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# **NXIVM, Religion, and “Cults”: Keith Raniere as Charismatic Leader and Transgressive Criminal**

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## **Abstract**

Keith Raniere, the founder and charismatic leader of NXIVM, was arrested by FBI agents in Mexico in 2018 and sentenced to 120 years in prison in 2020. The charges included sex trafficking, racketeering, child pornography possession, and other crimes. The question of whether NXIVM is a religion or a group that can be classified as “religious” arises due to the stereotype of new religious movements (NRMs) that emerged in the 1960s, which posited a charismatic leader (usually male) who predated sexually (and financially) upon members. The archetypes of this form of leadership include Jim Jones, who had sexual relationships with both male and female members of Peoples Temple, and David Berg (Moses David), the founder of the Children of God (later The Family International), whose movement has been accused of sexualizing young children, and abusing them in the context of an allegedly “sex positive” religion, as well as pimping female members as “hookers for Jesus” as a missionary technique. Memoirs by ex-members of the Children of God, Peoples Temple, the Church of Scientology, and many other NRMs have proliferated since the 1990s, and in the 2020s documentaries and books about NXIVM appear regularly. This article analyses NXIVM, its founder, its members, and group practices, identifying certain tropes familiar from the study of NRM leaders, in order to determine whether or not there is sufficient evidence to merit classifying it as a new religious movement (NRM) or a “cult.”

## **Keywords:**

New religious movement; cult; NXIVM; Keith Raniere; charismatic leader; coercive control; crime

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### **Introduction**

On 27 October 2020, Keith Allen Raniere (b. 1960), founder of NXIVM, was sentenced to 120 years prison time for “racketeering, racketeering conspiracy, sex trafficking, attempted sex trafficking, sex trafficking conspiracy, forced labor conspiracy, and wire fraud conspiracy.”<sup>1</sup> NXIVM and Raniere went from being almost unknown to experiencing near-constant media scrutiny after a series of highly-publicized arrests; on 12 June 2018 the organization closed.<sup>2</sup> Five of Raniere’s female acolytes and lovers were charged with various offences: second in command Nancy Salzman; her daughter Lauren Salzman; *Smallville* actress Allison Mack; Seagram heiress Clare Bronfman; and bookkeeper Kathy Russell. Scholars of new religious movements (NRMs) argue that the unreflective use of the word “cult” to describe NXIVM is a methodological flaw in the extensive media coverage, which includes the HBO series *The Vow* (2020-2022), which focused on actress Catherine Oxenberg’s quest to extract her daughter from NXIVM, and *Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult* (2020), which focused on India Oxenberg’s efforts to understand her time with Raniere, and to evaluate the impact it had on her psychological health and life trajectory.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, the story fits a classic “cult” narrative: there is the charismatic leader, understood to be Christ or Buddha – certainly no mere mortal, but a conduit for the divine - by followers, who play a crucial part in the creation of his charisma;<sup>4</sup> and the teachings that straddle self-help, corporate coaching, and esoteric religion. Raniere, who sexually and financially presented as a renunciant, secretly had sexual relationships with multiple NXIVM women, presided over an inner circle of female slaves branded with his initials, and had craved money and power since his time as an Amway employee in the 1980s. These are textbook examples of “cult” behavior; deceitful, manipulative conduct by a leader with enormous power over an inner circle.<sup>5</sup> There was a disconnect between what outsiders “saw” in NXIVM training, and what was happening inside the organization. In the early years, Raniere’s closest companions, “the original harem” as NXIVM whistle-blower and investigative journalist Frank Parlato called them, took care of his sexual needs, groomed women to become his lovers, and arranged abortions and other services as required. In 2017, Parlato observed that, “Karen Unterreiner (58ish) is the last of the original harem. Pamela Cafritz, dead from cancer; Barbara Jeske, dead from cancer; Kristin Keeffe, fled from Mr Raniere, taking their son with her; Gina Hutchinson, dead by suicide”.<sup>6</sup> Hutchinson died in 2002; in 2014 Keeffe left NXIVM with her son Gaelyn and Jeske died; Cafritz died in 2016. In 2015, Raniere began selecting female “slaves” and the

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<sup>1</sup> Susan J. Palmer, ‘Media Review: NXIVM and #MeToo’, *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 24, issue 4 (2021), 107.

<sup>2</sup> Kelly McLaughlin and Nicole Einbinder, ‘How NXIVM, a so-called self-help company, crumbled after former members exposed it as a cult that abused sex slaves,’ *Insider*, updated 9 September 2021. At <https://www.insider.com/what-is-nxivm-keith-raniere-explainer-2019-4>. (Accessed 31/10/2022).

