The Matrix is everywhere. You can feel it when you go to work...when you pay your taxes.") not only *could* have come from FOL literature, it *is* frequently cited in FOL literature, where it could be said to hold the status of a sacred text.

In his graphic novel, Menard writes about *The Matrix* I, II, and III ("Think of a movie as if it were a parable"). Then he proceeds to offer a Freeman's exegesis on the conversations between Neo, Morpheus, Trinity and Oracle and the Archon-like behaviour of Agent Smith (Menard 2011). In another publication ("Thirteen Things the Government doesn't want you to know") Menard (2015) justifies his reliance on quotes from the Matrix: "I stand against a Matrix also, and I do not think that Neo or Morpheus would mind."

U.S. Sovereign Citizens are also inspired by the quintessential Gnostic message that is so eloquently conveyed in *The Matrix*. The preface to the Sovereign Citizen's *Redemption Manual 4.5 Edition* (American's Bulletin. Oregon) begins, "This book is dedicated to those who seek freedom from the Matrix," and the author invites the reader to "take the red pill" and to "go down the [various] rabbit holes".

Many other examples might be found:

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<http://www.stopthecrime.net/the-matrix-and-the-us-constitution-sm-bk-format.pdf>;  
<https://www.scribd.com/document/38646293/Becoming-Free-of-the-Canada-Income-Tax-Act>  
<https://giftoftruth.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/redemption-manual-4-5-edition.pdf>  
<http://musicians4freedom.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Thomas-Anderson-Classified-Book-One-R-Anderson-Thomas.pdf>  
<https://www.scribd.com/document/96234193/HOW-I-CLOBBERED-EVERY-BUREAUCRATIC-CASH-CONFISCATORY-AGENCY-KNOWN-TO-MAN-a-Spiritual-Economics-Book-on-and-Remembering-Who-You-Are-by-Mary-El> -  
<http://index-of.co.uk/Hacking-Coleccion/196%20-%2013things%20%5B-PUNISHER-%5D.pdf>

Lewis finds it significant that “an ancient concept like gnosis shows up in a popular Hollywood blockbuster like *The Matrix*.” It seems to underscore a basic point; “this ancient idea resonates with us today. In this sense Gnosticism is also a philosophy that transcends place and time.” (Lewis 2013:13).

Jonas (1963:42) has observed that “the leading Gnostics displayed pronounced intellectual individualism and the mythological imagination of the whole movement was incessantly fertile”. The same might be said of FOL’s leaders whose eccentric and fertile imagination is evident in the passages quoted above.

### **Conclusion**

As Jonas (1967), Rudolf (1987) and Lewis (2013) concur, the Gnostic movement was a widespread phenomenon erupting in many places, in many forms, and in many languages. This study documents its recent eruption in what seems to be an unlikely area: in Canada’s Freedom-on-the-land movement.

But is it so very unlikely? Rudolph finds this “peculiarity” in the Gnostic tradition; that it frequently draws its material from a variety of existing traditions, attaches itself opportunistically to the material, and then “sets it in a new frame by which this material takes on a new character and a completely new significance” (Rudolf 1987:54). Thus, we find the basic elements of Gnostic mythology nestled inside the anti-government rhetoric, Strawman concept and conspiracy theories of a political protest anarchist movement, “almost as a parasite prospers on the soil of its ‘host religion’” (Rudolph 54-55).

Hans Jonas chooses a less revolting metaphor than Rudolph’s “parasite” in Spengler’s application of the term “pseudomorphosis” (Spengler, 1928), a term he borrowed from mineralogy:

Pseudomorphosis: If a different crystalline substance happens to fit the hollow left in a geological layer by crystals that have disintegrated, it is forced by the mold to take on a crystal form not its own and without chemical analysis will mislead the observer into talking it for a crystal of the same kind. (Jonas1967: 36-37)

Value-laden metaphors aside, Canada’s Freemen, unlike the U.S.’s Sovereign Citizens, are generally tolerated and not perceived as posing a threat. According to the recent Organization for  
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the Prevention of Violence (OPV) report, there are only around 150 to 250 Freeman-on-the-Land in Alberta, and only 10 to 15 Alberta Freeman have “demonstrated a behavioural propensity for violence” (Wakefield, 2019).

The fact that Freeman enjoy free speech and are only prosecuted when they are caught actually breaking the law is a testament to Canada’s success as a democratic society. Even so, the Freeman have thus far been studied mainly by lawyers and judges who (quite understandably) find their time-wasting antics annoying; or by law enforcement officers who are outraged by their challenges to authority; or by scholars in the discipline of Terrorism Studies assessing their potential for future violence; or by psychiatrists assessing their fitness to stand trial (Pytyck and Chaimowitz 2013; Parker 2014; Paradis, Owen and McCullough 2018); or by journalists whose focus is on sensational crimes and conflict. Thus, there is definitely a need for new studies with a more value-free, social scientific approach.

In order to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this fascinating anarchist movement, rather than focusing on the “extremist” literature or criminal records of Freeman, it would be more appropriate to do field research using participant observation methods with oral consent – if indeed this is even possible inside the new “Matrix” of the post-TCPS2 rise of Canada's Research Ethics Boards (Palmer 2018).

While the point of this study is *not* to suggest that ancient Gnostic philosophers like Simon Magus or Valentinus might be reincarnated as 21st century Freeman in Canada, or are being channelled by eloquent anarchists like Robert Menard and Dean Clifford, what it has hopefully shown is that this ancient philosophy – with its experience of alienation and the passionate pursuit of self-knowledge and ultimate freedom - informs the myths and seemingly irrational behaviour of Canada’s Freeman. Despite the demonstrable fact that Otherlaw techniques rarely, if ever, win cases in court, the ancient quest for Gnosis, embedded in the Strawman concept and the constellation of FOL ideas has captured the imagination of many of Canada's dissatisfied citizens. Recognizing this may help us understand the charisma and appeal of the Freeman-on-the-land movement today.

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# **Identity, Roles and Narratives of Ex-Members: Some Examples from the Swedish Religious Community Knutby Filadelfia**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, identity, roles and narratives of ex-members will be discussed, based on examples from the Swedish religious community Knutby Filadelfia, which ceased to exist in May 2018 and all members became ex-members. Narrative analysis is used. Based mainly on the preliminary enquirer report, where three of the former leaders in the group were accused by six ex-members of physical and sexual abuse, it is argued that the ex-members tend to identify with the Victim role and the Apostate role in relation to their former group. The role of therapists in the new identity construction is discussed, as several of the ex-members seem to have had assistance from therapists to create their new identities and roles in the process of leaving the group, therapists who seem to have encouraged these two role constructions. The question is raised whether other kinds of roles, for example the Hero role coined by Streib et al, in which the ex-member is seen more as an active agent with an increased awareness of his/her own motives, wishes and goals in life, and that he/she could learn something also from negative experiences, would have been more constructive for the individual.

## **Keywords**

Ex-member, identity, role, narrative, therapy, Knutby Filadelfia

## **Introduction**

In the autumn of 2016 the long-term members of the small religious community Knutby Filadelfia just outside Uppsala, Sweden, with roots in the Pentecostal movement, discovered that their female charismatic leader, conceived of as the future Bride of Christ, had had an intimate relationship with a pastor in the group. In combination with other events and circumstances – other extramarital relations from the side of the pastor, failed prophecy, constant overwork – the discovery led to the dissolution of the group one and a half years later, and all members – most of



them members for around 20 years – left the group. Several of the ex-members today consider themselves to be cult victims, and some took the charismatic leader and two pastors to court in January 2020, accusing them of physical violence and sexual abuse. The three were sentenced to community service and fines. This was the second time Knutby Filadelfia was in the media spotlight in Sweden. In January 2004, there was one murder and one attempt to murder in the group, with many spectacular details, which made the group notorious both in Sweden and abroad. The story will be outlined below.

This article will investigate and discuss the new identity formation of some of the ex-members after 2016, the ex-member roles they construct and occupy, and their narratives as they appear in the preliminary enquirer report. The article will not discuss whether the ex-members' memories and narratives are true or false, but take the standpoint that if the individuals define their memories as real, they have real meaning and real consequences in their lives (Warner and Feltey 1999: 161). Thus the analysis will be based on the ex-members' narratives and take a narrative approach. The article will also discuss the role of therapists in the exit process and in the new identity formation of ex-members.

The primary material consists of the preliminary enquirer report (PER 2019) prepared for the court case, and social media material. The preliminary enquirer report contains both the narratives of abused ex-members as well as the narratives of the three accused former leaders. While the emphasis in this article will be on the ex-members' narratives for the analysis of ex-member roles, the narratives of the former leaders will also be taken into account and discussed to some extent.

Informal talks and interviews with members/ex-members have, for ethical reasons, been used to a very limited extent, mainly for historical information, with great care taken to protect informants' identity. The author has been in contact with the group since 2011, and thus has seen the group both as fully working and as in the state of decline, and has continuously been interviewing members and ex-members in different layers in the group, as well as conducting field visits and having informal talks and discussions with members and ex-members.<sup>86</sup>

### **Knutby Filadelfia – a short summary of ideology, life style and history**

In 1921, Knutby Filadelfia was founded as a Pentecostal congregation (Peste 2011: 218). Its early history, here briefly summarized, is outlined in a dissertation by Sanja Nilsson which was published in 2019 (2019: 72-74). Knutby Filadelfia was, as many Christian congregations in Sweden in the 1980s, deeply influenced by a fertile Christian milieu with influences from several orientations. Noteworthy in this milieu is the Faith Movement church Word of Life, which was established in 1983 by Ulf Ekman, a former state church priest in Sweden (Coleman 2000: 89-90). The then head pastor in Knutby Filadelfia, Kim Wincent, attended a Bible school arranged by the Word of Life, and was inspired by the experience. As Nilsson remarks, Ekman's teachings

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<sup>86</sup> This article is a continuation of a study for which ethical permission was obtained from the Regional Ethical Review Board in Uppsala in 2012, with the purpose of investigating the situation of children and young people in Knutby Filadelfia, also in relation to staying in or leaving the group.

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contained discussions of evil spirits and spiritual warfare, teachings that were later to play an important role in the Knutby Filadelfia congregation (Nilsson 2019: 73).

In 1992, Åsa Waldau (b.1965), who was to become the future charismatic leader of Knutby Filadelfia, moved to Knutby. Waldau was at the time both a popular as well as a controversial youth pastor in the Pentecostal congregation in the nearby town of Uppsala (Nilsson 2019: 74). Waldau was the granddaughter of one of the leading figures of the early Pentecostal Movement in Sweden, Willis Säfve;<sup>87</sup> however, she grew up in a secular home. At the age of sixteen, she had a salvation experience which became decisive for her life. In Knutby, she worked mainly with music and with children, but, during this time, she worked as well as a travelling evangelist and travelled all over Sweden. She visited many Pentecostal congregations, and often attracted much attention. Many people were convinced that Waldau had direct contact with God. Later on, several of the people she met during these travels moved to Knutby, among them Helge Fossmo and Sara Svensson, who both later came to play important roles in the history of Knutby Filadelfia (interview 1). Two other persons, who also moved to Knutby after meeting Waldau during her time as a travelling evangelist, were the 2 Pastors who were accused in the court case in 2020 (interview 2).

In 1997, Knutby Filadelfia started a Bible School (Nilsson 2019: 75), and the membership doubled to around 100 members within a few years (interview 1). Most new members were young, enthusiastic people with a family background in the Pentecostal Movement (Lundgren 2008: 59). Gradually, Knutby Filadelfia began to develop a unique belief system. The most important belief was that there was a strong expectancy around the year 2000 that Jesus would return very soon to usher in the millennium. “Very soon” really meant the immediate future, and the congregation started to prepare for this to happen. Knutby Filadelfia was believed to have a special role in coming events, and the most special role was reserved for Åsa Waldau (informal conversations 1). At the end of the 1990s, some members began to discuss whether the concept of the Bride of Christ might refer to a human person, and soon a belief developed that Åsa Waldau would be the future wife of Jesus. Nilsson points out that there were several layers and levels in the group, and that only some members in the group were aware of this belief while others were not. Later on, Waldau became known in the media as “the Bride of Christ” (Nilsson 2019: 80-81).

In December 1999, a frightful event shocked the congregation of Knutby Filadelfia. The first wife of the Pastor Helge Fossmo was found dead in the bathtub in their house, a death which was at the time considered to be a tragic accident.<sup>88</sup> The couple had three very young children. The death was a trauma to the whole community, and many of the members believed that it must be a sign indicating that God’s kingdom would soon come and that they would then meet their close friend again. Several of the members prayed for the imminent return of Jesus (informal conversation 1), and talked in this context about “coming home” and “being taken home.” These prayers were later criticized as possibly referring to death as something positive, thus providing a

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<sup>87</sup> See Nilsson 2019: 70.

<sup>88</sup> In 2004, Helge Fossmo was also tried for the murder of his first wife, but was not convicted as the judge decided that there was not sufficient evidence (Peste 2011: 218).

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rationalization for what later became a charge of murder regarding Fossmo's second wife in 2004 (Peste 2011: 217).

As in classic Pentecostal congregations, prophecies, visions, and demons played a major role in the community's theology (Lundgren 2008: 61-63; Peste 2011: 219). It was quite common to have dreams and visions about Åsa Waldau as the Bride of Christ (interview 3; informal conversation 2). It was believed that some members of the congregation, especially Waldau and Fossmo, were under attack by demons, as they had important roles in upcoming global spiritual events. It was believed that especially Fossmo was in frequent battles with the Devil. Claiming that it would increase his power to fight the Devil, he initiated a secret sexual relationship with Sara Svensson. Fossmo had other secret extramarital relationships in the congregation as well (Nilsson 2019: 77). Meanwhile, the standards in the group regarding sexual relationships were that sex belongs to marriage, and the relationships of Fossmo were thus unknown to the congregation at large.

Knutby Filadelfia came under the media spotlight for the first time in 2004 when a murder and a murder attempt took place in the group. The second wife of the Pastor Helge Fossmo, also sister of Åsa Waldau, was shot to death at the age of 23, and another male member, a neighbor of the Fossmo couple, was seriously wounded. After the police investigation, Helge Fossmo was sentenced to life in prison, after having been found guilty of conspiracy to commit murder. Sara Svensson was convicted as the perpetrator of the deed. It was assumed that she had carried out the crimes under the influence of the Pastor; he had been sending anonymous text messages to her phone urging her to carry out the murder. Sara Svensson believed these messages came from God. She was committed to psychiatric care.

The murder in 2004 attracted tremendous attention from the Swedish media for several years. Due to their "unorthodox beliefs," Knutby Filadelfia was excluded from the Swedish Pentecostal Movement in 2004 (Frisk 2018). Waldau withdrew from official leadership in the group in 2008, allegedly due to overwork, and to prepare for the impending return of Jesus (interview 3). Meanwhile, she worked as an artist, musician and designer (Frisk 2018). The group continued to exist largely intact, with members turning inwards, entertaining the same beliefs as before about Waldau as the Bride of Christ; however, denying these beliefs to the general public and media.

From around 2008 (PER 2019: 50: 20), but especially from 2011-2012 (PER 2019: 53: 250), with a peak around 2013-2015 (PER 2019: 51: 92), violence crept into the life of the group. Waldau started to be physically violent towards some of the members, and this pattern of violent behavior in the group spread so that other members as well started to become violent towards each other (PER 2019: 53: 250). One of the members says that Waldau acted as she did to save the members from evil spirits (PER 2019: 51: 115). Waldau herself says that everyone had to be ready when Jesus returned, which could happen any minute. Waldau explains in the preliminary enquirer report that she became very worried when she felt that someone was not ready, and that it became of utmost importance for her to try to stop the members from committing sin (PER 2019: 53: 244-246). In those cases, Waldau says that she sometimes would slap the member to wake him up, to make him take command of the situation (PER 2019: 53: 248-249). According to Waldau, other

acts of violence might have happened when the women closest to her became physically too close, and she felt that they were invading her space (PER 2019: 53: 255).

The physical violence, plus a condition of constant overwork as the members were both building physical houses as well as working on themselves by initiating different severities advised or ordered by Waldau, like sleeping in difficult conditions, or not having intimate relations with their spouses, or desperately trying to stand “right”<sup>89</sup> before God through different actions, also influenced the situation in a destructive way, and escalated during the last years of the existence of the group. Another contributing factor was probably a sense of “failure of prophecy” from Waldau, as the group had waited for almost twenty years for Jesus to turn up and marry her, and it had not happened. In addition to the disappointment when members discovered both that Waldau had had an intimate relationship with one of the pastors, as well as the same pastor’s other extramarital relationships including one with a 17-year old girl, these factors finally brought on the downfall of Knutby Filadelfia (Frisk 2020).

### **The exit process from new religious movements: Perspectives on identity, narratives, roles**

Identity, narratives, and roles are closely related to the individual as well as to the social context. The sociologist J. P. Hewitt notes, in his 1991 identity theory, that social identity and personal identity are major forces in contemporary self-construction. According to Hewitt, social and personal identity link situations and their roles into meaningful sequences and create a sense of wholeness that combats the fragmentation of everyday life (Hewitt 1991: 191).

Identity construction is also an important aspect of the life narrative. The sociologist Martin Kohli describes how an individual chooses themes in order to construct his/her biography, and through this process confirms or reconstitutes his/her own identity (Kohli 1981: 70). The individual constructs, through a personal narrative, his or her identity and thus develops a purpose and a place in the world. Identity construction is a dynamic and evolving process (Wells 2011: 50-51).

In the case of disaffiliation from a new religious movement, the process of disaffiliation concerns an alteration of identity in the transition from being a member to being an ex-member. The exit narratives of the ex-members are part of the new identity construction (Newfield, Schneur Zalman 2020: 73). Susan Rothbaum, a counselor to former members of alternative religions, writes that ex-members in a single stroke lose everything that has structured their lives and defined their personal identities, from mundane routines to the meaning of life. Ex-members have a foot in each world, but feel at home nowhere. They must find a way to create a new identity outside the group during the time of transition. Rothbaum opines that the experience of being between two worlds can be both painful and productive. She writes that anti cult-oriented support groups affect ex-members’ retrospective evaluation of their experiences, thus pointing to the importance of the social context in recreating identities. Recipients of anticult therapies are less inclined to recognize

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<sup>89</sup> This is a special expression, often used in the group. “To stand wrong” meant to be out of grace with Waldau, which also meant to be out of grace with God. Waldau was conceived of as being intuitive and spiritually sensitive to the extent that she felt each person’s relationship with God.

positive aspects of the membership, and tend to look for explanations in the direction of the mind control model (Rothbaum 1988: 205-207).

Rothbaum further notes that membership in religious groups often means a systematic breaking down of individual identities, which generates substantial problems for the leave-taker. A systematic breaking down of individual identities is an element inherent in the belief system and practices in many religious groups, as the individual ego is viewed more or less as an island of selfishness, a delusion separating seekers from God or preventing them from realizing their true nature. Rothbaum argues that members join religious groups because they are dissatisfied with their own faults and limitations, and wish for a change. Later, the members may discover that the cost of membership is higher than they thought, and that they, as members, may also lose something essential to them. As Rothbaum writes, once the sculpting process for the new identity has begun, it is difficult for members to reassess whether the sculptor is as skilled as they thought, and whether they like the image that is being created (Rothbaum 1998: 208-209). Thus doubt may begin to rise, which may initiate an exit process.

The sociologist Stuart Wright discusses different role models for the ex-member, and elaborates on the “apostasy” role and the “victim/survivor” role. Wright as well notes the close relation between narrative and role, and writes that the narrative of the apostate often is formulated as a captivity narrative emphasizing manipulation and capture of the unsuspecting target who does not have any choice or free will (Wright 1998: 98). Wright asks the question why some leavers turn unfavorable experiences into a moral campaign while others resolve them with considerably less trouble and conflict (Wright 1998: 95-97). Wright writes that apostasy is a role behavior, and is learnt as a function of role-taking (Wright 1998: 100). Streib et al (2009:169-170) categorize different roles of ex-members in minority religions. Some ex-members are portrayed as “heroes,” and emerge in the narratives, after conflict and turmoil, with grief and anger, but also as active agents with an increased awareness of their own motives, wishes and goals in life. Typically, they trust that even a negative experience can be something from which they can learn. Others are in the narratives portrayed as “survivors.” Survivors mean that they have been cheated and wish to warn others. And, finally, there is the role of the “victim,” focusing on damage and entitlement to compensation (Streib et al 2009: 169-170).

David Bromley is another sociologist who writes about the social construction of different kinds of exit roles. He defines “apostasy” as a role that is constructed when an organization is in a state of high tension with its surrounding environment and involves an individual exiting the organization to form an alliance with an oppositional coalition. It is a role of high visibility, and is used to invoke social control measures of various kinds against new religious movements (Bromley 1998: 19). Thus roles of ex-members may also have a significance on larger social and structural arenas.

Narratives are mostly constructed in a social context. One situation in which narratives are socially constructed is in the therapist-client relationship. The professor of anthropology Cheryl Mattingly argues that this mutual construction of a story, which she calls “therapeutic emplotment,” is integral to the healing process (Mattingly 1998: 2). The British sociologist Eileen Barker writes

that the therapist's assignment is to help clients to construct a new reality so that they can reconcile themselves with the emotional upheaval and complex situations related to joining and leaving a new religion. Thus, the therapist's primary task in working with the client does not aim at the construction of an accurate and balanced account of the religious group, as is the case with academics studying these groups (Barker 1995: 21-22). This is, as well, one of the main reasons why the perspectives of therapists and academics differ regarding minority religions; their aims are simply very different.

Stuart Wright writes that anti-cult therapists contribute significantly to the construction of the "victim" role for ex-members of new religious movements. Wright refers, for example, to one wellknown anti-cult therapist, Michael Langone, as lionizing the role of the anti-cult therapist as one who helps the victim come to understand his or her victimization at the hands of the cult. (Wright 1998: 101). According to Wright, the treatment of ex-members does not simply serve a reintegration function for the sick, it is also a powerful position from which to wage a political campaign against new religious movements (Wright 1998: 102), thus relating to David Bromley's social and structural perspective described above.

Wright quotes J. David Brown, who has conducted research on ex-members who have changed to occupations in professional counseling. He quotes Brown as, regarding abuse counseling, writing that there is an emotional and symbolic identification of ex-members with their therapists during treatment, combined with deep personal meanings imputed to these relationships. The therapist enacts a powerful charismatic role in the professional ex-members' therapeutic transformation (Wright 1998: 107). Thus, Wright opines that the exit-counseling enterprise functions as a charismatic community for re-socialization and therapeutic transformation, as well as a mechanism for recruiting, cultivating and promoting apostates (Wright 1998: 109).

The social constructions of memory and reality resulting from the therapist-client relationship are not always accurate. There is an infamous murder case in Sweden, where Thomas Quick, an inmate in a closed psychiatric hospital, during the 1990s confessed to being the perpetrator of around thirty murders over the past three decades in Sweden, Norway and Finland. In close consultation with his psychiatric hospital therapists, Quick and the therapists co-constructed various murder scenarios, and Quick was later convicted for eight of these murders. Later he, however, retracted his confessions and, in 2013, was retried and deemed not guilty for any of the crimes (Frisk & Palmer 2015: 68-69).

There has been some previous research on Knutby Filadelfia in relation to exit narratives. Palmer & Frisk write in an article based on an interview with the Pastor Helge Fossmo, sentenced for conspiracy to murder in Knutby Filadelfia in 2004, that there are many similarities between his narrative and the construction of his therapist, Rigmor Robèrt. Fossmo describes in the interview how he worked closely with his therapist, to whom he gives credit for helping him understand his role in Knutby Filadelfia:

Rigmor Robèrt helped me to understand Knutby. I read about cults since I left the group. Why is it not a crime to control people's minds? Today I see that what happened in Knutby should not be allowed. (Frisk & Palmer 2015: 69)

Below the identity formation, narratives, and roles taken by the ex-members of Knutby Filadelfia will be discussed. As noted before, most ex-members came to identify with the victim role, and some with the apostate role. The process of their identity constructions will be scrutinized. Shortly, the narratives of the three accused former leaders will also be related.

### **Narratives and roles related to the exit process in Knutby Filadelfia: victims' narratives**

Narratives are always constructed in a context. Narratives are constructed for someone, with specific goals which the narrator for different reasons wishes to emphasize. In short, all narrators have a message which they want to convey to the listener, and who the listener is sets the agenda for how the narrative is constructed. Although narratives are constructed around a core of facts or events, the narrator has great freedom to interpret, select, and emphasize whatever he/she finds relevant (Lieblich et al 1998: 8). According to Lieblich et al, a narrative should be seen as neither a fiction nor as an accurate representation of reality; but is affected by surrounding conditions and is influenced by the cultural resources from which the storyteller draws (Lieblich et al 1998; Wells 2011: 45). In the case of Knutby Filadelfia, "the evil cult narrative," which was spread so widely in the media and popular culture, is the main cultural resource used (Frisk & Palmer 2015).

The primary material for this article are the narratives of the ex-members of Knutby Filadelfia as they appear in the preliminary enquirer report. The preliminary enquirer report must, however, be considered very special material, as the criminal accusations are in focus for the narratives by ex-members. The narratives were told to the police by some of the abused ex-members, with the explicit purpose of reporting criminal accusations against the female charismatic leader and the two pastors. These special conditions of course affect the narratives, and the victim role narrative thus appears natural in that context. The preliminary enquirer report strengthens and reinforces the victim narrative. Thus, the basic orientation of the narratives told in the preliminary enquirer report are already set from the beginning.

The preliminary enquirer report consists of several hundred pages. The narratives about physical violence, mostly by the charismatic leader Åsa Waldau, the "Bride of Christ," are numerous. Of these narratives, fourteen were chosen and taken to court, narrated by six ex-members (Ansökan om stämning B6654-17). These specific narratives were probably chosen because the proof situation was the most proximate regarding these specific cases. Some of the other events happened so long ago that the crimes were past statute, and could not be taken to court for that reason.

When reading the different cases, it is striking that many of the narratives turn out to be quite vague, both regarding when in time they occurred, but also regarding, for example, if other people were present, which might be significant for the witness/proof situation. In most of the narratives, it is striking that the violence seems to happen out of context, and comes out in the narratives as

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an inexplicable cruelty directed towards the members who could do nothing except accept they were being beaten. The focus is often on the pain inflicted, and for how long it has lasted, which on some occasions could be for months. This emphasis on painful consequences is also typical and significant for the court case narratives, and should perhaps not have been emphasized to that degree in other contexts.

A typical narrative from the preliminary enquirer report could, for example, run like this:

[Blows to the wall] have happened at least five times. All occasions took place in Åsa's house, maybe it also happened abroad. Åsa has taken A's head and knocked it into the wall. A remembers an occasion when they were in Åsa's bathroom. Åsa had a stone wall in the bathroom. A just remembers that Åsa got very angry and slammed A's head into the stone wall. It hurt a lot and was very uncomfortable. A thinks the event happened in 2014. She thinks that she may have told B and that B may have been present on one of these occasions. The blow hurt her head and the pain lasted for a while; she can recall that the head was tender and swollen for a couple of days afterwards. (PER 2019: 50: 22-23)

As is evident, in this narrative there are uncertainties regarding both time, place, and possible witnesses. The event is centered on the violence; no other context is given.

A second typical narrative runs:

This was at the end of such an evening [Saturday night]. They were in the hall ready to go home. Some people were in the hall at the entrance and some were a little further into the hall near the stairs. C herself was near the stairs and saw the whole incident. Åsa grabbed D's jaw with her hand and pressed her head against a large wooden wardrobe. Her head thumped and Åsa scolded D. She questioned what D was doing and told her to wrestle and fight back. First, she gave her a box on the ear, and then she pushed her up against the closet with force. It felt more violent than the ear box. When she gave her the ear box, it was with an open hand with the inside of her hand, as C remembers. It was maybe 2-3 strokes but could just as well have been 1 stroke, she does not really remember. D looked scared and panicked. She did nothing; she just looked at Åsa and was silent (PER 2019: 51: 116).

Regarding this incident, the context and the reasons for the violence remain unclear. The ear box is described in detail; however, it is unclear if it was one ear box or several.

A third narrative runs:

This was in October-November in connection with a building of a small extra house for Åsa. E does not remember what year. F had calculated how long time it would take to build it, and when he informed Åsa that it would be ready in May, she beat both E and F. They were at Åsa's home in the living room. She first hit F and then he [E] thinks that she hit him [E] as well, but he is not sure if it was on the same occasion that he also was beaten. She first hit F in the face over the cheek with an open hand once and then she did the same



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with E. It hurt. He looked down at the floor and his thoughts were occupied by a feeling of guilt that he had been standing "wrong" according to Åsa. Verbally, she scolded mainly F. (PER 2019: 51: 85).

In this narrative as well the specific time is uncertain. The event happened in October-November, but the narrator does not know which year. E is not sure who was beaten at this specific occasion, if he himself was included or not. The context on this occasion is elaborated slightly, as the reason for the violence is given (a building project which was delayed).

Two roles are continuously prominent in the narratives: the role of "the Victim," occupied by the narrator, and the role of "the Evil one," occupied by Waldau. Both roles are well known in the typical narrative structure. In the third narrative, F expresses feelings of guilt, typical for the victim role. In neither of the narratives do the narrators express anger or oppose the violence, or take any kind of active role. Waldau personifies evil, with an anger perceived as coming from nowhere or almost from nowhere, which is expressed in physical violence, described as very sudden and with very little explanation. Also the opposite pair, "evil" and "good," expressed in human character, is a part of the typical narrative structure.

Waldau is in the preliminary enquirer report described as the one having all the power and who decides next to everything in the congregation, thus emphasizing the members' powerlessness and victim-ness. G, for instance, one of the women who was very close to Waldau, says in the preliminary enquirer report that Waldau made her follow only her for many, many years (PER 2019: 50: 27). It is clear from G's narrative that G does not consider the possibility, in a more active perspective, that she was the one following Waldau; according to the narrative, it was Waldau who made G follow her, setting G in a very passive role. Waldau is emphasized as the active actor, and G is the explicitly passive follower. The term manipulation regarding Waldau is sometimes, though not often, used in the preliminary enquirer report (see for example PER 2019: 50: 49), and one member says on one occasion that she considers herself "programmed" (PER 2019: 51: 91).

### **The narratives by the three accused former leaders**

The preliminary enquirer report also contains the narratives of the three accused former leaders in Knutby Filadelfia, to which we will now briefly turn.

The narrative of Waldau herself, as related in the preliminary enquirer report, not surprisingly paints another picture of the power situation in the congregation. According to her narrative, for example, the intimate relationship with the pastor was initiated by the pastor as he explained that she had to give her body to him to be close to Jesus, and she had no other choice than to obey (PER 2019: 53: 277). During the years when the violence took place, Waldau emphasizes that she was withdrawn and nearly isolated from the congregation for several years, and that both pastors and certain other members, including some of the ones accusing Waldau of violence, exercised a power of their own towards other members, and sometimes even violence towards them (PER 2019: 51:

85). Waldau also maintains in the preliminary enquirer report that she did not have any memories of several incidents and details of which she is accused (PER 2019: 53).

Thus, in Waldau's own narrative, her own role is much more passive than in the victims' narratives, and dependent on the roles of others who are depicted as also being to varying degrees in power positions. In one sense, the role of Waldau in her own understanding could also be outlined as a kind of victim role, although it is not as explicitly expressed as in the case of the abused members. Waldau maintains that she did not have the kind of power the abused members claim she had, and that her role must be understood in the context of other members' power context and actions.

The pastor accused of sexual abuse of a 17-year-old girl who was in a dependent position in relation to him, also had other extramarital relations, including the one with Waldau. In the preliminary enquirer report he claims that Waldau was the one seducing him, and that he understood their relationship as a battle for Waldau to come closer to God. The pastor says that he was broken down during this time, as Waldau could, whenever she wished, decide that he was "standing wrong" without him understanding why. Regarding the 17-year-old girl, the pastor denies her being in a dependent position towards him, and emphasizes her own initiative, and also that he felt that the relationship was part of his service to God (PER 2019: 56). Again, in the pastor's narrative, Waldau's active role is emphasized, as well as the young girl's, and the pastor's role in his own narrative becomes very passive.

The third pastor reported himself for physical abuse toward another male member. He emphasized, however, that he hit this member because Waldau told him to, and that he considers himself a victim who has been used and manipulated by Waldau (PER 2019: 50: 8). Here the case is very clear: the narrative shows the manipulating role the pastor claims Waldau has, and the pastor considers himself explicitly as a victim. Still, he reports himself for the violent incident, and he was, eventually, found guilty to the crime.

Thus, in the narratives of the accused former leaders, we also find, to different degrees, a readiness to take on passive rather than active roles concerning events in the congregation, and that the victim role to a certain degree also is taken on by the former leaders.

### **Contact with therapists**

It is clear from the preliminary enquirer report that at an early stage in the exit process, many of the ex-members came into contact with therapists who held an anti-cult perspective, as well as an old friend of one of the members, said to be a "Religious Studies scholar<sup>90</sup> with insight into manipulation processes" (PER 2019: 51: 147), and who clearly transmits an anti-cult perspective to this member. Some of their written conversations were copied into the preliminary enquirer investigation. The high school teacher writes to her that it is evident that she and the other members have been exposed to manipulation, mind control and brainwashing, and that she should not be ashamed. According to him, the members were manipulated and broken step by step with the

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<sup>90</sup> According to Internet sources, he is a senior high school teacher in religion and history, and has also written school books.

passage of years (PER 2019: 52: 178-179). In their communication, the member starts using the term manipulation after he introduces it to her, and responds to him that he is right that Waldau manipulated them all (PER 2019: 51: 149).

One psychotherapist, interrogated in the preliminary enquirer report, states to have been in contact with around 30 members/ex-members in the congregation. According to the preliminary enquirer report, she diagnosed at least two of them with PTSD as a consequence of their experiences in Knutby Filadelfia. This therapist referred some of them to other therapists, and she was also the one suggesting to them to report the violence to the police and take the perpetrators to court (PER 2019: 56: 37). Thus, the idea to take the cases to court did not originate with the members themselves, but came from this therapist. In one informal talk I had with one of the ex-members, the ex-member told me that she was encouraged by her therapist (it is not clear if this was the same therapist or another one) to report accusations to the police; she had, however, in that case to think out something to report, as she did not really have anything (informal talk beginning of 2017).<sup>91</sup> Thus, it is clear that this ex-member as well was encouraged to report violence to the police by her therapist, although she did not really seem to have a clear case to report.

It is clear from the preliminary enquirer report that several of the ex-members were in contact with therapists at the time of the interrogation. One of the ex-members says in the report that the therapy helped her to get memories back, and that memories came back to her with the help of therapy (PER 2019: 50: 29; 48). She states that the therapy has helped her to remember more from the abuse (PER 2019: 55: 15). This narrative confirms the role that therapy may have in remembering, constructing, and reconstructing memories. Of course, considering what has earlier been said in this paper about memories and narratives, nothing can be said about the extent to which these memories are “true” or “false.” It is clear, however, that memories might have, to some extent, been altered through selection, interpretation, and social support.