<sup>3</sup> Jehane Noujaim and Karim Amer (dir.), *The Vow* (New York: HBO Documentary Films, 2020-2022); and Cecilia Peck (dir.), *Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult* (North Vancouver: Lionsgate Television, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Nathan Kravis, ‘Charisma’, *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (2021), 523-554.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Berman, *Don’t Call It A Cult: The Shocking Story of Keith Raniere and the Women of NXIVM* (Lebanon, NH: Steerforth Press, 2021), 54-55 on Toni Natalie having experienced all phases of Raniere’s ‘playbook’ during their eight-year relationship.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Parlato, ‘Aging Harem: Karen Unterreiner: She also serves who stands and waits’, *The Frank Report*, 27 June (2017), <https://frankreport.com/2017/06/27/aging-harem-karen-unterreiner-she-also-serves-who-stand-and-wait/>. (Accessed 31/10/2022).

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sorority Dominus Obsequious Sororium (Latin for “Lord Over the Slave Women” or “Master Over the Obedient Female Companions”) was born.<sup>7</sup>

This article assesses the life and teachings of Keith Raniere (pronounced Ren-ear-ee), using NRMs studies to dissect the NXIVM story, and identify factors that are associated with high demand organizations in general (and religions in particular). Raniere is compared to two notorious leaders of controversial new religions: James Warren “Jim” Jones (1931-1978), the founder of Peoples Temple, and David Brandt Berg, known as Moses David (1919-1994), the founder of the Children of God (The Family International).<sup>8</sup> Both men, like Raniere, had sex with many followers and the movements they led were engulfed in scandal, crime, and legal problems. There are also clear connections between NXIVM and another genealogy of NRMs: L. Ron Hubbard’s (1911-1986) Church of Scientology (CoS), founded in 1954; and Erhard Seminars Training (EST), founded by Werner Erhard (b. John Paul “Jack” Rosenberg, 1935) in 1971, and its later incarnation Landmark Education.<sup>9</sup> These groups all employ a conceptual vocabulary developed by Hubbard, have a more “corporate” image, and are distinctively American and contemporary. The first part of this article discusses Raniere’s life prior to the founding of NXIVM. Second, the creation of NXIVM and the years of success are the focus. The third section analyses the teachings of NXIVM to identify religious and “cult” themes. The fourth part covers: high-profile defections from NXIVM and negative media coverage; the arrest, trial, and conviction of Raniere; and what NRM scholars can gain from studying NXIVM, given that the available sources to date are non-academic, including ex-member memoirs, televisual accounts, and print journalism.

### **Keith Raniere: Biography and Background to NXIVM**

Keith Raniere was born in Brooklyn in 1960; his parents divorced when he was eight. He was raised by his mother, a ballroom dancing teacher, in Suffern, “an affluent suburb in Rockland County, New York, the last stop on the New Jersey Transit commuter train line to Manhattan.”<sup>10</sup> Like a majority of charismatic leaders (and most obviously Scientology’s Hubbard), Raniere cultivated a personal mythology, in which he was an extraordinary child, a precocious young adult genius, and a philosopher who discovered the secret to progress humanity into the future. In 1988, while living in Albany, New York, he was profiled in a local newspaper, the *Albany Times Union*, due to “his membership in an obscure high-IQ society, based on a self-administered test that allegedly ranked Raniere one in ten million.”<sup>11</sup> Ronald K. Hoeflin’s ‘Mega Society’ test was criticized by psychologists; it permitted the candidate to

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<sup>7</sup> Berman, *Don’t Call It A Cult*, 216-217.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Scott Cain, ‘The Charismatic Leader’, *The Humanist* 48, no. 6 (1988), 19-36. Cain compares John H. Noyes (founder of the Oneida Community), David Berg, and Jim Jones. He identifies breaking societal norms re sex as a link between the three (Noyes was an advocate of free love, Berg was an advocate of incest and child rape, and Jones, while not explicitly advocating any sexual stance, had sex with male and female followers).

<sup>9</sup> Carole M. Cusack, “‘Squirrels’ and Unauthorized Uses of Scientology: Werner Erhard and EST, Ken Dyers and Kenja, and Harvey Jackins and Re-Evaluation Counselling”, in *Handbook of Scientology*, ed. James R. Lewis and Kjersti Hellestoy (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 485-506.

<sup>10</sup> Toni Natalie (with Chet Hardin), *The Program: Inside the Mind of Keith Raniere and the Rise and Fall of NXIVM* (New York and Boston: Grand Central Publishing, 2019), 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> Berman, *Don’t Call It A Cult*, 23.