An interesting case of a role-taking of the “Apostate” is a female pastor in the congregation, who together with a well-known anti-cult therapist in Sweden, Rigmor Robèrt who was the therapist of Helge Fossmo (see above), started a very popular pod called “The Cult Podcast” (“Sektpodden”). From being bitter enemies for several years, during the years the pastor was still a member of Knutby Filadelfia, they became close friends after the breakdown of the congregation. Started in the autumn of 2019, a new episode has been published every week at the time of this writing (July 2020). Focused to a certain degree on Knutby Filadelfia, with several episodes dealing with this group, there have also been episodes about other “cults,” as well as thematic episodes dealing with, for example, sex, violence, or leadership. The structure of the episodes is typically that the Knutby ex-pastor asks questions, relying upon Rigmor Robèrt as an expert, in a typical Dr. Watson-Sherlock Holmes pattern, well known from many other narrative contexts. Thus the structure of the podcast follows a well-known narrative structure, with the roles “the Ignorant” (although the ex-pastor sometimes relates memories from the Knutby community to

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<sup>91</sup> The violence reported was restricted to a few of the members; most of the members in the community did not experience any violent situations at all.

confirm the conclusions by Robèrt) and “the Expert.” The central character in “The Cult Podcast” is the therapist, who is the person the episodes revolve around. The perspective given by Rigmor Robèrt is a traditional manipulation-brainwashing-evil cult perspective, thus drawing upon well-known cultural resources.

“The Cult Podcast” has received a lot of attention from media, and the Knutby ex-pastor, as well as Rigmor Robèrt, have been in different TV shows in Sweden during winter and spring 2020, and both are often consulted as experts in both TV- and radio programs. Thus the “Apostate” role, taken by the Knutby ex-pastor, has been reinforced and stabilized. The pastor could today be seen as a “professional apostate,” emphasizing and consolidating her new identity and role as an apostate in relation to Knutby Filadelfia.

### **Discussion**

In the transit from being a member to becoming an ex-member, the members of Knutby Filadelfia have typically taken on the “Victim role,” as well as, in some cases, the “Apostate role.” In this process, they had social support of different kinds, first and foremost from each other. The interviews indicate that the breakdown of the congregation in many cases changed relationships between the members, making some of them bitter enemies as they realized they had been suppressed and abused by certain other members as well, not only by Waldau. Several of the ex-members, however, also had support from each other and communicated a lot, helping and supporting each other to make sense of their experiences (interviews and informal conversations 2017-2018). The preliminary enquirer report supports the findings suggested by several sociologists in previous research, such as Cheryl Mattingly, Eileen Barker, and Stuart Wright, that several of the ex-members had help and support by therapists, who seem to have encouraged the “Victim” role-taking. Striking is the absence of the “Heroe role,” suggested by Streib et al, which is characterized by the ex-member taking on the role as an active agent, as well as the perspective that much could be learnt also from negative experiences if approached from mature frames of mind.

The role of the therapist is prominent in the narrative constructions of the ex-members of Knutby Filadelfia, as they came forward in the preliminary enquirer report. As suggested by Cheryl Mattingly and Eileen Barker, the therapist and the ex-member co-create a narrative, with the explicit goal of helping the client construct a new reality with which he/she can live, as part of the healing process for the client. As Stuart Wright notes, however, anti-cult therapists typically help the victim to understand his or her victimization in the cult, thereby contributing to the construction of the victim role for ex-members. One of the ex-members of Knutby Filadelfia says in the preliminary enquirer report that she “got her memories back” by therapy, which leads to the question of to what extent memories are “coming back,” or are “created” or “altered” with the help of the therapist. Memories typically change and are subject to selective choices and interpretations when told and retold, but also naturally change as time passes.

There are as well examples in Knutby Filadelfia of the “Apostate role.” Several of the Knutby Filadelfia ex-members have come forward in the media, most of them emphasizing their passive

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role in the group and asserting that they had been “brainwashed by the cult.”<sup>92</sup> Most prominent here is the previous female pastor mentioned above, who could additionally be said to occupy the role of “the Ignorant” and the “Cult Expert,” depending on context. She performs mainly in “The Cult Podcast,” but additionally in many other media contexts in Sweden. In the pastor’s identification with the apostate role, the role of her therapist and close friend, Rigmor Robèrt, is prominent. The anticult therapist Rigmor Robèrt is often hired by the media as an expert, and occupies a charismatic role, as Wright quotes J. David Brown as writing, in relation to at least the ex-pastor, but she is also mentioned with great affection and admiration by other ex-members in other contexts. As Stuart Wright writes, exit-counseling enterprises could function as charismatic communities for resocialization and therapeutic transformation, as well as recruiting, cultivating, and promoting apostates.

It could, however, be questioned whether the new identities and roles of ex-members are the most constructive ones for the individual when constructed as “Victims” and “Apostates.” I would like to suggest that an alternative for the therapist might be to help ex-members to construct a more active and empowered role in relation to the religious groups, such as “the Heroe role” suggested by Streib et al. As a sociologist knowing the members/ex-members for many years, it is striking to note that the Victim role seems to lock the individual into bitterness and passivity, with very limited possibilities of changing to other mental states. Likewise, the Apostate role contains the danger of locking the individual into a role not unlike the cult role but instead defending anticult values. To the observer, both roles seem unfortunate, at least in the long run, and that there must be other more mature ways to approach new identities for ex-members. From my point of view, the therapist should rather help the ex-member to construct a narrative which empowers the ex-member and gives him/her self-confidence to continue his/her life in a constructive manner. The role of the therapist should definitely be to help the ex-member come to terms with his/her time in the religious group, and continue his/her life in a constructive way. From this point of view, the Hero role is definitely a role which could be more explored and developed by the therapists.

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<sup>92</sup> There are some exceptions with more balanced narratives, mostly from members of Waldau’s closest family.  
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Informal conversation 2. August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

# **Cult Critics & Cult Apologists: Can there be middle ground?**

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## **Abstract**

The phenomenon of new religious movements (NRMs) or “cults” has given rise to two polarised camps – scholars who seek a value-neutral approach, and vociferous critics, often referred to as the “anticult movement”. The discussion draws on a number of old controversies surrounding NRMs, in an attempt to consider whether there might be scope for resolving differences. Terminological issues are an initial problem, and concepts such as “cult”, “anticult”, and “cult apologist” are examined. It is argued that the “cult critics” have now come to use the term “cult” in such a broad sense, spanning an unwieldy range of phenomena, encompassing political groups, business organisations, therapy and self-help groups as well as religious ones, that it has come to lack any predictable content. This is particularly problematic since the critics tend to essentialise the concept, contending that there are identifiable “marks of a cult”, stemming from R. J. Lifton’s model. This model has given rise to the well-trodden debate about brainwashing; although the debate is old, some new modifications of the theory are considered here. These are Steven Hassan’s “B.I.T.E.” (Behaviour, Information, Thoughts, Emotions), involving a distinction between brainwashing and mind control; Janja Lalich’s “bounded choice” theory; and, most recently, the concept of spiritual abuse, which has gained momentum within some Christian organisations. Further division between critics and NRM scholars relates to the locus of expertise, and the methods used by each group to study NRMs. In particular, there is lack of agreement between the roles of participant-observation and ex-member testimony. It is concluded that, despite irreconcilable differences, some limited common ground between critics and NRM can be found. Although some scholars have dismissed the testimony of ex-members, the author argues that ex-members have an important role in NRM research. Both parties agree that NRMs can exert psychological pressure (although not best described as brainwashing or mind control) and that leavers can encounter personal problems that require appropriate counselling. Both parties might agree on providing accounts of NRMs which are recognisable, although not necessarily endorsable, by their supporters.



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## **Keywords**

Brainwashing, cults, mind control, new religious movements, research methods, spiritual abuse.

Ever since new religious movements (NRMs), or “cults”, aroused public attention, there has been a rivalry between their critics and most of the academic community. Before the wave of NRMs of the 1960s and 1970s, most of the criticism was generated by countercult Christians, mainly in the Protestant evangelical tradition, and there was little response by the academic community. The new wave brought new stakeholders into the debate: the so-called “anticult movement” (ACM), and an academic community, initially of sociologists, who claimed to adopt a more neutral and “value-free” approach.

The earlier countercult movement offered a critique based mainly on (usually mainstream Christian) theological grounds, claiming that NRMs’ teachings were heretical, and that they failed to offer a means of salvation, which could only be provided within the mainstream Christian fold. While this critique continues, the anticult movement claims that its purpose is not to make theological criticisms, but rather to expose the malpractices of these groups, to warn seekers of the perceived dangers, and to offer counselling and “rehabilitation” to those “victims” who have left. In what follows, I aim to highlight the principal grounds of controversy between academics and critics, and assess the extent to which it is possible to find any common ground.

## **Characterising the factions**

At the outset, it is important to couch the discussion in terminology that would be acceptable to both sides of the debate. Academic researchers resent being called “cult apologists”, and in any case dislike the term “cult”, while the so-called anti-cult movement frequently contends that its supporters are not against “cults”, but are merely opposed to their malpractices. It is difficult to alight on appropriate vocabulary that each side would find acceptable. Michael Langone suggests a renaming of the two factions with the terms “critics” and “sympathisers” (1993:32): probably both sides of the debate would regard this as an improvement, but the suggestion is not altogether satisfactory. First, it suggests that NRM scholars cannot be critics and, second, the term “sympathisers” is only marginally better than “cult apologists”: an apologist positively speaks out on behalf of a group, while a sympathiser is one who approves of the phenomenon. As Chryssides and Geaves (2014) argue, there is an important difference between sympathy and empathy, and that the latter – not the former – is characteristic of the student of religion. “Empathiser” might seem to be a more appropriate term, but unfortunately it can readily be conflated with “sympathiser”. The words “academic” or “researcher” are less pejorative than “cult apologist”, but to use them in contrast to the critics would be to suggest that the critics are invariably non-academic, or that they do not research their material. While it is true that some of their writing may lack academic rigour, it would be unfair to suggest this of all of them. In what follows I propose to settle for the term “critic”, as Langone recommends, but to contrast this with “NRM scholar”. This is not to imply that the critics lack scholarship, but rather that they do not wish to adopt the

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term “NRM” (new religious movement), which many of them regard as a euphemism for the word “cult”.

To mention these terminological issues is to anticipate much of the ensuing debate, and in what follows I propose, first, to examine further the terminology “anticult”, “cult apologist”, and “cult”, all of which highlight important differences between the two camps. Second, I shall consider the different analyses that both parties give to the NRM phenomenon; and third, I wish to examine the question of where expertise lies. Finally, I shall identify possible areas of agreement, and issues that remain unresolved.

### **Anticultists and cult apologists?**

The critics typically claim that they are not “anticult”, and that the term is unduly negative. Their aim is not the elimination of the so-called “cults”, but to challenge their practices, while fully supporting freedom of belief. They will also point to what they perceive as the more positive side of their objectives – to free individuals from oppression, liberating them from the psychological manipulation, and helping to restore them to what they regard as normal family life. Some claim that they are positively defending human rights, since they believe that cult members are deprived of rights such as liberty, security, privacy, and property. (See, e.g. Dvorkin 2015).

Despite periodic assertions that such groups seek positively to promote freedom, a cursory glance at the critics’ aims indicates a combative stance towards NRMs. The objectives, and in some cases even the names of monitoring organisations, indicate marked opposition: for example, the French government agency MIVILUDES (Interministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combatting Cultic Deviances),<sup>93</sup> by the inclusion of the word “combatting” suggests a confrontational stance. UNADFI (National Union of Associations for the Defence of Families and the Individual Victims of Sects)<sup>94</sup> a French non-governmental organisation defines its aims in part as “to prevent the actions of sectarian groups, movements and organizations”, while in Britain the Family Survival Trust (formerly FAIR – Family Action Information and Resource) includes in its mission statement “to prevent, and to provide information on coercive control, cultic behaviour and psychological manipulation” (Family Survival Trust 2020). In Poland, the office of the Ministry of the Interior offers “anti-sect” training for educators and law enforcement personnel, and in Lithuania some ex-members of NRMs founded The Cult Prevention Bureau. Words like “prevent” and prefixes like “anti-” are fairly clear indications of opposition. Opposition to NRMs is not confined to these organised groups, but extends to governmental policies in numerous countries. The French and Belgian governments formulated lists of “sectes” – the word itself is pejorative in French – although the function of such lists was far from clear and included well-respected religious organisations such as Adventists and Pentecostals (Assemblée Nationale

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<sup>93</sup> The acronym MIVILUDES stands for "Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires". In January 2020, the organisation was dissolved and its work relocated within the Interministerial Committee for the prevention of delinquency and radicalization. See Fleurin 2020.

<sup>94</sup> UNADFI stands for Union nationale des Associations de défense des Familles et de l'Individu victimes de sectes. Its stated objective in French is "prévenir les agissements des groupes, mouvements et organisations à caractère sectaire...".

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1995). More substantially, various governments have imposed restrictions on registration, which typically affect permission to assemble, to purchase property, and to obtain financial benefits from the state. Often permission to register depends on a minimum number of converts, excluding immigrants who have entered the country as missionaries. Such policies by their very nature discriminate against new religious organisations, and impede their progress (Chryssides 2019:227-248). At the time of writing, some of the most serious opposition is to be found in Russia, where Jehovah's Witnesses have been branded as an "extremist organisation", had their properties confiscated, and been banned from meeting, largely at the instigation of Aleksander Dvorkin, a former professor of missiology and member of the Russian Orthodox Church, who chaired a governmental law-enforcement agency, particularly targeting Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, and the Unification Church.

Turning to the label "cult apologist", it may be tempting to think that, if one is not critic, one must be on the opposite side, defending NRMs against criticism – hence the label. "cult apologist". It is important, however, to note what an apologist actually is. In the early years of Christian history, writers like Tertullian and Justin Martyr wrote works bearing the title *Apology*. They were writing as Christians – Tertullian in fact was an early convert at the time – appealing to the Roman authorities for tolerance and for an end to unjust treatment. Their *Apologies* were written from the standpoint of the Christian faith, setting out its key beliefs and practices, and commending it to the Roman authorities. The word "apology" literally means "to speak on behalf of" (Greek *apō* – "for", and *logos* – "word") and, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, means "something that is said or written to defend something that other people criticize". As Eileen Barker points out, academic writing on NRMs aims to be value-free: we do not seek to commend the religions under discussion but to explain their beliefs and practices as objectively as possible. This can sometimes involve setting the record straight if a religious organisation has been inappropriately described or maligned, but there is an important difference between correcting inaccurate information and positively commending the community under discussion.

Generally, the critics' attitude to academic scholarship is negative, for a variety of reasons. Some critics fail to understand the nature of neutrality and scholarship aiming to be value-free. In 1987 FAIR News printed an editorial in which the author suggested that value-free meant value-less. As Eileen Barker pointed out, this is simply a silly criticism, since the two concepts – value-free and value-less – are by no means mean the same (Barker 1989: x; FAIR News 1987: 5). A somewhat more plausible critique of academic neutrality comes from Alexandra Stein, who accuses the so-called cult apologists of cultural relativism. Presumably the rationale behind this criticism is that, since academics tend to avoid making value judgements, and more especially do not adjudicate on questions of truth in the religions they study, they must regard all NRMs as equally legitimate, worthwhile, or true. However, it should be obvious that this is a non-sequitur: a refusal to assess a religious community's claim to truth is certainly not tantamount to implying that it is as true as any other. To withhold judgements about truth is merely to acknowledge that truth claims are the province of the philosopher and the theologian, rather than the sociologist or the scholar of religion, whose aim is simply to understand the worldview and the practices of the

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community under study. It is likely that Stein is conflating relativism with acceptance of religious pluralism: it is obvious in the study of new religious movements that there are many varieties of belief and practice, but this self-evident fact does not commit the scholar to claiming that each has an equal claim to truth, or that truth is relative. Indeed, the fact that in the main those who study NRMs remain on the outside indicates that they have already made decisions about issues of truth.

### **Language and terminology**

The term “cult” needs to be addressed, since this is a common source of division between critics and NRM scholars. The critics continue to insist on its use, claiming that the alternative expression favoured by academics – “new religious movements” – is a euphemism. One main problem with the term “cult” is that it is pejorative. Some may see this as a merit; indeed, one academic, whose mother was involved in an NRM, has stated that she feels that she needs a term like “cult” to express her infuriation at the way her parent was treated. Some ex-members of NRMs have claimed to have felt a sense of liberation when an authority has said, “You’ve been in a cult!” – a remark that acknowledges the sinister nature of the organisation they had joined, and expresses sympathy for their predicament. Since the word “cult”, therefore, imports a value judgement, it can only properly be applied after the true nature of the organisation has been ascertained. It cannot legitimately be applied *ab initio*. If one of the characteristics is that it exerts undue psychological pressure, or has authoritarian leadership, such aspects need to be established before using the label.

The use of the term is rendered more complex by those critics who employ the expression “destructive cults”. The phrase leaves it unclear as to whether the adjective “destructive” is an amplification of the concept of cult, indicating that all so-called cults are destructive, or whether it implies a contrast between destructive cults and benign cults (Chryssides and Zeller 2014: 322). One seldom hears critics mentioning benign cults, or applying the term to organisations that might generally be agreed to be innocuous, such as a Christian monastic group.

These observations highlight a more general problem, namely the scope of the term “cult”. In this author’s early years of research, an NRM-monitoring organisation presented a list to a committee of which he was part, which contained over 100 items, including groups and practices as diverse as the Unification Church, Scientologists, Baha’i, Christadelphians, Gestalt, “biorythms” (sic), dream groups, reflexology, and Seventh Day (sic) Adventists (FAIR 1982). The obvious problem with such a list is that the criteria for inclusion are nebulous. It is not obvious why astrology, neuro-linguistic programming, and tarot – sometimes included in similar lists – do not appear: one wonders whether these omissions are deliberate or accidental. One key consideration in academic study is that concepts should have what Steven Sutcliffe, in a slightly different context, has termed “predictable content” (Sutcliffe 2003:29). In other words, it is important that, when devising categories, it should be obvious which items fit, and which do not. For example, if we consider terms like “male” and “female”, we would typically agree, faced with a room full of people, who fell into each category. (The fact that male/female need not be a binary, or that we can occasionally be mistaken, is irrelevant: we can readily classify most people.)

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The problem is compounded by the fact that writers like Steven Hassan, Janja Lalich, and Alexandra Stein, among others, use the term “cult” to include political organisations, therapy groups, certain types of business organisation, and self-improvement techniques. The term has spanned movements and techniques as diverse as those on the 1982 FAIR list mentioned above, together with the marketing company Amway, the Democratic Workers Party, and others that do not claim a religious identity. It may be asked whether bracketing such radically different movements and practices is helpful; normally good academic research highlights differences rather than conflates them.<sup>95</sup>

### **Are there “marks of a cult”?**

Failure to acknowledge such diversity has caused critics to define “marks of a cult”. One principal difference between critics and NRM scholars is that the former adopt a form of essentialism, claiming that there are key characteristics that are shared by NRMs. By contrast, scholars such as Eileen Barker insist that essentialism is inappropriate, and that one feature of NRMs is that they are all different. The “Marks of a Cult” theory appears, sometimes with minor modifications, in various prominent critical writers. The critics’ literature typically portrays the “cult” as having a number of characteristics, which derived from the R. J. Lifton’s study of US servicemen who were made prisoners during the Korean War of 1950-1953. This approach has been adopted by Margaret Singer, Janja Lilich and Steven Hassan, and can be found on many cult-monitoring web sites. (Lifton 1989: 429).

Lifton’s eight “marks” are: (1) milieu control; (2) mystical manipulation; (3) demand for purity; (4) the cult of confession; (5) the “sacred science”; (6) loading the language; (7) doctrine over person; and (8) dispensing of existence. Some explanation of how these are interpreted by the ACM may be appropriate. (1) The first of these involves control of the environment: for example, Unification Church workshop members typically studied Sun Myung Moon’s teachings in a controlled environment, in a relatively remote location, with a tightly scheduled programme. (2) Happenings may be attributed to divine activity: thus, a leader might suggest that God had brought members to the location, that God was leading them into acceptance of the truth, or that hostile spirits were causing attendees to fall asleep at lectures. (3) The third criterion entails that the cult offers either purity of life, in contrast to a tarnished external world, or that it presents unique truth, amidst a world whose citizens are in error. (4) Members are encouraged, even required, to confess misdemeanours; auditors in the Church of Scientology, for instance, cause “pre-clears” (their term for those who have not yet reached the appropriate level of spiritual attainment within the organisation) to recount past incidents in their lives, which are then placed on records which are filed. (5) “Sacred science” entails that the cult has teachings that have absolute and unquestionable truth – supremely important and undoubtable, and there can even be sanctions for causing dissent within the organisation. (6) “Loading the language” involves what Lifton called “thought-terminating clichés” – employing labels that lack clear meaning, but serve to terminate further

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<sup>95</sup> The term “new religious movement”, of course, also requires a definition that enables predictable content. I have discussed possible definitions elsewhere, e.g. Chryssides 2012.

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discussion, for example that a piece of literature is “apostate”, or that someone is “worldly”. (7) People are considered to be less important than the ideology, and leaders may treat members inconsiderately, making them conform to their predetermined standards. (8) Dispensing of existence can entail deciding who belongs to the organisation and who does not, as well as deciding who will survive some final judgement, and who will perish.

NRM scholars find a number of problems with this approach. First of all, it involves essentialism by implying that there is some kind of common essence to all the so-called cults. Second, it fails to acknowledge that NRMs developed over time: initially, there may be a leader who is thought to be charismatic by supporters, but as a movement expands, the majority of new seekers do not initially meet the leader, or even meet him or her at all, let alone come under the leader’s personal influence; and after the leader’s death she or she is no longer able to exercise power over members. Third, as with the concept of “cult”, many of these features lack predictable content, or fail to identify distinctive features that are not found outside the controversial organisation. For example, most institutions – both secular and religious – have their own special vocabulary (“loading the language”), and many mainstream religious believers seek purity of life, and at times attribute events to divine activity.

It does not follow, however, that there are no legitimate uses of the word “cult”. It may signify a loosely organised movement, with no clear central authority, as is the case with the “cult” of the Virgin Mary, or the “cult of Elvis”. At times NRMs can begin in a “cultic” way. The Church of Scientology is one example: initially L. Ron Hubbard’s 1950 book *Dianetics: The Science of Mental Health* was not published in the name of any organisation, but as a popular self-help psychology book which caught the imagination of the American public, and which could plausibly be described as a “cult book”. Hubbard’s ideas subsequently moved from the book’s popularity to what Max Weber called institutionalisation (Weber 1947: 36-77), when in 1958 some of his supporters helped to set up the organisation which continues today. The word “cult” need not be abandoned completely: it simply needs to be used properly, with clear meaning, and non-pejoratively.

### **Differences in analysis**

Differences between critics and NRM scholars are not merely about terminology, but about the processes leading to joining NRMs, and what happens within them. One of the longest-running debates has been about brainwashing. NRM scholars have argued that the term has no clear meaning, and that critics have exaggerated the coercive techniques that are allegedly employed in recruiting and retaining members. Among NRM scholars, Eileen Barker is usually credited with the most decisive refutation of brainwashing theory in her *The Making of a Moonie* (1984), in which she demonstrated that, of those attending a two-day workshop in London in 1979, 15% dropped out, only 30% progressed to the seven-day workshop, and 18% to the 21 day one. A mere 8% joined as full-time members for over a week, and after two years, only 4% remained; 3.5% on 1 January 1983 (Barker 1984:146). This indicates that if the Unification Church sought to use coercive strategies, they were singularly ineffective. Notwithstanding Barker’s substantial

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research, responses from critics tended not to offer counter evidence, but commented that sociologists work with generalities, and that monitoring organisations like FAIR invariably encountered families of long-standing members that remained in the organisation. Other critics simply dismissed academic research; Casey McCann, who later became chair of FAIR, described academics as “an inordinately complacent and self-satisfied lot of mystagogues” (FAIR News, October 1984, 16). (One wonders how many academic conferences he attended, or how many reviewers’ comments from journals he had seen!) Critics continue to cling on to brainwashing theory: an article in *FAIR News* in September 2015 was headed “Should We Call a Spade a Spade?”, in which the author, on the subject of radicalisation, wrote:

The danger facing young people therefore is not that they may be “radicalised”. ... Rather it is that we do not call a spade a spade and describe what is actually happening to them by using the right word – brainwashing (Khodabandeh 2015: 1).

### **Modifications to “brainwashing” theory: (1) Hassan’s concept of “mind control”**

A number of critics, recognising difficulties with brainwashing theory, have suggested modifications. In his *Combatting Mind Control* (1988) Steven Hassan attempts to distinguish between brainwashing and mind control (which he equates with thought reform). Brainwashing, he notes, was the term devised by journalist Edward Hunter in 1951 to describe the treatment of Korean prisoners of war by the Chinese, involving control of the physical environment, and coercive measures, of which the prisoners were fully aware, but were nonetheless forced to comply, and were able to abandon on exit. By contrast, mind control is a manipulative process of which the subject may be unaware, and frequently involves two factors: hypnotic processes, and group dynamics. The subject, he claims, is placed in an environment which induces a trance-like state, which can be quite pleasant, but which diminishes one’s critical faculties, enabling the implanting of irrational beliefs, and influencing one’s subsequent actions. Group conformity is a further factor: Hassan cites the experiments in social psychology carried out by Solomon Asch and Stanley Milgram, who demonstrated how experimental subjects would engage in uncharacteristic behaviour to conform to group norms or an authority figure. In a similar way, he believes, an NRM and its authority figure can cause supporters to block out critical information, often creating a barrier to outsiders through “loaded language” or causing them to regard those outside the organisation as enemies, and instilling fear about leaving the group. The processes result in control of belief, information, thought, and emotions, resulting in maintaining loyalty and devotion to the organisation and its leader.

Hassan develops these ideas into a more complex model, which he refers to as the “B.I.T.E. Model”. The acronym stands for “Behaviour, Information, Thoughts, Emotions”, which Hassan believes to be four key aspects of the “destructive mind control” exercised by “cults” upon their followers. Hassan develops these four presumed aspects of mind control further on his Freedom of Mind Resource Center web pages. There one finds a more complex model, with 36 points in

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the main web site, and a further-developed 44-point model: 82 points, if one includes subheadings (Freedom of Mind 2020).

It would be impossible here to discuss even a fraction of Hassan's points, but some samples will suffice. Some are, not unexpectedly, based on Lifton, for example "unethical use of confession" (II.6), "use of loaded language and clichés" (III.3), and "labeling alternative belief systems as illegitimate, evil, or not useful" (III.10). Other points are typically echoed in ACM literature, for example regulating one's diet, sleep deprivation, financial exploitation (I.5-7), and "love bombing" (IV.6). Presumably Hassan does not wish to claim that all NRMs possess all of these features – a claim which would be manifestly false – but rather that these are characteristics that can be found in at least some "cults". Some are certainly recognisable: for instance, discouraging "non-cult sources of information" is characteristic of a number of NRMs; the Church of Scientology, the New Kadampa Tradition, and Jehovah's Witnesses only make available their own literature (although they do not necessarily instruct their members to read nothing else); corporal punishment is imposed on children within the Twelve Tribes; and assuming new names and identities is practised by numerous spiritual groups in Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions. Shunning (IV. 5 e) is a widely publicised practice within the Plymouth Brethren and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other examples on Hassan's list do not appear to be exclusively applicable to NRMs: prescriptions about sexual mores can be found in mainstream Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; the instruction to "encourage only 'good and proper' thoughts" (III.4) would surely be endorsed by any religion; instilling belief that one is not living up to one's true potential (IV.4a), again, applies to many mainstream as well as new religions; and confession of sins is routinely practised in mainstream Christian worship.

Other points in Hassan's itemisation seem bizarre. His list of characteristics of undue influence include "Punish disobedience by beating, torture, burning, cutting, rape, or tattooing/branding" (I.15) and, curiously, "singing and humming" as an example of thought-stopping techniques. Hassan does not specify which organisations he has in mind when he itemises "[t]errible consequences if you leave: hell, demon possession, incurable diseases, accidents, suicide, insanity, 10,000 reincarnations, etc." There are several reasons for regarding this list the strange. In his *Combating Cult Mind Control* he states that rape and torture are characteristics of brainwashing, not mind control, yet they continue to appear on his list of mind-controlling tactics. Of course, the longer the list, the more likely one is to alight on a characteristic that can apply to a particular cult, and it is therefore easy for a less critical reader to assume that, having found one matching characteristic, there must be more. Since he claims to be writing not merely about religious movements, but about political, psychotherapy/educational, and commercial mind-controlling cults, compiling a cumulative list of their presumed characteristics is unhelpful. To give an analogy, suppose I attempted to list features of university life, and itemised: bureaucracy, heavy workloads, unfair marking, pointless meetings, student protests, sexual harassment, fieldwork, animal experimentation, boring lectures, examinations, work placement, volunteering, student societies, and chaplaincy. This would be an unhelpful list, since some members might experience some of these aspects, but no single lecturer or student would experience all of them.



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The list needs to be made coherent by relevant selection, either by specifying lecturers' duties, disciplinary matters, course curricula, or whatever its purpose is. In fact, a "marks of a cult" list is even more problematic than my imaginary "marks of a university": at least we have a clear idea of what universities are, and where to find them; the concept of "cult" remains nebulous. By listing characteristics that can be found across the totality of so-called "cults", which apparently includes therapy groups, self-help groups, and business and political organisations, Hassan has inevitably alighted on characteristics that can be found in some of these groups, but failed to offer any collective qualities that could be regarded as universal "marks of a cult".

### **(2) Janja Lalich: "bounded choice"**

A further attempt at improving on brainwashing theory comes from Janja Lalich, who proposes a hypothesis which she labels "bounded choice". According to Lalich, it is an oversimplification to believe that one can be hypnotised by a charismatic figure; rather, being drawn into a cult involves four factors: (1) "charismatic commitment"; (2) a transcendent belief system; (3) systems of control; and (4) systems of influence (Lalich 2004). The first factor entails being drawn to the personality of the charismatic leader; the second entails accepting the worldview that he or she offers, which is a closed system, which followers may not question. However, since intellectual assent is insufficient to maintain allegiance, the leader imposes a system of control, so that members physically demonstrate their allegiance, perhaps by adopting a dress code, or by learning the group's special vocabulary, or by paying acts of homage to the leader, for example the Unification Church members' ritual of bowing before the portrait of the Reverend Moon and his wife.

Lalich's bounded choice theory offers a somewhat more sophisticated explanation of NRM membership. The observation that one demonstrates allegiance finds some support in Eileen Barker's "charismaticisation" theory: the followers learn how to bestow charisma on the leader, rather than simply recognise an incoherent quality that he or she possesses. Thus, acceptance of charismatic leadership is an interactive rather than a one-way process. However, if bounded choice theory is intended to differentiate cultic membership from mainstream religious allegiance, it is questionable whether these elements are unique to NRMs. A monastic community, for example, has its special rule of life, and its special forms of dress, and its members' choices are "bounded": as long as they remain in the group they must adhere to the lifestyle of their order, and for many, abandoning their way of life is not an option, since they may no longer possess the qualities demanded by the outside secular world, or be able to find a niche in mainstream society.

### **(3) Spiritual abuse**

A further, more moderate theory of undue influence employs the concept of "spiritual abuse". The term appears to have originated in the late twentieth century, and different authors have identified different characteristics. David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, who are early proponents of the concept, define it as "the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining or a decreasing that

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person's spiritual empowerment" (Johnson and VanVonderen 1991:20). Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond's (2013) *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse* has proved particularly influential in UK church circles, and was taken up by the Churches Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS), renamed in 2018 as Thirtyone:eight. The somewhat enigmatic new name alludes to Proverbs 31:8: "Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable" (Contemporary English Version). Oakley defines spiritual abuse thus:

Coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or using the pulpit to control behaviour, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a "divine" position, isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context. (Oakley and Kinmond, 2013: 21).

It should be noted that spiritual abuse is not the same as "cult abuse" in Hassan's and Lalich's sense. As noted above, the term "cult" has been applied to nonreligious as well as religious organisations, hence the term "spiritual abuse" can only be applied to the latter. In that regard the concept is narrower, but it also has a wider application in that it is also applied in the context of mainstream Christian churches, and indeed a number of denominations, including the Church of England, have formulated official guidelines relating to the phenomenon (Church of England 2020). There is no obvious reason why the term should not be applied outside of the context of Christianity, however, and it has been used occasionally in the context of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam.

Essentially, spiritual abuse relates to an unequal power dynamic between a religious leader and the subordinate adherent. A religious leader might seek compliance from a member, claiming that God has spoken to him or her, using the authority of the Bible in pursuit of one's own ends, or threatening the follower with supernatural consequences, for example that they would have to justify their behaviour at the Last Judgement, while others have been warned of adverse consequences for their children's well-being: the Bible depicts God as "punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" (Exodus 20:5). In his *Churches that Abuse* (1992) Ronald Enroth catalogues a variety of serious examples of abusive treatment within Christian congregations, but Thirtyone:eight suggests that spiritual abuse can often be less obvious, and even unintentional.

While these examples of alleged spiritual abuse are no doubt recognisable, the concept has attracted criticism. The Evangelical Alliance has criticised the term for being vague, unworkable, and potentially discriminatory. Its 2018 report "Reviewing the Discourse of 'Spiritual Abuse': Logical Problems and Unintended Consequences" the authors acknowledge the existence of coercive and controlling behaviour within Christian organisations, but argue that such abuse is already adequately covered by the concept of emotional and psychological abuse, and that there is

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no need to devise a separate category for its occurrence within a religious context. The Alliance is also concerned that the notion of spiritual abuse potentially threatens the rights and equality of religious groups, and could be harmful to interfaith relations, since the practices that certain religious organisations consider acceptable may be regarded as abusive by others. To take some examples,<sup>96</sup> the Southern Baptist Convention explicitly states that the husband is the head of the household, and that – as the Bible states – his wife and family should obey him (Ephesians 5:23-24). Many conservative Christian churches, as well as Muslim communities, firmly hold that homosexual relationships are contrary to their religion’s teachings: are such claims to be construed as spiritually abusive towards the LGBT community, or can they be justified in the name of religious freedom and freedom of speech? Is it spiritually abusive to be criticised for not being able to speak in tongues, or having a Bible that is not sufficiently “well-thumbed”? I have certainly come across Christian believers who have castigated others on such grounds. The Evangelical Alliance has cause for unease with the concept. The concept of spiritual abuse seems somewhat clearer than the concept of brainwashing; however, the fact that it applies specifically to religious communities can be seen either as a merit or as a weakness. The debate is still in its early days, and awaits fuller discussion.

### **The question of expertise**

A further important divide between NRM scholars and the ACM is the question of where expertise lies. Academics justifiably claim to have obtained appropriate institutional accreditation, to research their material thoroughly, to weigh up alternative hypotheses and interpretations, and to reach measured conclusions. The process of peer-reviewing serves as an assurance that the quality of one’s work is of appropriate standard and, even if reviewers do not necessarily agree with the views presented, they nonetheless vouch for the material’s integrity and scholarly value. By contrast, the NRM-monitoring organisations have tended to originate, not from scholars, but from other stakeholders, mainly concerned parents whose sons and daughters have become involved in an NRM, and ex-members. The majority tend to lack college qualifications in religion or social sciences, although a few who have emerged from NRM membership has subsequently gone on to acquire qualifications in social science or in counselling. In the main, those to whom the media often gives the label “cult expert” are self-styled authorities, who typically present a one-sided and negative view of “the cults”. In some cases their sole credentials involve having belonged to a controversial organisation, sometimes for a very short period of time, and not always a religious one; indeed a number of these so-called experts’ background lies in political movements. At times they inflate their status, using pretentious titles like “executive director” or claiming an institutional affiliation when they merely teach a few extramural classes.

Such criticism has provoked a reaction from the Apologetics Index, who make the following response:

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<sup>96</sup> These examples are my own, not those of the Evangelical Alliance.