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consult with others. Ranieri denied that he had help; yet skeptical ex-NXIANS believed that he did. The reporter was seemingly star-struck, and expounded Ranieri's life uncritically; she was impressed that he was a gifted child who could as a toddler aged 2

spell the word 'homogenized' from seeing it on a milk carton. He was precocious in math development and says he had an understanding of subjects such as quantum physics and computers by age 4 ... He was East Coast Judo champion at age 12, tied with the state record for the 100-yard dash, is an avid skier, swimmer and wind-surfer. He says he plays seven instruments and also sings 'high tenor' in local musical productions.<sup>12</sup>

Ranieri was also reputed to need just two to four hours' sleep per night, and to have gained a triple major in mathematics, physics, and biology from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, in 1982. In fact, his results were unimpressive; he averaged a 2.26 GPA. After graduation he worked for Amway, studied neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and Scientology, then founded a multi-level marketing company, Consumers' Buyline, in 1990.

In this venture Ranieri was inspired by the novels of Ayn Rand (1905-1982), the Russian-American Objectivist 'philosopher', specifically *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957).<sup>13</sup> Rand's thought was pro-capitalist and pro-technology, and her fictional heroes and heroines individualists, artists, and creative geniuses, struggling against bureaucracy and the blandness of modern life. Rand advocated the reduction of government intervention in daily life, thought it was a human obligation to smoke, and "praised pollution as a sign of human progress. Her heroines have wept with joy at billboards and saluted smokestacks, regarding them as a sign of the human struggle against nature."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Rand redefined ethics to refer only to the individual, who "thinks and acts alone and is responsible for his [sic] own actions."<sup>15</sup> This denial of the legitimacy of the community or society was seen throughout Ranieri's career; his own ambition and desire for power overrode the expectations (and the rights) of the women who followed him, and the members of his various organizations.<sup>16</sup> As it happened, Consumer's Buyline violated multiple laws regarding pyramid schemes, and in 1994 the business was officially shut down.

Toni Natalie, Ranieri's girlfriend in the 1990s, was managing a health food business, Awaken, as part of his empire, but in 1997 that company also closed, and a new initiative, National Health Network, a vitamins and supplements retailer, emerged. Natalie met Nancy Salzman, a woman at the forefront of the lifestyle coaching trend, an accredited Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) coach and hypnotherapist, in late 1997 Salzman needed help

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<sup>12</sup> Natalie, *The Program*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Freedman, 'Cult of Personality', *Forbes* (October 2003), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/willyakowicz/2019/05/15/keith-ranieri-the-leader-of-the-nxivm-sex-cult/?sh=5e65a27635a9>. (Accessed 31/10/2022).

<sup>14</sup> Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshiper and Other Pagans in American Today*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 288.

<sup>15</sup> Edward W. Younkins, 'Ayn Rand's Objectivist Virtues as the Foundation for Morality and Success in Business', *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 12, no. 2 (2012), 242.

<sup>16</sup> James M. Odat and Jennifer Gish, 'Secrets of NXIVM'. *Times Union*, 24 February (2012), <https://www.timesunion.com/local/article/Secrets-of-NXIVM-2880885.php>. (Accessed 31/10/2022).

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with constipation, her problem vanished after Natalie recommended certain supplements. The two women became friendly, and Natalie confided in Salzman about her problematic relationship with Ranieri, who she said raped her regularly, humiliated her about her lack of formal education, and demanded she treat him with the respect due to a genius.<sup>17</sup> Natalie initially thought that Salzman arranged to meet with Ranieri on her behalf, but after their first meeting (which is reported in some sources to have involved Salzman spending four days with Ranieri in his office), Salzman was completely won over by him, and she criticized Natalie, saying “You don’t know who he is.”<sup>18</sup>

The meeting between Salzman and Ranieri was fated: her executive training merged with his messianic aspirations, and Executive Success Programs (ESP) was born in 1998. Lyra Walsh Fuchs observes that “ESP combine cognitive-behavioral therapy with group therapy and a sprinkling of Steiner seminars, Ayn Rand, pop psychoanalysis, and Scientology. Hardly anything in NXIVM was original, but the course was styled as the expression of Ranieri’s unique genius.”<sup>19</sup> From this point Ranieri was known as “Vanguard” (originally the name of a computer game he enjoyed playing), and his second-in-command Salzman as “Prefect.” Natalie left Ranieri in April 1999, which made her “Lucifer - the ultimate suppressive,” as Cafritz, one of Ranieri’s closest disciples, told her that year.<sup>20</sup> Natalie was to experience more than fifty home invasions by Vanguard’s lieutenants, have her livelihood undermined and her dog killed, and be pursued in the courts by him for fifteen years.<sup>21</sup> Twenty years after their relationship ended, she witnessed his sentencing by Judge Nicholas Garaufis on 19 June, 2019 and published a memoir that celebrated surviving Vanguard.