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Cult apologists employ a number of tactics in their fight against the anti-cult and counter-cult movements ... Some academic cult apologists attempt to create a credibility gap between themselves and what they refer to as “so-called ‘cult experts’” or “self-proclaimed ‘cult experts’.” In doing so they try to create the false impression that a) there are no – or few – academics within the anticult- or countercult movements, and b) that one can not be an expert without being credentialed (Apologetics Index 2018).

It is certainly true that some NRM critics have good academic qualifications or hold academic posts, although academic literature tends to be dominated by contributors who seek to adopt a neutral stance on NRMs. The second statement – (b) – above, however, needs to be challenged. The academic community has room for independent scholars, some of whom make excellent contributions to journals and conferences, and who do not necessarily have formal qualifications in religious studies or in sociology; those who referee for academic journals are not normally told the author’s credentials, and there is no editorial policy that excludes such independent scholars from contributing. Nonetheless, the notion of being an “expert” demands having some kind of evidence of expertise, and having one’s material peer-reviewed ensures that appropriate quality is maintained.

Whatever credentials might be presented, however, the notion of a “cult expert” is inherently absurd. The fact that there are estimated to be between 500 and 1000 new spiritual organisations in Britain, 5000 in the US, and 183,000 registered religions in Japan should be sufficient indication that no single person or group could claim expertise over such a wide area (Cult Education Institute 2000; Facts and Details 2012; Hilpern 2013; Hunt 1994).<sup>97</sup> The concept of the “cult expert” ought to be no more credible than someone who claimed to be a “people expert” or a “book expert”. With the proliferation of NRMs, and their liability to constant change, no academic would credibly claim to be an “NRM expert”: while one may have a basic knowledge of the best-known new religions and spiritualities, even maintaining expertise on one single organisation can prove to be a daunting task.

Notwithstanding the implausible versatility of the “cult expert”, the media continue to use the title and draw on such people for comment, and there are several reasons why the “cult expert” is privileged over the academic. First, the claimed range of expertise enables the media to find a convenient port of call when comment on a new religion is needed; finding a specialist academic can be more difficult and time-consuming. Second, the cult expert speaks the language of the audience: he or she can keep it simple, without taxing the audience with uncertainties, complexities, or different potential viewpoints. Third, academics require time to research the material and ensure the reliability of the data; by contrast, the cult expert is all too ready with an instant answer. When the collective suicides of Heaven’s Gate were discovered in 1997, only a

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<sup>97</sup> These statistics do not have scientific validity, and there are obvious problems about statistical information of this kind. They are simply used here to give a rough impression of the scale of the phenomenon on which the “cult expert” claims expertise.

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very small number of academics had heard of the group; the ACM, on the other hand, implying that there is a certain sameness in all “cults”, and bearing in mind the previous mass deaths in Jonestown, Waco, and the Solar Temple, could come up fairly instantly with the verdict that “this is a typical cult”, and that it highlighted the dangers that were involved in joining these new organisations.

### **Research methods**

The issue of expertise relates to research methods. Sociologists and scholars of religion tend to look to a religion’s practitioners for data, often employing participant-observation, while the critics emphasise the testimony of ex-members. Critics may argue that when academic scholars are over-friendly, they may ingratiate themselves to a religious community, placing themselves in a position where they are reluctant to criticise, or to give unfavourable evidence in situations such as acting as expert witnesses in litigation when called upon to do so. The scholar is sometimes in a difficult position: maintaining good relationships ensures that he or she continues to receive good information, while writing material that is to the group’s detriment may cause information and invitations to be withheld. Particularly problematic situations arise when controversial organisations offer benefits to scholars. In the 1980s and early 1990s the Unification Church became controversial for inviting academics to attend seminars under names such as the New Ecumenical Research Association, the International Conference for the Unity of Sciences, and the Assembly of World’s Religions, paying travel and accommodation expenses. Critics were quick to accuse those academics who accepted such invitations as being bribed, being “pampered” in luxurious hotels, lending credibility to a disreputable organisation, and placing themselves in a compromising position where they felt obliged to speak favourably about Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Movement.

Ex-member testimony has proved controversial among NRM scholars. Thus sociologist Bryan Wilson writes:

The apostate is generally in need of self-justification. He seeks to reconstruct his own past, to excuse his former affiliation, and to blame those who were formerly his closest associates. Not uncommonly the apostate learns to rehearse an “atrocious story” to explain how, by manipulation, trickery, coercion, or deceit, he was induced to join or remain within an organisation that he now forswears and condemns. Apostates, sensationalised by the press, have sometimes sought to make a profit from accounts of their experiences in stories sold to newspapers or produced as books ... Neither the objective sociological researcher nor the court of law can readily regard the apostate as a credible or reliable source of evidence. He must always be seen as one whose personal history predisposes him to bias with respect to both his previous religious commitment and to his former associates. (Wilson 1990: 19).

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Writing slightly earlier, James Beckford (1985: 197) suggests that ex-members may be embarrassed at having been persuaded to join an NRM, and feel stigmatised. Hence they can feel the need to exonerate themselves by devising a scenario that accounts for their recruitment into the cult, such as an unduly persuasive leader, or the process of brainwashing. In some cases, the ex-member can approach celebrity status, by being encouraged by the media or by the ACM to tell his or her story, which can be adapted or enhanced to fulfil the expectations of those who hear it. Daniel Carson Johnson goes so far as to suggest that some of the apostates that are presented in such circles are entirely fictitious.

Understandably, ex-members such as M. James Penton (2004: 233) are irked by such comments. Penton argues that this is an over-generalisation, and that ex-members have a variety of backgrounds, and that such statements are not backed up by any scientific evidence. On this matter, I believe Penton is right. While it may be true that some ex-members embellish their accounts of the life inside an NRM, those who have come out of the older new religions, such as the Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses, have no occasion to explain how they joined, since they may never have joined in the first place, being second- or third-generation adherents. Ex-members often bring to bear valuable insider knowledge about an organisation, particularly if they have had a leadership role, with access to information that might otherwise be inaccessible. In the case of the Watch Tower organisation, William J. Schnell (1959) provides valuable insights into the Society in the 1930s and its progress in Austria and the US, and Raymond V. Franz (2000) gives unique information about how the Governing Body operates and reaches its decisions. Like any other testimony, of course, it must be critically evaluated, but it should certainly not be dismissed.

Scholars often write as if the ex-member is someone other than themselves. However, it should be noted that there are NRM scholars who are themselves ex-members, and indeed some who are themselves NRM members. Academic scholarship has come beyond the phenomenologist's model in which academics stand on one side and attempt to create a "bridge of understanding" with the religion they seek to comprehend. As I have argued elsewhere, the insider/outsider model is grossly over-simplistic, and it must be recognised that there exist a variety of positions, both on the part of practitioners and on the part of those who study them (Chryssides and Geaves 2014: 241-274; Chryssides and Gregg 2019: 3-29).

### **Can there be common ground?**

Having highlighted a considerable number of differences between the two sets of stakeholders, is there anything on which both parties might agree? The main issues that continue to divide relate, first, terminology: the critics still want to retain terms like "cult", "brainwashing", and "cult apologist". Second, the critics tend to favour essentialism, which has become exacerbated by extending the term "cult" to political groups as well as business organisations and self-help techniques. Academics in general, and NRM scholars specifically, favour acknowledging differences, and regard questions like "Why do people join cults?" as ill-framed. Third, the issue of emphasis is divisive: cult critics continue to emphasise the sinister aspects of NRM allegiance, and often wish to single out "cults" for special legislation, which NRM scholars would regard as

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discriminatory. Fourth, there also remains the question of expertise: while acknowledging that academic credentials are not the only legitimating qualifications, it is vital that those who wish to comment with authority on NRMs, and those who offer counselling can demonstrate their competence. It is also a matter of regret that the critics often seem reluctant to turn to academia for information.

There are, however, some points that the two factions might share in common. I doubt if any NRM scholar has ever denied that new religions have created problems on various occasions. Even though sociologists and scholars of religion seek to adopt a neutral stand when investigating the subject matter, no scholar could possibly condone Jonestown, Heaven's Gate, Waco, or satanic child abuse, and much of the literature on such topics has been written, not merely out of intellectual curiosity, but also with the purpose of providing accurate information to those who are caught up in NRMs, or who might be considering appropriating their forms of spirituality. We might also agree that there have been many occasions on which seekers and members have been placed in controlled environments, subjected to psychological and emotional pressure, and been expected to part with substantial sums of money. We can acknowledge too that leaving an NRM can be difficult, even impossible, and that those who leave can need good professional counselling. The fact that several ex-members have gone on to gain expertise in counselling is undoubtedly to be welcomed.

Despite these points of agreement, however, important differences are set to remain. NRM critics risk exaggerating the perceived dangers of membership: only too often one finds reference to phenomena such as the Jonestown atrocity in discussions of NRMs more widely. Most NRMs do not involve mass murder or suicide, and to emphasise the "killer cults" is to induce undue fear on the part of friends and families. I think it might also be reconsidered whether it is sensible to lump together spiritual groups, therapy groups, certain forms of business organisation, and human potential groups under the name of NRMs or "cults". Unfortunately, the media and the critics have tended to take the lead in deciding that these are "cults", and academia has followed on. This has unfortunate consequences: not only are they significantly different in character, but the so-called "cult expert" can appeal to experience in one area to justify presumed expertise across the board. Being involved in a radical political organisation or in a therapy group, even if there are similar tactics such as psychological pressure and soliciting money, is not sufficient to gain an understanding of religions – and vice versa. While it has been argued that certain groups are really business organisations masquerading as religions, and while there are borderline cases where it is not clear whether a group can properly be regarded as religious, it seems self-evident that neurolinguistic programming, for example, is not a religion, even though it has sometimes been classified as an NRM. Both parties would do well to assess where they have real expertise lies and not to push the boundaries beyond their proper limits.

The scholar of world religions Wilfred Cantwell Smith contended that an account of religion should be recognisable by the community itself. The word "recognisable" is important: it does not necessarily mean that our accounts would be endorsed by the practitioners – the "insider" version is not necessarily definitive. (Smith 1959:42; Chryssides 2019:373). If a religious group can

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recognise, although not necessarily endorse, the accounts given by the various interest groups, then we have gone some way towards ensuring fair treatment. It is to be hoped that both parties might at least agree on the aims of fairness and accuracy, and the debate can continue with constructive dialogue rather than rivalry and animosity.

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# Divine Mother of Carramar: The Motivations, Construction, and Stylistics of Caodaism's Second Sydney Temple.

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## Abstract

In November of 2019, the Caodaists of Sydney opened their second temple – a Điện thờ Phật Mẫu or Holy Mother Temple in the South-western Sydney suburb of Carramar. This is a remarkable achievement given the small size of the Caodaist community in New South Wales.<sup>98</sup> This second temple was not constructed to accommodate new worshippers nor spread the presence of this religion further across the city but was dedicated wholly to another deity; Đức Phật Mẫu – or the Divine Mother. It is a temple to her alone and serves as a complimentary temple to the one built for her consort Đức Cao Đài or God the Father in the nearby suburb of Wiley Park.<sup>99</sup> The need in Caodaism for separate divine mother and father temples is a consequence of this religion's growth and development during the twentieth century. In this research I will outline this history as a background to a more theological explanation of this new building. I will also examine how this temple came to be built in Sydney, outline the ways in which it

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<sup>98</sup> In the 2016 Australian Census, 273 residents of New South Wales identified religiously as Caodaists. This was a fall from peak numbers of 336 in the 2011 Census, but still more than the 97 who identified as Caodaist in New South Wales in 2011. In the more recent Census data around 600 citizens identify as Caodaist nationally. The question on religious affiliation is a non-compulsory question in the Australian census. See, <https://www.abs.gov.au>.

<sup>99</sup> In a wide-ranging translation project currently underway and under my direction our team is rendering the term Đức Phật Mẫu as “Divine Mother.” This Vietnamese term literally translates as “Venerable Buddha Mother” – but Caodaism's relation to Buddhism is complex and we sought to avoid linking what was a “universal” mother figure to Buddhism alone as this may, in some reader's minds, limit the scope of her universality or limit the breadth of her origins to something singularly Buddhist. This is not so. Her origins are deeply connected to Daoism and Chinese folk religions as much as they are to Buddhism. In English, the Caodaists of Sydney have called their new temple a “Holy Mother Temple.” Thus, in the following “Holy Mother” will refer only to the temple whilst “Divine Mother: will refer to the deity. There are at least twelve other names used in the religion to refer to this deity. See my description of this temple and a full translation of the central prayer to this deity at: Christopher Hartney, *Our Divine Mother of Carramar: The Australian Điện thờ Phật Mẫu of Caodaism*, accessed 14 February 2020, [https://www.academia.edu/41766631/Our\\_Divine\\_Mother\\_of\\_Carramar\\_The\\_Australian\\_%C4%90i%E1%BB%87n\\_Th%E1%BB%9D\\_Ph%E1%BA%ADt\\_M%E1%BA%ABu\\_of\\_Caodaism](https://www.academia.edu/41766631/Our_Divine_Mother_of_Carramar_The_Australian_%C4%90i%E1%BB%87n_Th%E1%BB%9D_Ph%E1%BA%ADt_M%E1%BA%ABu_of_Caodaism).

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functions as a social hub for Vietnamese Australians, and finally consider how it operates as an Australian-Vietnamese religious space.

### **Caodaism**

This new religion explodes onto the social scene of French-colonised Indochina in 1926. The new faith weaves Chinese processes of spirit communication with Western traditions of séance. Early disciples received messages (in French and Vietnamese) from a supreme deity ĐứC Cao Đài (Venerable ‘High Tower’ – a divine pseudonym) and other divine beings – many from the pantheon of Chinese folk religion.<sup>100</sup> The religion’s popularity dramatically increased either side of World War II when it constructed a great sacred city in Tây Ninh province. In the early 1930s, the religion shattered into a number of sects, but the main group at Tây Ninh continued to grow in numbers and national importance. With French complicity, the religion was able to extend temporal control over large areas of Southern Vietnam. During the mid-1950s, with the fading of French power in Indochina and the rise of American influence in the South, Caodaism’s political prestige was significantly diminished. The religion developed slowly through to 1975 when it came under strict control from Hanoi.<sup>101</sup> At this time séance was banned and a government management committee appointed to run the faith. This situation continues through to today.

When the new government took control of their religion, many Caodaists decided to flee the nation. This arose in part because of the religion’s military activities. During the Japanese occupation of Vietnam (1940-1945), a Caodaist army was formed and trained by the occupiers to assist them in their control of Indochina. When the Japanese were defeated, the Caodaist army remained a potent force in Vietnam. During the latter part of the 1950s, this religious army became integrated into the fighting forces of the Republic of South Vietnam. When this army was defeated in 1975, many Caodaists involved in defending the South against the Communists found that their best option for avoiding persecution by the new national government was to leave. They joined an exodus of Vietnamese leaving Vietnam. The numbers of refugees exiting the country from 1975-2000 is estimated at 800,000.<sup>102</sup> Caodaists constituted a solid proportion of this exodus.

### **Local Conditions Amongst Caodaists in Sydney**

Unsurprisingly, homesickness and a lack of familiarity with cultural contexts are guiding themes in the Vietnamese diaspora in the West. These feelings were even more acute for those

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<sup>100</sup> See, Sergei Blagov, *Caodaism: Vietnamese Traditionalism and Its Leap into Modernity* (Huntington, N.Y: Nova Science Publishers, 2001); Christopher Hartney, ‘Caodaism’, in *The Sage Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Adam Possamai and Anthony J. Blasi (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2020); Jérémy Jammes, *Les Oracles Du Cao Đài: Étude d’un Mouvement Religieux Vietnamien et Ses Réseaux* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2014).

<sup>101</sup> Sergei Blagov, ‘Caodaism in Vietnam: Religion versus Restrictions and Persecution’ (International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), University of British Columbia, Canada, 31 July 1999), [http://lecaodaisme.free.fr/caodainet/English/Htm/Caodai\\_inVN\\_SB.htm](http://lecaodaisme.free.fr/caodainet/English/Htm/Caodai_inVN_SB.htm).

<sup>102</sup> UNHCR, ‘State of the World’s Refugees’, 2000, 79–80, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/publications/sowr/3ebf9bad0/state-worlds-refugees-2000-fifty-years-humanitarian-action-chapter-4-flight.html>.

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Vietnamese who arrived in Australia. During the long period of French control of Vietnam (c.1862-1954) and the subsequent involvement by the United States, the Vietnamese had developed sophisticated ideas about Europe and North America. With the exception of some participation by Australian troops in the American War (1955-1973), Australia had remained a *tabula rasa* for the majority of Vietnamese. This had consequences for those who eventually settled here. As Nguyen Cam explains,

...many highly placed and highly educated Vietnamese had received their education in France or the U.S. and therefore most of them and their extended family preferred to settle in these two countries. Canada is also a preferred destination as it enjoys the double advantages of being close to the U.S. and offering the possibility of using the French language. I am afraid that Australia [for resettling] is very much a fourth choice.<sup>103</sup>

This suggests that less socially adaptable Caodaists chose, or were forced to choose, Australia. This is not a solid rule but carries some truth when compared to, say, Canada.<sup>104</sup> Many of the Sydney Caodaists I have interviewed had little understanding of this nation before their arrival and no idea that they would end up settling here when they began their exodus.<sup>105</sup> Like other Vietnamese settling in Australia, Caodaists kept themselves to specific enclaves in the suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne and to a lesser extent other capital cities. Here they were able to open shops and other social spaces that resembled home. One of the significant primary uses, then, of the two Caodaist temples in Sydney is to recreate intensely symbolic Vietnamese cultural spaces - temples which are indeed sacred but also redolent of home culture. At the official openings of these two temples (in 2000 and 2019 respectively), Caodaists were proud to declare that each temple was a gift from their community to all Australians. Both buildings are open to the general public and receive many non-Vietnamese visitors each year. But it is worth noting that these ‘gifts’ do not come with easy modes of interface for non-Vietnamese. To the general non-Vietnamese Australian visitor both temples remain dazzlingly alien to the surrounding suburban landscape.

If we compare the Sydney community and its buildings with the work of Caodaists centred around (recently deceased) Dr Bùi Đắc Hùm in California – to choose one example – we can note some significant differences. Firstly, the Californian congregation is ecumenical. It is welcoming of all Caodaists outside of Vietnam no matter their sect affiliation and, for a time, this group even

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<sup>103</sup> Nguyen Cam: ‘Barriers to Communication Between Vietnamese and Non-Vietnamese’ in *Vietnamese Studies in a Multicultural World*, (ed. by Nguyen Xuan Thu, Melbourne, Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications, 1994) p.69.

<sup>104</sup> See, Louis Jacques Dorais, ‘Faith, Hope and Identity: Religion and the Vietnamese Refugees’, *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1 January 2007): 57–68, <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdi0227>; Louis-Jacques Dorais, ‘The Vietnamese in Montreal, Canada: Reflections on Intangible Capital and Immigration’, *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 18, no. 2 (June 2009): 231–54.

<sup>105</sup> Christopher Hartney, ‘A Strange Peace: Dao Cao Dai and Its Manifestation in Sydney’ (University of Sydney, 2004). esp. Chapter Five.

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received some non-Vietnamese converts. Bùi Đắc Hùm, his wife Bùi Đăng Cẩm Hồng, and their co-religionists have done much to spearhead early translations of Caodaist scripture into English. They have also worked to extend information on their faith in English and other languages to the wider American public, translate prayers, and explain Caodaist rituals to non-Vietnamese.<sup>106</sup> This Californian group has an easy-access website and much information loaded onto online video presentations.<sup>107</sup> By comparison we can say that the Sydney community is much more insular. Both Sydney temples are strongly affiliated with the central group of Caodaism focused on the Holy See at Tây Ninh. This uncompromising stance makes it difficult for non-Tây Ninh Caodaists to feel completely at home in these spaces. The Sydney group has been long associated with the “Caodaist Overseas Missionary” – a body that started specifically within Tây Ninh (pre-1975) and was re-adapted by some overseas communities (from 1983 in NSW) to keep Tây Ninh-affiliated Caodaist groups working together.<sup>108</sup> These groups, including the Sydney community, are devoted to the religious mission of Tây Ninh’s most prominent leader Phạm Công Tắc (1890-1959) a *force majeure* in driving the development of Caodaism but who, in other less populous branches of the religion, remains a controversial if not divisive figure.

When commencing their building projects in Sydney, Caodaists did not seek to imagine what an architecturally distinct Caodaist/Australian building might look like. They sought instead to create exact replicas of Vietnamese sacred buildings scaled to fit the site available. Building designs were done by Vietnamese, and the work carried out by volunteers using only the very basic materials. The façades of each temple seek to proclaim their difference to the surrounding urban landscape. Although much negotiation took place between local councils and the community during the planning and development stage of each building, the two temples present themselves as resolutely Caodaist in style. Where they differ from buildings in Vietnam, we find that the cause is more related to local government restraints and attempts to address neighbours’ concerns in the scale of the building.<sup>109</sup> These markers of difference are also stressed in the online world. The Sydney temples have no dedicated website in English.<sup>110</sup> The cultural insularity of both temples is heightened by the fact that many co-religionists in the Sydney community knew each other or knew of each other’s families when residents of Tây Ninh province before 1975. After resettlement, many Caodaist neighbours in Vietnam became neighbours once more in Sydney. This

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<sup>106</sup> For example: Hum Dac Bui and Ngasha Beck, *Caodai: Faith of Unity* (Fayetteville: Emerald Wave, 2000); Hum Dac Bui and Hong Dang Bui, *Caodai: A Way of Peaceful Life* (Canada, 2018).

<sup>107</sup> See, [www.caodai.org](http://www.caodai.org) accessed 12 March 2020.

<sup>108</sup> See, <https://www.acnc.gov.au/charity/426396283ef4f66119d236466c350a45>, accessed 11 March, 2020.

<sup>109</sup> Christopher Hartney, *A Gift to Australia: Caodaism and the First Caodaist Temple of Australia* (Sydney: Caodaist Temple of New South Wales, 2000); Hartney, *Our Divine Mother of Carramar: The Australian Điện Thờ Phật Mẫu of Caodaism*.

<sup>110</sup> A Sydney Caodaist, who by profession is a library technician, created the website ‘Centre for Studies in Caodaism, Sydney, Australia’ (<https://www.daotam.info/tam.htm>). This is a comprehensive online library for Caodaist sources and a vital resource for researchers. It archives auxiliary texts on the religion, and numerous translations. It certainly contains information about the Sydney temples, but it is not, however, a simple landing page for Caodaism in Sydney nor is it primarily directed at welcoming the generally curious member of the general public into either building.

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interconnectedness increases the regional, familial, and hence community tightness of the group. The other factor that deeply binds this community is a shared political outlook concerning Vietnam.

There remains a fervent and prevailing hope among first-generation Vietnamese in Australia that political conditions will change in the homeland enough to justify a relocation to Tây Ninh once religious freedom can be ensured. But this condition is yet to be met. Immediately after 1975, 40-odd leading Caodaists were executed by government forces and many of these died as retaliation for their roles in colluding with the French or the Americans.<sup>111</sup> Séance communications were banned at Tây Ninh and, after a failed attempt by the government to rid itself of new religions like Caodaism, a management committee was installed to control the day-to-day operation of the faith.<sup>112</sup> In 1986 the policy of *Chính sách Đổi Mới* led to a more relaxed approach to the outside world. It was at this point that the expectation of political change in Vietnam increased. But the change towards openness were limited and expectations of a free and safe return were not met.

Although Sydney Caodaists remain wary of Hanoi, in some regards temporary return has become easier for them. Changes in visa conditions now allow Australian citizens of Vietnamese birth to return and stay in Vietnam for extended periods – up to five years between visa renewals.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, government suspicion of new religions and Caodaism in particular remains palpable.<sup>114</sup> This is emphasised by the stories of community leaders in Sydney and elsewhere in the West who have been “invited” to intimidating interviews with the state security services when they have landed in Saigon. Additionally, second and third generation Vietnamese Australians have so entrenched themselves in their lives in Sydney, that as workers or retirees on the state pension, and also as parents and grandparents, there are compelling personal reasons for why first generation Vietnamese-Australians may not be able to return to Vietnam. As they age and face the reality of death in Australia, the Caodaists of Sydney have been increasingly eager to complete their religious responsibilities before reincarnation. This then brings us to one of the central religious motivations for the opening of this new temple. As we will see below, the Divine Mother plays a significant role in the soteriological mechanisms of the faith. Temple worship to her allays fears of death in numerous ways.

### **Mother Goddesses, Creation, and the Millennium in Caodaism**

In the scriptures and prayers of Caodaism, the Divine Mother is referred to by at least a dozen names, each with their own substantial place in the religious history of East Asia.<sup>115</sup> Through these

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<sup>111</sup> Blagov, ‘Caodaism in Vietnam: Religion versus Restrictions and Persecution’.

<sup>112</sup> Blagov.

<sup>113</sup> ‘Five-Year Visa Exemption for Vietnamese and Family Members’, accessed 14 February 2020, <http://vietnamconsulate.org.au/en/services/5-year-visa-exemption-for-vietnamese-and-family-members-25.html>.

<sup>114</sup> Sergei Blagov, ‘Vietnamese New Religious Movements: An Introduction’, in *Handbook of East Asian New Religious Movements*, ed. Lukas Pokorny and Franz Winter (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 547–64.

<sup>115</sup> Of these the main ones are: (1) Đức Phật Mẫu – literally “Venerable Buddha Mother.” A title framed by Buddhist terminology. (2) Tây Vương Mẫu (西王母) Queen Mother of the West – a Vietnamese transliteration of a traditional Chinese term referring to the imperial consort of the Jade or Heavenly Emperor. Tây Vương Mẫu is worshiped in many Chinese local temples in Vietnam and is a figure of

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multiple names we can trace an extensive syncretic urge to bring into the religion many of the supreme female personalities from Chinese folk religion, Daoism, Buddhism, and from nineteenth-century new religions that spread across much of the East Asian world. The religion regards these various motherly figures as a manifestation of the one supreme female deity. To do this takes some complex theological management. As we will see, each of these previous deities are used to reconstruct a supreme female personality that, through her motherly characteristics, brings cosmogenic, soteriological, microcosmic, and millennial strands together in such a way as to make her an irrepressible force for worship.

Paradisical feasts hosted by the Divine Mother feature as a significant trope in the funeral prayers of Caodaism and in the main prayer to the Divine Mother (composed sometime in the mid-1930s). The poetic symbology in these prayers is intense. In the latter prayer the line “*Chưởng đào tiên thủ giải trường tồn*” depicts the Divine Mother offering to believers the peaches of immortality. This links directly to Tây Vương Mẫu (西王母) or Queen Mother of the West – an immortal peach-bearing figure made most famous in the Ming Dynasty religious novel *Xi You Ji* (西遊記) - but whose antecedents are much older.<sup>116</sup> By tracing these antecedents we can state that the perennial existence of a mother figure in East Asian sacral systems seems to vastly precede the idea of a fatherly one. The Jade Emperor, upon whose lore Đức Cao Đài is partly formed, seems to be a much younger divine personality - at only about a thousand years old.<sup>117</sup> Although there is also a Christian heritage of monotheism interwoven into this supreme deity, Đức Cao Đài is linked also to the Neo-Confucian philosophical concept of the 太一 *tai yi* or ultimate principal.<sup>118</sup> Both traditions, nevertheless, remain younger than the extensive heritage of the Divine Mother.

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importance in Chinese literature. (3) Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu (瑤池金母) in Chinese literally “Golden Mother of the Nacre Lake” – a term that arises out of Chinese Dragon Flower Millenarian texts, particularly from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This name makes reference to the celestial region where her palace is located (beside the Nacre Lake). This is the name of the Divine Mother in Vietnamese as it is found on the main altar in the Carramar temple. (4) Diêu Trì Cung (瑤池宮)- Nacre Lake Palace – the palace name serves sometimes as a euphemism for the Divine Mother. (5) Kim Mẫu Nguyên Quân (金母元君) Golden Mother of the First Ruler – another traditional Chinese name rendered into Vietnamese. (6) *Vô Sanh Lão Mẫu* (無生老母). Literally “Not-born venerable mother” – i.e. the eternal mother that came before cosmic existence. (7) *Vô Sanh Phật-Mẫu* (無生佛母). Again literally “Not-born Buddha mother.” These two terms can also relate to the “nameless” and “unborn” female force whose most well-known appearance is in the Daoist Classic *The Dao De Jing*. (8) Cửu Thiên Huyền Nữ (九天玄女) Profound Lady of the Nine Heavens. (9) Cửu Thiên Nương Nương (九天娘娘) Goddess of the Nine Heavens. (10) Đức Mẹ thiêng liêng – Venerable Divine Mother. (11) Mẹ sanh – Mother of Creation. (12) Diêu-Trì Kim-Mẫu Vô-Cực Thiên-Tôn – a name used in the main ritual to the Divine Mother literally (Nacre-Lake, Golden Mother, Infinite, Divinely Honoured).

<sup>116</sup> Our new translation of this prayer can be found, together with a commentary by Phạm Công Tắc at [https://www.academia.edu/41766631/Our\\_Divine\\_Mother\\_of\\_Carramar\\_The\\_Australian\\_Điện\\_Thờ\\_Phật\\_Mẫu\\_of\\_Caodaism](https://www.academia.edu/41766631/Our_Divine_Mother_of_Carramar_The_Australian_Điện_Thờ_Phật_Mẫu_of_Caodaism) accessed 11/3/2020.

<sup>117</sup> Anna Seidel, ‘Yü Huang’, in *Encyclopedia of Religions* (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

<sup>118</sup> Paul Demiéville, ‘Philosophy and Religion from Han to Sui’, in *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, vol. 1 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 867.



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Sinologists trace the existence of 西王母 [Xiwangmu] back at least 3500 years when this name appears on oracle bones from the Shang Dynasty. It is quite possible, however, that the original meaning of Xiwangmu had more to do with ancestor worship than as the specific name of a goddess.<sup>119</sup> This overlap between ancestor figure and goddess, as we will see, carries on in Caodaist conceptions and becomes key to understanding the need in Sydney for a temple dedicated to her.<sup>120</sup>

An abiding feminine force manifests most evidently in the Chinese Classic the *Dao De Jing* (c.300BCE). In Chapter 25 reference is made to the oblique force before heaven and earth which is referred to here as great, and as the mother of all things. This sentiment is amplified in the opening line of Chapter 42. And the pattern here is also partly reflected in Caodaist cosmogony...

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物

(The Dao gives birth to the one, the one births the two, the two births the three, and the three births the myriad things.)

This pattern of cosmogonic development is found in a sermon from 1928 by the Caodaist leader Phạm Công Tắc. Here he explains creation. But switches the primary force of the universe to a male force:

There had been nothing before the creation. Then the two masses of air called Hu Vô Chi Khí [which relate to the concept of Wu wei (無爲) or void - CH] came from nowhere and smashed into each other. God's soul was formed from this, and His Throne called Thái Cực [Taiji, (太極) or Supreme Ultimate - CH] came to exist. The fiery globe called Thái Cực, which is the mechanism of the material, divided

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<sup>119</sup> See Paul R. Goldin, 'On the Meaning of the Name Xi Wangmu, Spirit-Mother of the West' in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol 122 no. 1 (2002) pp.83-85. Here the author suggests, quoting a passage from the 爾雅 *Er Ya* - an early thesaurus (c.200sBCE), that the term 王母 originally relied on 王 meaning not 'ruler' as it is most often understood, but powerful spirit. Thus 王母 can refer to one's deceased paternal grandmother. In light of this 西王母 may have originally meant specifically "deceased paternal grandmother of the west."

<sup>120</sup> Other early textual references to a significant female divine force can be found in two central Chinese works. The first is the 庄子 *Zhungzi* (c.300sBCE), where Xiwangmu is depicted as a great and venerable goddess sitting on a mountain peak in the West and in the 荀子 *Xunzi* (c.200sBCE) where the author of this work depicts the discipleship of an ancient ruler Yu: he says 'Yu studied with the Queen Mother.' Both these texts are much younger than oracle bone evidence, but they are still quite ancient. The *Zhuang Zi* is one of the earliest texts of Daoism (c.300sBCE) and is quite possibly an earlier work than the more famous *Dao De Jing*. The *Xun Zi*, on the other hand, is one of the formative texts of the newly developing school of Confucianism. That both traditions hold Xiwangmu in mutual esteem and see her as a religious authority is noteworthy for a religion like Caodaism where Daoism and Confucianism play such an important role.

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itself under God's orders into the Lưỡng/Nghi [yin/yang]...<sup>121</sup>

This passage seeks to demonstrate how Cao Đài came into existence from clashing winds of the void. It goes on to posit that Thái Cực's first duty is to separate out the male and the female. Only when this is done can life develop as a gendered yin/yang syzygy. Cao Đài then becomes the male aspect and his co-equal becomes Phật Mẫu or the Divine Mother. She represents the yin aspect of all creation. It is from this position of almost co-equality that her millennial aspects begin to emerge in Caodaism. It is because Thái Cực is considered primary yet also analogous to Cao Đài (and not Phật Mẫu) that Caodaism claims to be a monotheism ruled by a male deity. It is to this deity that dispensations of salvation have been offered across human history. Although this idea is originally more closely connected to the development of a mother goddess.

The millennial dimensions of Caodaism are drawn from vernacular traditions that develop from as far back as, at least, the 1500s with the 寶卷/Bai Luan or Precious Scrolls tradition of lay scripture. These emerged in China during the Ming and flourished during the foreign/Manchurian Qing dynasty. These precious scrolls, delivered through automatic writing, often referred to a major female deity. These groups also expressed coded political dissent and appealed to a newly literate class of worshippers who reacted against the Confucian (and patriarchal) orthodoxy that, during the Qing, found itself in the service of China's foreign rulers.<sup>122</sup> One noteworthy example of these texts is 古佛天偵考証龍華寶經/*The Dragon Flower Scripture Verified by the Old Buddha Tian-chen*.<sup>123</sup> This work, like many of its kind, promoted the idea of a future great meeting of souls where the worthy would be given high rank in heaven. This idea flows through into Caodaism and helps explain the official name of the religion - *Đại-Đạo Tam-Kỳ Phổ-Độ* - (*Great Religion for the Third Period of Salvation*). Other vernacular religions referred to an "Eternal Venerable Mother" and gave her a central place in these schemes of salvation. This was especially so in White Lotus groups and amongst those fleeing Qing persecution by moving to Taiwan, Vietnam, or further afield.<sup>124</sup> Most importantly, Chinese movements venerating a supreme female deity help enervate the tradition of spirit writing as *the* "new religious technology" of these times. As Jordan and Overmyer explain,

The venerable mother myth is related to a three-stage time scheme of Buddhist origin in which the moral quality of the world gradually declines. In sectarian belief, the third stage is upon us, marked by a moral decay, rejection of religion, and the disappearance of traditional forms of teaching. While in the Ming and Qing periods

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<sup>121</sup> Translation archived at:

[https://www.academia.edu/42204489/A\\_Sermon\\_On\\_the\\_Process\\_of\\_the\\_Creation\\_of\\_the\\_Cosmos\\_from\\_a\\_Caodaist\\_Perspective\\_and\\_Other\\_Subjects](https://www.academia.edu/42204489/A_Sermon_On_the_Process_of_the_Creation_of_the_Cosmos_from_a_Caodaist_Perspective_and_Other_Subjects), accessed 11 March 2020.