### **NXIVM: Executive Success and the Years of Growth**

NXIVM and ESP, though both sold services not physical products, were essentially multi-level marketing schemes. Sarah Edmondson, a Canadian actress, became involved at the invitation of Mark Vicente, a South African born film director best-known for *What the Bleep Do We Know!?* (2004), a New Age docu-drama which focused on the alleged connection between quantum physics and spiritual consciousness.<sup>22</sup> Vicente and his co-writer/directors William Arntz and Betsy Chasse were all members of Ramtha’s School of Enlightenment, a New Age group led by J. Z. Knight (b. Judith Darlene Hampton in 1946), focused on a channeled being, Ramtha, who had lived on the lost continents of Atlantis and Lemuria many centuries ago, when they scripted and filmed the surprise hit.<sup>23</sup> Clearly a spiritual seeker, Ranieri had initially invited Vicente to Albany, where many NXIANS lived, to ask him to make a film about the

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<sup>17</sup> Natalie, *The Program*, 85-87.

<sup>18</sup> Natalie, *The Program*, 87.

<sup>19</sup> Lyra Walsh Fuchs, ‘Cult Capitalism.’ *Dissent* 68, no. 2 (2021), 8.

<sup>20</sup> Natalie, *The Program*, 121.

<sup>21</sup> Berman, *Don’t Call It A Cult*, 172, 175.

<sup>22</sup> William Arntz, Mark Vicente, and Betsy Chasse (dir.), *What The Bleep Do We Know?!* (Los Angeles, CA: Roadside Attractions 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Carole M. Cusack, ‘New Religions and the Science of Archaeology: Mormons, the Goddess and Atlantis,’ in *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science*, ed. James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 765-796

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organization. The film never eventuated, but Vicente became Raniere's best friend, and shot a vast amount of footage, some of which was later used effectively in *The Vow*.<sup>24</sup>

Edmondson climbed "the Stripe Path" (the hierarchy within ESP, white for students, yellow for coaches, orange for proctors, green for senior proctors, blue for counsellors, and purple for senior counsellors, "Prefect" Salzman in possession of the only gold sash, and Vanguard ostentatiously wearing a white sash to signify his commitment to being eternally a student, open and willing to learn),<sup>25</sup> completing NXIVM courses and enrolling scores of members. She was a proud "Espie" (graduate of ESP). Lauren Salzman became her closest friend in NXIVM, and she was the celebrant at Edmondson's wedding to fellow actor and Anthony "Nippy" Ames in 2013.<sup>26</sup> In her memoir Edmondson calls 2009 to 2012 the "Golden Years"; she was making friends, seeing successes in her career, and enjoying social life with other members, especially Vanguard Week, the annual ten-day celebration of Raniere's birthday on Lake George in the Adirondack Mountains, at the Silver Bay YMCA Resort (which cost \$2,000 to attend).<sup>27</sup> The sense of community was strong.

There were intimations that all in Raniere's world was not going well, however. In 2009 his girlfriend, Barbara Bouchey, a financial planner who had joined NXIVM in 2000, left him. She shared concerns about how NXIVM was being run with Susan Dones, who ran the Tacoma center, and focused on "the training side" of the teachings, rather than what Natalie called "the cult side."<sup>28</sup> These women, with seven others, became the "NXIVM Nine" defectors, who were sued by Vanguard and Prefect and harassed in the courts. Bouchey and Dones had reservations about Raniere squandering huge sums of money donated to the cause by the Seagram heiresses, Clare and Sara Bronfman, who had joined in 2003 and placed their vast wealth at his disposal.<sup>29</sup> Bouchey was their financial adviser, and she was very worried that they were being used by Raniere to fund unsuccessful schemes. She was also keen to exit her nine-year relationship with Vanguard. In a process that was very similar to Natalie's break-up with Raniere, Bouchey had come to realize that she would never be the Chosen One who would give birth to the miraculous child Vanguard spoke of, and that most of his female "friends" were also his lovers. The defection of the "NXIVM Nine" was a blow for Raniere, yet in 2009 he took part one of NXIVM's greatest media events, playing host to His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, on 6 May at a NXIVM venue in Albany. It was later revealed that the Bronfman sisters had made the visit happen with a one-million-dollar donation.<sup>30</sup> The event was viewed by Raniere and his inner circle as a legitimation of NXIVM as a humanitarian organization.

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<sup>24</sup> Alison Willmore, 'Before NXIVM and *The Vow*, Mark Vicente Directed a Truly Bizarre Hit Documentary', *Vulture*, 22 October 2020, <https://www.vulture.com/2020/10/looking-back-at-mark-vicentes-what-the-usd-do-we-k-now.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Edmondson (with Kristine Gasbarre), *Scarred: The True Story of How I Escaped NXIVM the Cult that Bound My Life* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Prism, 2019), 41-42.