<sup>122</sup> Daniel L. Overmyer, *Precious Volumes: An Introduction to Chinese Sectarian Scriptures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), passim.

<sup>123</sup> Anonymous, '古佛天偵考証龍華寶經', accessed 12 December 2018, <http://www.taolibrary.com/category/category50/c50039/01.htm>.

<sup>124</sup> Blagov, *Caodaism*, 4.

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the onset of this third stage could signal the arrival of the Maitreya, come to renew the world, by the nineteenth century the new age was understood in some groups to be manifested in a new, more direct form of revelation. This was *fu-chi*, which was employed when in desperation, the Mother emptied the heavens, ordering all the gods and saints to descend to communicate a new moral and religious teaching. This was a new dispensation, the last chance for human beings to change their ways and for society to reform.<sup>125</sup>

From Xiwangmu of popular Chinese literature to the Eternal Mother of Buddhist-inspired popular and millenarian movements, we can glimpse at how the Divine Mother of Caodaism develops compelling (and competing) antecedents and combines them. The newly integrated deity is seen as central to the original creation event of the universe and now offers millennial promises of salvation. But the philosophical impact of the Divine Mother does not end here.

### **Microcosmic Corporeality and Filiality**

*In Caodaism the self is understood as a tripartite entity. The foundations of ritual to Cao Đài and Phật Mẫu are based on worshippers offering these three elements of self to the altar (and thus to heaven). These are the Tam Bửu, or three precious elements: tinh, the physical body (represented in ritual offerings as a sacrifice of fruit or flowers upon the altar), the spiritual mind referred to as khí (represented by an offering of wine), and energy of the transcendent soul or thần (represented by an offering of tea). These elements can be traced from both the Chinese tradition of Daoism and the Western movement of spiritism.<sup>126</sup> In both traditions the subtle, or astral body, or perispirit, was seen as the third part of the self that communicated with the spirits during séance and, with training, could write with, speak on behalf of, and even visit the celestial realms in shaman-like journeys.<sup>127</sup>*

Tinh is the same material as the physical world around us and is often described in Caodaist theology as the “animal” part of the human which the more elevated parts of the self ride through

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<sup>125</sup> David K Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer, *Flying Phoenix*. (Princeton University Press, 2016), 17.

<sup>126</sup> These three aspects link back to concepts of the body in the tradition of Religious Daoism and in particular the concepts of 精 (Jing – essence or seed), 氣 (Qi – breath essence) and 神 (Shen – soul divine spark). This then has a correlation to spiritist understandings of the body (flesh, perispirit, and soul). See, Isabelle Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). And also, Allan Kardec, *Le livre des esprits: contenant les principes de la doctrine spirite sur l'immortalité de l'âme, la nature des esprits et leurs rapports avec les hommes, les lois morales, la vie présente, la vie future et l'avenir de l'humanité* (Paris: Dervy-Livres, 2007).

<sup>127</sup> For an example of such astral journeys see: Christopher Hartney, *How Heaven Operates: The Confucian/Daoist/Buddhist Afterworld of Caodaism as Envisioned by Phạm Công Tắc. Being the Original Text, English Translation and Commentary on the Book Con Đường Thiêng-Liêng Hằng-Sống or The Divine Path to Eternal Life – a Celestial Journey and Esoteric Mapping of Heaven Delivered in 35 Sermons during the Years 1948 and 1949 by Phạm Công Tắc Leader of the Vietnamese New Religion of Caodaism*. (In press, 2020).

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life. In contrast the Thần is our soul which is gifted by Cao Đài. It is seen as an essential part of his existence and which, after numerous reincarnations in the sub-lunar world, eventually reunites with him. It is the Khí that, Caodaists say, is created in the Golden Basin (kim bàn /金盤) of the Divine Mother and gives to us our mind. Without her creative work, the Caodaist self would not be complete. It is in this way that Caodaists refer to her as the foundational mother of all beings.

This final point is stressed in an innovative set of sermons delivered by Phạm Công Tắc in 1948 *where the leader of Caodaism visualised heaven for those present and escorted them through its various offices and palaces in a shaman-like visualisation process. In the Fifth Sermon of this series, Phạm Công Tắc escorts his followers into the heavenly palace of the Divine Mother and explains what will happen when each person looks at her:*

When we are able to enter here, we even see our own mother! If a grandfather looks up, he will see his mother; if a grandchild looks up, he also will see his mother. Our personal love will be directed towards this complete love. On earth, mothers often scold, but when we return to this realm our heavenly mother is filled with love. This mother doesn't behave like mothers on earth. When we see her, all our past love returns. It is indescribable; even those who are hard-hearted will become emotional and burst into tears when they see the noble love embodied in this great mother. Many people who believe in and understand the Way do not realise this. Even Đức Phật Di-Lạc (Maitreya Buddha) who holds a high and honourable position as the head of many heavens is still his mother's child.<sup>128</sup>

This passage stresses that universal motherhood connects us all and by this image, Phạm Công Tắc redirects intense feelings of filiality to this deity. In this way, Cao Đài *and* Phật Mẫu become ideal parents deserving of the highest filial respect far beyond that of one's own earthly parents. I have charted elsewhere the peripheral and scattered history of the worship of Phật Mẫu in Caodaism before the 1940s. The wide renown of these sermons amongst Tây Ninh Caodaists from 1948 coincides also with the start of Phật Mẫu's rise to intense popularity in the religion. I think this is no coincidence.<sup>129</sup>

### **The Carramar Temple Context**

When we examine the community locations of Vietnamese Australians across Sydney there are three main areas of settlement. Marrickville in the inner-West of the city, Bankstown in the South-west, and Cabramatta, still in the South-west but much further from the heart of the city. It is this latter suburb that is the most highly populated with Vietnamese-Australians. The community's first worshipping space was established in the 1980s. It was a rented house located in the Inner-west at St Peters (close to Marrickville). This was an early half-way house for Caodaists newly arrived in Sydney. It had a modest ritual area for ancestor worship and an altar to

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<sup>128</sup> Hartney.

<sup>129</sup> Hartney.

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Đức Cao Đài. After seeking to relocate to something more permanent, in the early 1990s, Caodaists started searching for vacant land for a dedicated temple. I have covered this development elsewhere in detail.<sup>130</sup> The building of this temple was a decade-long undertaking of significant difficulty involving the acquiring of cheap excess vacant land from the state of New South Wales, a lengthy planning procedure with Canterbury Council, and extensive building works. This first temple opened in 2001. The community sought to avoid these complications when constructing their temple to Đức Phật Mẫu. So in 2004 a modest fibre-board house was purchased in Carramar – a satellite suburb of the Vietnamese cultural centre of Cabramatta.

An altar to Đức Phật Mẫu was installed in the lounge room of this old house. The bedrooms were used to house (female) temple guardians. A shed in the back yard of the property provided community space, kitchen, and eating areas. Worship to the Divine Mother took place in this modest manner for more than a decade. In 2016 the community's finances were strong enough to demolish the house and construct something purpose-built. Plans were submitted to Fairfield council and, as is often the case with new temples in Sydney, substantial resistance was met from local residents.<sup>131</sup> Wattle Avenue is a withered shopping precinct dotted with mostly bordered-up shops. The street runs alongside a suburban and goods railway line which provides noise disturbance throughout the night. Despite this on-going noise pollution, residents complained to Council that the gentle chanting coming from the temple would be too much to bear. These complaints were little more than xenophobic. The Caodaists were required to attend a number of community meetings with Council and residents before planning was approved.

During September 2018, the altar inside this new building was finally dedicated, and a year later, on the 10 November 2019, the Holy Mother temple was officially opened with a crowd of several hundred adepts and supporters present. Before explaining the final form of the building, worship processes should be outlined first.

### **Processes of Worship**

The presence of the Divine Mother in Caodaism was perhaps the first major event of the religion. *During September 1925 – three months before the religion was announced through séance by heaven – a special ceremony took place in a private residence in Saigon. It was a banquet to welcome the Divine Mother and her nine attendants – each a female buddha. Early Caodaists were instructed, by séance, on how to set out this banquet with a table, vegetarian food, tea, and empty chairs. Once seated, the invisible spirits were served, then they departed. This event then set the practice of Caodaism's Hội Yến Diêu Trì, or feast of the Divine Mother. It is now an annual ceremony central to the Caodaist ritual calendar and held on the 15th Day of the 8th Lunar*

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<sup>130</sup> Hartney, 'A Strange Peace: Dao Cao Dai and Its Manifestation in Sydney'; Hartney, *A Gift to Australia: Caodaism and the First Caodaist Temple of Australia*.

<sup>131</sup> See, Christopher Hartney, 'Performances of Multiculturalism: Three South Asian Communities in Sydney', in *South Asians in the Diaspora: History and Religious Traditions*, ed. Jacobsen A. Knut and P. Pratap Kumar (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

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*Month while East Asians more generally celebrate the “Autumn Moon” festival (中秋節/ Tết Trung Thu).*

In the sermons of Phạm Công Tắc we read how serving food and drink to the Divine Mother at this banquet is both an act of worship and a practice of heightened filial piety. It is these combined aspects of the banquet that has helped make this ceremony one of the most popular in Caodaism and, for Caodaists, a ceremony that is essential to both a demonstration of (celestial) filial piety and their own personal salvation. This ceremony, however, was not central to Caodaist concerns before the 1930s and no significant space in Tây Ninh was set aside as a temple to her veneration. During the 1940s, a temple that was designed to celebrate filial piety more generally was remodelled to become the main temple to the Divine Mother. This was more an afterthought than a specifically planned building. This fact has had consequences for the build in Carramar. When building the temple to Đức Cao Đài in Wiley Park, local Caodaists had to reconstruct hundreds of features that appear originally in the official temple to Cao Đài in Tây Ninh (completed in the years after World War II). Because the temple architecture to the Divine Mother remains more temporary, more flexibility was possible.

*In addition to the annual welcome and feast for the Divine Mother, monthly and daily ceremonies have been added.* Monthly worship takes place on the first and fifteenth of every lunar month. It is at this time that Caodaists congregate to venerate this deity. Additionally, there are daily prayers at every Holy Mother Temple. These are offered four times a day at 6AM, Noon, 6PM and Midnight. Caodaists present in the temple or near-by will join these short prayers, but often only the temple’s caretakers will be present for these briefer daily ceremonies.

### **The ‘Look’ And Function Of The Carramar Temple**

As with local Phật Mẫu temples in Vietnam, the Carramar temple is distinguished by one central tower over the main door (temples to Cao Đài have two towers either side of the main door). Although this tower has been lowered considerably to comply with local planning dictates. Whereas a Phật Mẫu temple in Vietnam would give as much height as possible to the worshipping space, in Carramar the worship space is confined to the upper story of the building. This is reached from a main staircase just inside the front door. Here, windows are set high in the wall to protect the privacy of neighbours. In Vietnam much larger windows would be used. The height in the upstairs area is amplified by a clerestory ridge in the roof admitting additional light. On the ground floor toilets, a kitchen and eating area and other administrative areas are located.

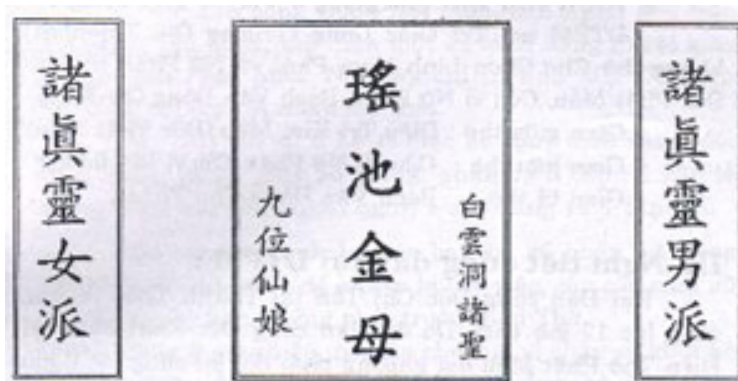
With the main banquet ritual permitted only in Tây Ninh, the Carramar temple only needs to accommodate monthly and daily prayers. These are facilitated by three altars lined up along the rear wall of the upstairs space. Instead of statues of the nine female buddhas who attend the Divine Mother, in Carramar there is a raised altar screen flanked by two columns on which the following objects appear:

- A lute – symbolising the First Female Buddha
- An incense burner symbolising the Second.

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- A ‘dragon-wisk’ fan representing the Third
- A golden name board symbolises the Fourth
- A ‘wand of contentment’ represents the Fifth Female Buddha
- A banner of ‘wandering freedom’ represents the Sixth
- A lotus flower represents the Seventh.
- A basket of flowers symbolises the Eighth
- And a flute represents the Ninth.

When we turn our attention to the name plaque on the altar we see the following characters. This plaque is dominated by the name of Phật Mẫu using the following words from top to bottom.



On the left side of this central name in the collective title of the nine female immortals.

1. Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu /瑤池金母 – see chapter two for a more complete explanation of this and other names applied to this deity.
2. On the left of this central name is the collective title for the Nine Immortals: Cửu-Vị Tiên-Nương /九位仙娘.
3. And on the right side of this central name is the title of the “Saints of the White Lodge” or Bạch-Vân-Động Chư-Thánh /白雲洞諸聖.

The reference to “White Lodge” here refers to the moon which, in Caodaist cosmology is seen as a sacred way-station where souls with advanced merit prepare themselves for reincarnation into life on earth with the express duty of promoting religious advancement. Many of the early founders of Caodaism were assumed to be advanced souls and would have passed through the White Lodge before their birth into Vietnam in time for the start of Caodaism.

On the altars at both Tây Ninh and Carramar the layout of various objects is consistent with other Caodaist altars. Offerings of flowers, fruit, wine, tea, candles and incense are placed here in a similar way to the altar in the Great Divine Temple and at Wiley Park. The main difference between a father and mother altars being a lamp over the former that represents the Universal Monad and brings us back to the theological place Đức Phật Mẫu holds in Caodaism: a being who is co-equal to Đức Cao Đài in most respects, but who does not precede him.

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## **Conclusions**

In this religion's brief history, the voice of the Divine Mother was one of the first to manifest to the earliest disciples in séance during 1925. It was a voice, however, that was obscured by other concerns and other divine messages as the religion grew to prominence across the French colony of Indochina after 1926. Only in the mid 1940s does she return as an increasingly central concern for Caodaists. In this period she rises almost to co-equality with Đức Cao Đài and her presence seems to challenge the monotheistic claims of a religion that now so devotedly worships this divine couple through the filial paradigm explained here. We have seen here how the Divine Mother has developed in Caodaism theologically. Made from a composition of motherly deities from East Asian religious systems, both ancient and more recent, she takes on what Caodaists consider vital soteriological and millennial dimensions. As such, when the aging Caodaist population of Sydney got the chance, they dedicated serious resources in time and money to construct a temple specifically to her. Closer to the heart of the Vietnamese community in Sydney than their first temple, this new build allows them to complete their religious duties without necessarily returning to Vietnam – an option that remains politically limited. Given the 'temporary' nature of the main temple to Đức Phật Mẫu in Tây Ninh, Caodaists were not bound to incorporate a wide range of details into this new temple – as they did with their first temple. And, as we have seen, local council pressures and neighbourly concerns have additionally altered the nature of this new building. But for a small community still dealing with the impact of homesickness, their new temple in Sydney does much to create a cultural home space for this exiled group. It is both a religious and a political statement about their place as Vietnamese and Australians and is a religious site that warrants much more study, which I hope this initial research encourages.

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### BOOK REVIEWS

***Gurus in America.* Forsthoefel, Thomas A. and Humes, Cynthia Ann Eds. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005, 236 pp.**

*Gurus in America* tells the story of the gurus who have been referred to as part of the ‘second wave’ of gurus in America. The figures involved in this book include gurus who visited America as well as Indian teachers who never came to America but who had a significant impact on later gurus visiting America. For example, Forsthoefel’s essay describes Ramana Maharshi as a teacher who had never been out of his native Tamil Nadu, but whose teachings paved the way for the migration of ideas clad in Hinduism. Many of the gurus who did come to the West either claimed to be descendants of Ramana or responded directly to his message and example. In this sense, the title of the book is more or less misleading; perhaps it would be more appropriate to entitle the volume *Gurus Who Influenced America*.

The collection introduces nine gurus, who can be roughly divided into three categories: Respectively, two gurus from the Advaita Vedanta tradition (Ramana Maharshi and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi), three gurus from traditions that privilege Bhakti (Satya Sai Baba, Ammachi, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami), and three guru from the Tantric tradition (Guru Chidvilasananda, or Gurumayi, Rajneesh, Adi Da).

Generally speaking, these vary from each other, firstly, because of the different aspects of their respective understanding of Hinduism, and secondly because of the different means of adaptation they chose for their missions. More specifically, the anthology highlights the strategy adopted by each for spreading Hinduism to America and their attitude towards non-Hinduism. The possibility for spreading Hinduism to the Western world is imbedded in the universalism implied in Hinduism, which is consistent with Western values. Additionally, the ideological groundwork carried out by the native gurus for the gurus who later arrived in overseas missions, especially Ramana’s questioning of the exclusivist tendencies in traditional Advaita, made the universalism implied by the axioms of non-dualism coherent.

What intrigued me most about this book was its specialized account of the contribution of female gurus to the spread of Hinduism in America. The book covered two female teachers in the second wave, Ammachi and Gurumayi (Muktananda’s successor). The essay on Ammachi was written by Selva Raj. According to Raj, there is a dynamic relationship between Ammachi’s spirituality and Christianity. Ammachi’s theory takes the position of universalism and egalitarianism. She believes spiritual merit comes from experience, not birthright. Women are also one of the models of devotion in the Bhakti movement. Because of Ammachi’s devotion to Krishna, she also articulated the natural response of human feelings toward the divine.

Like many other gurus, Ammachi adopted three main forms of missionary practice – the first being the spiritual formation of non-Hindus using the spiritual resources already available in Hinduism, the second drawing on resources from other religious traditions, especially from Christianity, and the third being cultural innovation to guide Westerners to Hinduism with the

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familiar content of their original faith. To be more specific, Ammachi's innovations included four aspects: The salient one is that her universalism broke not only the limits of caste and ethnicity, but also the limits of the *darshan* method itself. Another aspect is "water *darshan*", which means that devotees received the embrace of Ammachi in water. The third aspect is a further development involved in the integration of business opportunities and spirituality. The last one is that a strong institutional structure was constructed by Ammachi to serve as a vehicle for charitable and pedagogical matters related to the spread of Hinduism.

Lola Williamson's essay focuses on Guru Chidvilasananda, or Gurumayi, the current leader of the Siddha Yoga community. According to Williamson, Gurumayi focused on the secular life of the believer. She openly stated her support for believers who wanted to marry and have children, and even held fellowship dances in hopes of enabling believers to find lifelong partners. These shifts made by Gurumayi are markedly different from the traditional Hindu emphasis on the radical renunciation of the sannyasi, who "subdued" everything with the goal of liberation. Gurumayi demonstrated the power of gurus by cultivating a common way of life through this more modest goal of morality and good living, thus consciously regulating the urgency and intensity of liberation. Here we can see the important role of women in the development of the religion.

Apart from the female gurus, there were some male gurus who took the importance of women into consideration when dealing with religious matters. For example, Bhaktivedanta paid attention to the value of women's spirituality and leadership in his theology. That was encouraging and impressive.

It is necessary to conclude this review with an overall evaluation of the volume. The book is reasonable in the layout of its chapters, from non-dualism to traditions focused on religious piety to tantric traditions, and reveals a developmental process that gradually steps out of the shackles of traditional teachings as Hinduism spreads to America. The book's detailed presentation of the two female gurus is very encouraging; it recognizes the contribution of women in the spread of religion, and also situates the integration of Hinduism into the American ideal of equal rights. At the same time, the volume also points out certain deviations of gurus, such as the fact that some teachers drew inspiration from the Tantric tradition, asserting that sexual energy itself can be a vehicle for non-dual experience – yet these individuals ended up exhibiting extreme behavior.

This provides a cautionary note regarding the excesses that can manifest in the name of spiritual wisdom. There is also the question that the book holds a prior affirmative attitude towards the Gurus' missionary approach in America and then explains their missionary process. However, one can question the extent to which such a means of catering to the missionary audience does not produce a lopsided view of Hinduism, and whether such a supposed "skillful means" could eventually result in some kind of resistance to Hinduism?

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***Falun Gong: Spiritual Warfare and Martyrdom.* James R. Lewis, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 97 pages. ISBN: 978-1-108-44565-8, Paperback, £15.**

Falun Gong (FG) or Falun Dafa is a New Religious Movement (NRM), more specifically a Chinese spiritual movement, founded in 1992 by Li Hongzhi in the north-eastern city of Changchun. Although FG denies that it is actually a religion putting emphasis on its scientific and spiritual character, it could be considered as one of the very ‘new’ NRMs or cults that has attracted international attention after 1999 when it was officially banned by the Chinese authorities. FG is usually characterized as a controversial group with hidden teachings and ‘aggressive’ media and legal strategies against anyone who could be perceived as an enemy. This brief book, published in Religion and Violence Elements series of the Cambridge University Press is authored by James R. Lewis, Professor at the School of Philosophy of Wuhan University in China.

The book focuses on the role of violence, more particularly of the spiritual warfare and martyrdom, taught and practiced within FG, a strategy described also as ‘spiritual terrorism’ (Lewis and D’ Amico 2017), without, however, neglecting the violence perpetrated against the group by the Chinese authorities after its official ban in 1999. It consists of six sections and an afterword accompanied by an extended and well-informed reference and bibliography list on FG. The main themes discussed in those sections include a brief background about FG and its conflict with the Chinese state authorities until and after the 1999 ban, the atrocity tales narrated by FG members, the role of the founder, Li Hongzhi, his teachings on apocalypticism, karma and spiritual warfare and FG’s media strategies, which is a crucial aspect of the group’s public appearance. One of the key-themes of the book is the incident of the self-immolation of FG members on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2001 in Tianannmen square. Building upon this incident as a key-point of the group’s spiritual warfare and martyrdom, the author tries to interpret it by analyzing the testimonies of those who survived, of former members as well as of the official discourse and teachings of Li Hongzhi. Through the interpretation of this particular incident Lewis wants to focus on and expose what he calls the hidden face of FG (pp. 12-21). His input is twofold.

On the one hand, he argues that while studying closed and difficult to access groups, like FG, researchers should be careful when listening to members’ accounts regarding atrocities tales and brutalization at the hands of the secret service, the police and other state authorities. Further, he insightfully offers his personal experience, since, as he admits, he was giving the floor to such victimization narratives of FG members in his own university classes (pp. 3-4). He adds, nevertheless, that this shift in his academic approach on FG does not mean that he is not accepting that state authorities have been treating brutally some of the inmates, but caution is necessary before one unconditionally accepts any story told.

On the other hand, and in relation to the above, he tries to turn his focus on those teachings of FG that could potentially lead to the perpetration of violence on the part of the authorities or violence exercised by FG members upon themselves. He focuses on Li Hongzhi’s teachings especially with regard to spiritual energy (*xinxing*) and its split into good karma (*de*) and bad karma (*karma*) (p. 18), which is based on Buddhism and Confucianism and aims at promoting

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three values, i.e. *Zhen* (truthfulness), *Shan* (benevolence) and *Ren* (forbearance). This energy which is found in every person is being transferred between people and rises or falls based on human activity. That means that when people are doing good deeds the good karma enters their body as well as when they are victimized by others. He also adds that the founder of FG had been elaborating a theology of martyrdom long before the official banning of the group in 1999 (p. 42). Despite the group's denial that Li Hongzhi's teachings have in any way influenced the 2001 self-immolations, Lewis argues that this could be actually interpreted in terms of his theology of martyrdom, which includes fighting with demons, who basically take the form of oppressors, state authorities and any other enemy (pp. 45-47).

The analysis conducted in this illuminating book offers the opportunity for comparisons in the field of the study of religion and NRMs. Regarding martyrdom, FG's strategy of seeking brutalization or even death reminds of the early Christians who considered their own martyrdom as an imitation of Jesus, a theological idea that survived until the third century more or less and described as voluntary martyrdom (de Ste. Croix. 2006) or as good death and self-conscious suffering (Moss 2012). In addition, such acts of martyrdom remind one of the mass suicides of other NRMs (e.g. Peoples Temple, Branch Davidians, etc.) and one could compare the different theological and spiritual backgrounds and their contexts. On the other hand, FG's media and legal strategy resembles significantly the Church of Scientology as described elsewhere (Lewis 2017). Overall this short book offers fruitful insights on a number of issues and stimulates the reader to undertake further research, analyses and comparative studies, and it would be a useful tool for those interested in FG in particular, in NRMs in general or in the broader field of religion and violence.

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***From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as Popular Culture.* Holtorf, Cornelius. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2005, 196 pages. ISBN: 0759102678.**

In *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as Popular Culture* (2005) Cornelius Holtorf explores the intricate and surprisingly intimate relationship between archaeology and popular culture. Over the course of 9 chapters which partly consist of reworked and previously published articles, Holtorf examines this interdependent and often mutually beneficial relationship through a range of different popular media.

Never reductive nor monothetic, explicitly favoring a more round-about and rhizomatic mode of exposition (p. 19) Holtorf examines a wide range of individual, collective and more often than not consumerist desires that ultimately furnishes the archaeological study and pop cultural portrayal of the past with a distinct and, not least, commercially viable “archaeo-appeal.”

Offering a sympathetic, entertaining and yet penetrating exploration of archaeological practice, Holtorf eventually reaches his more contentious yet intriguing proposition, one that he shares with his poststructuralist brethren of symmetrical archaeology: An object’s value is decided in moving from past to present through the work of desire (Shanks 1995 cited in Holtorf 2005:121). The latter half of his book is spent in circumambulatory consideration of the implications this suggestion has on the way archaeologists and popular culture sustain and create an archaeo-appeal that engages with the public.

Reflecting on the personal and subjective appeal of archaeology, Holtorf examines the psychological, metaphorical and literal “underground” in chapter 2. From idiomatic, everyday body-metaphors (“digging deeper”) to the depths of the Freudian subconscious, Holtorf identifies inherently human relation or obsession with the forgotten and/or repressed past and its relation to the present, conscious self. Given the many literal and metaphorical connotations with their primary field of study, the underground, the archaeologist acquires an adventurous air as he intrepidly probes the subsurface for chthonic secrets all the while shedding civilizing light on the dark and exotic recesses of the world and the human psyche. In chapter 3 Holtorf explores the archaeo-appeal of well-worn archaeological tropes in popular media. Be it the bookish and bespectacled scholar or the hip-shooting and whip-wielding explorer, they reiterate, according to Holtorf, a timeless and clichéd hero-myth as they endure the discomforts of archaeological fieldwork while unflinchingly pursuing noble ideals of truth, enlightenment and scientific discovery. While a tried and proved cast in Western storytelling, Holtorf reminds us that archaeologists usually are more concerned with dust and dirt than lavish treasure, and addresses, albeit somewhat briefly, the more troubling colonial and sexist connotations of these stereotypes.

By chapter 4 Holtorf suggests that much of archaeology’s arhaeo-appeal could derive from the laborious, careful and whodunnit-like approach the excavating archaeologist uses in piecing together the many and often conflicting clues of the past. As with any detective novel, it is not so much the solution to the murder mystery but the mystery itself and the methods

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applied which ropes the reader in. Whether 18<sup>th</sup> century faux-excavations at Pompeii for the aristocratic wealthy or inviting online audiences to solve the Ice Age murder mystery of Ötzi, it is the archaeological process itself, the diligent and careful search for clues and reconstruction of past events, that provides the attraction.

At this point, Holtorf arrives at the more theoretically consequential and arguably contentious examination of the archaeological process and its relationship with popular culture. As Holtorf admits, the past rarely presents itself as a ready-made puzzle with an unequivocal solution and compares archaeological understanding of the past with the plasticity of memories. For each revisit memories are reinterpreted by hindsight, tinted by present sentiments, agglutinated by circumstantial detail and, for better and for worse, irreversibly altered even if just ever so slightly.

Tracing the shifting interpretation of Neolithic stone axes in chapter 5 from naturally occurring and evil-warding “thunderbolts” in the middle ages to bulletproofing charms during the Franco-Prussian war, Holtorf successfully conveys how every generation not only are drawn to the remains of the past but also, much like memories, encrust them with layers of meaning conditioned by their own contemporary needs and sensibilities.

Holtorf thus transforms the indeterminacy of translation - our hermeneutical inability to exhaustively and without error understand the past Other - to a source of endless sustainability. In fact, Holtorf suggests that the past is a “renewable resource” (chapter 8) as it is always and already in active translation and interpretation through our ever-compounding and changing understanding of ourselves and others. More worryingly for archaeologists hoping to accurately reconstruct the past, however, is the implication that there really is no objective past, only our experience of it in the present through a welter of historical, educational and entertainment contexts.

This reconsideration of the relation between past and present also has important implications on one of archaeology’s most sacrosanct of axioms: authenticity (chapter 7). If the ultimate goal of archaeology is not so much accurately reconstructing the past as experiencing it in the present - opening up one’s eyes to the past to quip Holtorf (p. 159) – a whole new set of demands on public dissemination of archaeological knowledge may be warranted. Rather than considering Disneyfied theme-parks, apocryphal horned Viking-helmets or the mostly PEG-infused Vaasa ship as bastardized quasi-representations of the past, they may instead be considered more authentic in that they make manifest and explicit our contemporary, consumerist expectations and desires. The study of the past is as much a study of our own, contemporary desires and how we display and engage the public with the past, either through clearly labeled and factual museum exhibits or Indiana Jones-themed rollercoasters, are thus equally informative of our changing relationship with the past.

The book can be charged, as it has by other commentators (Casella 2006; Wallace 2007), with neglecting or not considering at more depth the many misuses and outright abuses of archaeology and its close ties with Western consumerism and culture. Indeed, considering the relativizing nature of its claims - that the archaeological understanding of the past essentially is one of contextual interpretation in the present - one should perhaps be even more vigilant of

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its abusive potential especially when considering its frequent and appealing portrayal in popular, Western media.

However, I think we can forgive a project that deals with the portrayal of archaeology and the past in non-academic and popular contexts for keeping it light-hearted. In fact, I find it praise-worthy that Holtorf emphasizes that the past ultimately is *experienced* in the present. Beyond reiterating the hermeneutical caution that we always bring our encultured and socially conditioned selves with us when engaging with the past, Holtorf also succeeds in imparting the importance of experiential, phenomenological and lived experience both in the past and in our present understanding of it. In discussing the atmosphere, allure and aesthetic pull the Neolithic menhirs exerted on local and global communities throughout the Bronze and the Iron Age right up to present-day Europe Holtorf reminds us of the ineffable, ephemeral yet undeniable archaeo-appeal of the past and its remains – even without the aid of Hollywood. With the rapidly advancing video game and VR technology, people can now virtually explore in impressive and immersive detail medieval Venice, Ancient Egypt and Greece in a range of popular video game series. I have no doubt that the creating the right set of “authentic” aesthetics, allure and atmosphere will occupy video game designer in the years to come and be much more instrumental in sustaining the continued appeal of archaeology than renewed chronology sequences, erudite publications or even tombs laden with gold ever will.

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***The Invention of Satanism.* Asbjørn Dyrendal, James R. Lewis, and Jesper Aa. Petersen. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 254 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-518110-4.**

In terms of the general impression given to us by the cultural image of "Satan", Satanism is evil, cunning and ferocious. For those readers who come into contact with the term for the first time, many will ask: does such a belief really exist? Why do people really worship the devil? How did this belief emerge? What are its core values? How is it active in contemporary society?

Indeed, as a strange and complex contemporary social and cultural phenomenon, Satanism is inevitably stereotyped. However, one should not be intimidated by the title and cover of *The Invention of Satanism*. This is an interesting and serious work of research that unveils the mystery of Satanism.

The authors of this volume are three prominent international experts in the study of new religious movements, Asbjørn Dyrendal, James R. Lewis, and Jesper Aa. Petersen. All three have been following and studying Satanism for quite a while and enjoy a reputation in related fields. In this book, they collect academic research and cutting-edge survey information, which provide a comprehensive understanding of Satan.

As the authors state, the core issue of the book is "how Satanism was invented as a self-declared religious and/or philosophical position, and how it serves as a personal and collective identity." The authors tackle this issue from two angles: historical and sociological.

To this end, in terms of material use, this book highlights some central movement texts which are used by spokespersons to create their own discursive position and authority. On the one hand, they reference a variety of published resources. On the other, they present details such as interviews and journalistic treatments, biographies, artistic expressions, and cyberspace material.

The first half of this book focuses on historical context, examining the various sources of Satanism and the stages of self-construction and development in contemporary society; providing detailed information about Anton Szandor LaVey, the founder of the Church of Satan and his famous *Satanic Bible*, and continuing into the Satanism scare cases of the 1980s and 1990s. The relevant content is primarily contained in the first through fifth chapters.

The second half of the book is primarily a sociological analysis of the Satanic milieu's demographics, including three quantitative surveys of contemporary Satanists, featuring sociological observations. It is worth mentioning that Lewis's survey, which spans the first decade of this century, reflects the latest developments in Satanism, though the surveys relied entirely upon convenience samples and thus are open to the criticism of being nonrandom. The relevant content is in chapters 6 to 9.

One of the obvious theoretical contributions of *The Invention of Satanism* is the construction of the three ideal types of Satanism, reactive, rationalist and esoteric Satanism. To put it simply, reactive Satanism refers to a childish form of rebellion against Christian ideology, which is usually related to popular culture, and it is a temporary stage of Satanic identity construction; esoteric Satanism refers to esoteric beliefs and practices; and rationalist Satanism, and which refers to an attitude of "atheistic, skeptical, materialistic, and epicurean", which are the core

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values in *The Satanic Bible*. These three types are helpful for a better understanding of the complex and pluralistic ideological trends of Satanism. With it, we can form a clearer overall impression of contemporary Satanism: "rationalist and esoteric Satanism occupy a bipolar manifestation of organized, mature, and systematic worldviews with reactive Satanism as a catch-all category of popular Satanism, inverted Christianity, and symbolic rebellion." (pp.5).

All in all, in this fascinating narrative of a seemingly mysterious and often daunting movement, Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen demonstrates that the invention of Satanism is an ongoing and evolving process.

In terms of the impact of this book, I realize that an important source of Satanism is the rebellion against the traditional Christian ruling ideology in the West, from groups that have been treated unfairly because of religious prejudice. With the revival of modern humanism, the image of Satan was subverted in literature, gradually separated from its theological background, and became a cultural symbol: advocating individuality and rebellion against authority, elitism, and the expression of material desires. With the rise of modern consumer culture and sexual liberation and so on, the symbol of Satan contains more abundant contents. All these have contributed to the self-conscious identity construction of Satanism. Satan is a substantial and/or functional equivalent to what is usually meant by "religion" and was specifically created to be so. Thus Satanism belongs to the category of what are called "self-religions", focusing on a this-worldly emphasis that sacralizes the individual self with a critical attitude toward the socializing influence of "mass society." This was one of the most enlightening lessons I took from this book. Of course, there is more room for readers to explore for themselves.

The book is not long, with a total of 254 pages, but it provides a popular and concise outline of how contemporary Satanism emerged step by step. Coupled with a fair and rigorous academic standpoint, readers will gain a comprehensive and profound understanding of Satanism while satisfying their curiosity. No matter why your interests are in Satanism, this book should be your first choice.

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Article manuscripts should be approximately 7,000+ words, but we may accept upwards of 10,000 words as well. We also accept short notes from 1,000 to 5,000 words. **Article manuscripts are double-blind peer-reviewed.**

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