<sup>26</sup> Edmondson, *Scarred*, 139-141.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Parlato, 'Unseen Texts: Keith Grovels, Begs for Cami at V-Week', *The Frank Report*, 26 March (2022), <https://frankreport.com/2022/03/26/unseen-texts-keith-grovels-begs-for-cami-at-v-week/>.

<sup>28</sup> Natalie, *The Program*, 202.

<sup>29</sup> Berman, *Don't Call It A Cult*, 91-92.

<sup>30</sup> Berman, *Don't Call It A Cult*, 161-163.

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Natalie and Edmondson both stress in their memoirs that Keith Raniere had conservative ideas about the leadership of men and the subservience of women.<sup>31</sup> This is paradoxical, in that most of his most entrepreneurial followers were women, and he owed a great deal to their energy, innovation, and devotion to him personally and to the institution he had built with Nancy Salzman, NXIVM. In 2013 special men's and women's groups were updated: the men were part of the Society of Protectors (SOP), which was intended to assist them to be authentically masculine in a changing world; Jness, the women's equivalent was founded in 2006, and was run by the women and marketed as empowering. Edmondson wryly noted "Jness training was supposed to make us women stronger and help us develop character, and while SOP [in which her husband Nippy Ames was a leader] was allegedly creating a men's movement, it actually proved to be a platform for Keith's latent misogyny."<sup>32</sup> By 2015 she was disillusioned: her mentor Bouchey had left; and her good friend Jeske had died; and at Cafritz's funeral she was shocked to hear Allison Mack, as emcee, refer to her as Raniere's "life partner."<sup>33</sup> Shortly after, Lauren Salzman, her closest friend, flew to Vancouver to tell her of a secret initiative, "life-changing ... top-secret, and before I can tell you anything, I need you to give me collateral to ensure that you won't tell anyone about it."<sup>34</sup> Collateral referred generally to sexually explicit material such as photographs and videos, or proof of secrets that were potentially damaging to the person handing it over. Putting up collateral was intended to ensure the member's silence. For the inner circle, NXIVM had ceased to be about games and training, career-building, socializing, and V-Week.

### **Vanguard: Keith Raniere and the NXIVM Worldview**

When Natalie met Raniere, he lived in a share house with three women, Karen Unterreiner, Kristin Keeffe, and Pam Cafritz: Unterreiner was his former college girlfriend, a specialist in finance; Keeffe would become his legal "attack dog"; and Cafritz, despite her dizzy, carefree personality, was his fixer in matters sexual, particularly procuring abortions for women who became pregnant to him.<sup>35</sup> Keith Raniere, his sexual appetites and worldview, is at the core of all the organizations that he established since Executive Success Programs in 1998. Jness became the base from which he selected his circle of "slaves" (several of whom themselves had slaves as he commanded them to). The key people in DOS were Lauren Salzman and Allison Mack. At the trial Mack claimed that the branding ceremony and the design with the initials of Raniere (and, it was claimed by some, Mack herself) were largely her idea.<sup>36</sup> This seems unlikely as in 2015 Raniere, who was in a secret sexual relationship with Camila Padilla, whom he first had sex with when she was 15 and he was 45, gave her a chain collar and

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<sup>31</sup> Courtney Shea, 'Ladies Who Cult: Celebrities, executives and wealthy heiresses brought into NXIVM's promise of expanded consciousness and female empowerment. Then came the sex slavery, brainwashing and blackmail. Inside an alleged cult for successful women', *Chatelaine* 92, issue 2 (2019), <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=googlescholar&id=GALE%7CA573241856&v=2.1&it=r&sid=sitemap&asid=74e8e667>.

<sup>32</sup> Edmondson, *Scarred*, 132.

<sup>33</sup> Edmondson, *Scarred*, 158.

<sup>34</sup> Edmondson, *Scarred*, 160.

<sup>35</sup> Natalie, *The Program*, 239-240.

<sup>36</sup> Alessa Dominguez, 'What the NXIVM "Sex Cult" Documentaries Don't Say', *Buzzfeed*, 28 October 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/alessadominguez/keith-raniere-nxivm-the-vow-seduced>.



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demanded a “vow of obedience ...for life”, and wrote to her “I think it would for you to own a fuck toy slave for me, that you could groom, and use as a tool, to pleasure me.”<sup>37</sup> Camila was distressed when she found that *Battlestar Galactica* actress Nicki Clyne was wearing the same chain collar; Raniere later explained to Camila that he was initiating a secret sorority, and the members would be “branded with my monogram.” She was not enthused about the branding, asking “You want to burn me?” Berman says Raniere asked, “You don’t want to burn for me?”<sup>38</sup>

It is important to realize that these developments were not known to the outer members of ESP, and the large-scale workshops for those who were climbing the Stripe Path continued. Every year NXIVM celebrated Vanguard Week, and as Vicente’s footage in *The Vow* shows the late-night volley-ball games that Raniere liked to participate in, and the long walks in the wee small hours that he took with favored NXIVM members, were ongoing.<sup>39</sup> A majority of members continued to participate in seminars for Jness, SOP, ESP, and the elite programs that were more recently developed, in acting, art, and other cultural fields. Courtney Shea observes that groups like NXIVM work on two levels. On the first level, “A lot of people (approximately 17,000 over its 20-year run) dabble, taking a handful of expensive courses and then continuing on with their lives.”<sup>40</sup> On the second level, there are those who give their lives to the organization; Mack, for example, had joined to tackle problems holding her back in her acting career. However, she became so committed to Vanguard that she ceased acting entirely. The dangerous aspects of the group remain hidden, because the majority of participants never see, or hear about, them; those who are deeply involved have handed over collateral and find it difficult to discuss problems or leave as a result. However, there is another way to interpret that practice, cynically expressed by journalist Zoë Heller: “that Raniere collected *kompromat* from DOS members ... suggests his psychological coercion techniques were not ... sufficient to keep women acquiescent. A great many people ... met him, saw a sinister little twerp with a center part who insisted on being addressed as ‘Vanguard’, and, sooner or later, walked away”.<sup>41</sup>

Elements of this organizational strategy are reminiscent of Scientology, which is the source of much of Raniere’s ideas and terminology. Scientology’s training programs are termed The Bridge to Total Freedom, and typically dedicated members spend large amounts of money climbing the Bridge.<sup>42</sup> Edmondson’s description of the content of her first ESP workshop, the “Five-Day” training reinforces this impression: teachings were referred to as “the tech”, the scale of parasites resembled Hubbard’s “tone scale”, the practice of having Raniere’s picture in the room and students bowing to it is reminiscent of the prevalence of images of Hubbard in Scientology Orgs, and those who rejected ESP teachings were termed “suppressives”.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Berman, *Don’t Call It A Cult*, 216.

<sup>38</sup> Berman, *Don’t Call It A Cult*, 217.

<sup>39</sup> Palmer, ‘Media Review: NXIVM and #MeToo’, 106.

<sup>40</sup> Shea, ‘Ladies Who Cult’.

<sup>41</sup> Zoë Heller, ‘What Makes a Cult a Cult?’ *The New Yorker*, 12-19 July 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/07/12/what-makes-a-cult-a-cult>.

<sup>42</sup> Stoddard Martin, *Orthodox Heresy: The Rise of ‘Magic’ as Religion and Its Relation to Literature* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1989), 216, 297 suggests that Scientology is an alternative to college/ university education and reflects Hubbard’s lack of formal academic qualifications.

<sup>43</sup> Edmondson, *Scarred*, 41-45

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Further, Bouchey explained why enrolling friends in NXIVM paid courses was ethically fine in terms identical to Hubbard's regarding Scientology; the tech was priceless. It could be given freely, but people do not value what they do not pay for.<sup>44</sup> Cultic Studies scholar Stephen A. Kent has tracked possible ways Raniere could have accessed Scientology materials; Heidi Hutchinson, sister of Gina Hutchinson (mentioned above) took Scientology courses in Los Angeles, and "Raniere, upon (presumably) learning about Heidi's Scientology involvement from Gina, solicited Gina's help in getting her sister to provide Scientology documents to him".<sup>45</sup> Kent mentions Vicente's statement that he never saw Scientology books on NXIVM premises and that Raniere spoke negatively about Scientology, concluding that it is obvious that he would claim NXIVM was more effective.<sup>46</sup> The parallels exist, despite Raniere not being a "squirrel" – the Scientology term for those who take the tech and use it for purposes other than Hubbard's – like other founders of groups influenced by Scientology (Werner Erhard and EST, Ken Dyers and Kenja, and Harvey Jackins and Re-Evaluation Counselling).<sup>47</sup>

Kent notes other parallels: litigation against "enemies"; falsely inflated biography of leader; keeping the "tech" secret; peculiar ideas about ethics; extending from corporate coaching to other areas such as education (Rainbow Cultural Garden Program of children's education and the Lak' Ech social reform program); disregard for human rights (including forced labor and forced abortions); and a host of more minor resemblances such as wealthy donors, an inner circle like a "court" around the leader, and malignant narcissism; deprivation of liberty (forced confinement), and trolling critics.<sup>48</sup> Susan Raine argues that Raniere groomed his followers, and that "at the core of the grooming process is the perpetrator's aspiration to exercise complete control over his victim(s)".<sup>49</sup> When his girlfriends Natalie and Bouchey left, Raniere pursued them in the courts and harassed them in daily life, reflecting the level of control he believed he was entitled to over these women. Raniere promoted his intellect as exceptional ("the smartest man in the world") and expected admiration and reverence from his followers. He was the ultimate authority in NXIVM, and was largely unavailable to casual and short-term members, turning the full force of his charm and influence on the inner circle, who, as Raine notes, "were willing to meet Raniere's psychological, sexual, and financial needs and demands, genuinely believing they were in the presence of greatness."<sup>50</sup>

Raniere was regularly likened to Bill Gates and Steve Jobs in terms of entrepreneurial skills and brilliance, and to Jesus Christ and Buddha in terms of his spiritual insights and salvific powers. As early as 1991, when Toni Natalie first met Raniere, there was talk in his inner circle about "the One", the woman who would bear a child to the guru. Cafritz asked him if Natalie was "family", which he confirmed. She then asked whether Natalie was "the One" and Raniere said she might be.<sup>51</sup> Raniere told women that had sex with him that they may "see

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<sup>44</sup> Edmonds, *Scarred*, 50-52.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen A. Kent, 'Introduction to the *IJCAM Special Edition: Comparative Reflections on Scientology and NXIVM*,' *International Journal of Coercion, Abuse and Manipulation* 1, issue 2 (2021), 6.

<sup>46</sup> Kent, 'Comparative Reflections on Scientology and NXIVM', 6-7.

<sup>47</sup> Cusack, "'Squirrels' and Unauthorized Uses of Scientology", 490-503.

<sup>48</sup> Kent, 'Comparative Reflections on Scientology and NXIVM', *passim*.

<sup>49</sup> Susan Raine, 'Narcissistic Sexual Predation: Keith Raniere's Grooming Strategies in NXIVM.' *International Journal of Coercion, Abuse and Manipulation* 1, issue 2 (2021): 41-59.

<sup>50</sup> Raine, 'Narcissistic Sexual Predation', 47.

<sup>51</sup> Natalie, *The Program*, 25.

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a blue light” as he ejaculated; he also claimed that “sex with him was transformative,” and DOS member India Oxenberg was told “the only way to true enlightenment is by having sex with Keith.”<sup>52</sup> The overwhelming majority of “high ranking, inner circle females were single”, as Edmondson noticed early in her association with NXIVM.<sup>53</sup> The women who were his lovers accepted the “official” girlfriends, Natalie and Bouchey, who were unaware that their relationships with Raniere were not monogamous on his part. In NXIVM, it seemed that Keith Raniere was able to alter reality, and his intimate followers collaborated in this.

### **Branded Slaves: Scandal, Defections, and Criminal Charges**

Edmondson travelled to Albany for her DOS branding ceremony in March 2017. She had become uncomfortable over time with the explanations that Lauren Salzman gave her, for example that she would make a lifetime vow of obedience as Lauren’s slave, that she would wear a chain (anklet, bracelet, necklace, or some other piece of jeweler that would never be removed, and would symbolize her servitude), and that she should “practice daily acts of denial, like not eating sugar or drinking caffeine, or taking a cold shower.”<sup>54</sup> She was then asked to recruit six of her own slaves, was alarmed to learn that slaves were supposed to be filmed while being paddled (beaten) and confined to a cage, and finally discovered that Lauren wanted her to sign over the title deeds of her Vancouver home. The branding ceremony was a traumatic experience. Susan J. Palmer observes that the women did not realize “that the branding ceremony would require being held down, naked, and screaming for twenty minutes of searing pain under a cauterizing pen.”<sup>55</sup> Edmondson returned home and had frank conversations with her good friend Vicente, whose wife Bonnie Piesse had left NXIVM in January 2017.

By May Vicente had decided to leave the group, too. He asked Edmondson if she trusted in Raniere’s claimed abilities? Did she believe his stories? Vicente probed further:

Have you ever seen him write a module? Have you seen any of his credentials, like that IQ test that put him in the *Guinness Book of World Records*? He’s supposed to be a trained classical pianist – have you ever seen him play? Or show off his judo champion skills?<sup>56</sup>

Vicente, Piesse, and Edmondson pieced together their knowledge and realized that there were many women in Raniere’s inner circle who were existing on extremely restricted diets, as he preferred his women to be very thin (preferably under 100 pounds), that DOS existed under his control (via female lieutenants like Mack and Lauren Salzman), and DOS members were being groomed to have sex with Raniere, who at 57 years old was now often not able to perform, but enjoyed giving women oral sex, and watching them have sex with each other.<sup>57</sup> Further, increasingly negative publicity was building; on 5 June 2017 Frank Parlato posted an article

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<sup>52</sup> Susan Raine, ‘Reinventing the Self: NXIVM’s Promises, Secrets, and Lies’, *International Journal of Coercion, Abuse and Manipulation* 1, issue 2 (2021), 75.

<sup>53</sup> Raine, ‘Narcissistic Sexual Predation’, 49.

<sup>54</sup> Edmondson, *Scarred*, 163-165.

<sup>55</sup> Palmer, ‘Media Review: NXIVM and #MeToo’, 110.

<sup>56</sup> Edmondson, *Scarred*, 184-185.

<sup>57</sup> Natalie, *The Program*, 247.

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about DOS on *The Frank Report* website. The mainstream media became interested in the so-called sex cult, and coverage was near-constant from mid-2017. NXIANs left in droves, though the inner circle remained loyal.

Raniere's penchant for underage girls was well-known to his intimates; he had openly questioned the age of consent laws in a video watched by women in a Jness seminar. Raine notes Raniere stated, "that the age of sexual consent is 12 in some countries ... indicating his preference for such rulings."<sup>58</sup> Since his mid-twenties Raniere had pursued and had sex with under-age girls, which in America is statutory rape: he seduced Gina Hutchinson and her friend Gina Melita when both were 15 and he 24; he groomed Daniela Padilla for two years and had sex with her when she was just 18 and he 44; the next year he had sex with her younger sister Camila (mentioned above), who was 15; he also had a relationship with Daniela and Camila's sister, Marianna Padilla, who gave birth to his second child. In the 2000s, according to Toni Natalie, Raniere was having sex with the three Padilla sisters, Cafritz, Bouchey, Unterreiner, Keeffe, Russell, Nancy and Lauren Salzman, Hutchinson, Jeske, and two other women not yet mentioned, Dawn Morrison and Ivy Nevares.<sup>59</sup> There are many others who joined NXIVM in later years and became his sexual partners. After his first child, a son Gaelyn, was born to Keeffe, Raniere founded the Rainbow Cultural Garden Program, an early childhood education system that aimed to "have five caregivers speaking five different languages" per child; Natalie claims these "nannies" were underage "illegal immigrant girls".<sup>60</sup> The annual cost was \$120,000 per annum.

Keeffe became worried about Raniere "experimenting" on Gaelyn and left NXIVM in 2014; Rainbow Cultural Garden also came under scrutiny as it was not registered as either a school or childcare,<sup>61</sup> and because some involved in the program believed it was ultimately aimed at the sexualization of the children. One whistle-blower in Mexico wrote to Natalie in 2013:

Keith tell us that the main goal of Rainbow Cultural Garden is to teach children that sex is beautiful. He said it should be practiced open ... It seems that Keith, Nancy and others are creating a club to teach the young girls to become sexual partners. They believe that sex may release the children and help them be stronger ... Keith says many times that young people should have sex with adults [errors in original].<sup>62</sup>

Several NRM leaders have also had transgressive and criminal ideas about sex: Jim Jones was a Christian minister, yet he had sex with followers of both sexes, was addicted to drugs, and fueled murderous fantasies that culminated in 918 people dying on 18 November 1978. Of these, 907 died of cyanide poisoning, seven of gunshot wounds, and four of cut throats.<sup>63</sup> David Berg's sexual transgressions are more shocking: he promoted the sexual availability of women as a missionary technique; advocated adult-child sex as part of a "sex positive" new religion;

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<sup>58</sup> Raine, 'Narcissistic Sexual Predation', 53.

<sup>59</sup> Natalie, *The Program*, 149-150.

<sup>60</sup> Natalie, *The Program*, 151.

<sup>61</sup> Berman, *Don't Call It A Cult*, 154-156.

<sup>62</sup> Natalie, *The Program*, 217-218.

<sup>63</sup> Carole M. Cusack and James R. Lewis. 'Mass Suicides and Mass Homicides: Collective Violence and the Demise of New Religious Movements.' In Michael Stausberg, Stuart A. Wright, and Carole M. Cusack (eds), *The Demise of Religions: How Religions End, Die or Dissipate* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 176-179.

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and engaged in incest. Raine and Kent note that the *Mo Letters*, which he sent to members, “document his sexual abuse of his granddaughter.”<sup>64</sup> His son with his second wife Maria Fontaine (Karen Zerby), Davidito (aka Ricky Rodriguez), cut the throat of his former nanny Angela Smith, whom he accused of sexually abusing him, and then committed suicide by gunshot wound to the head.<sup>65</sup>

Another newsworthy aspect of the Jonestown story was the role of women in Peoples Temple, in particular the sisters Carolyn Moore Layton and Annie Moore in carrying out the execution of their community. Mary McCormick Maaga has argued that the role of women in Jonestown was minimized by the widespread view that they were “brainwashed” and sexually exploited by the “cult” leader Jones, and also were forced victims of suicide.<sup>66</sup> She states that when Peoples Temple moved to Guyana, Jones was frail and unwell, and that the women took over the management of the Jonestown community. Rebecca Moore argues that “[w]omen received the utilitarian benefits of achieving status, serving as gatekeepers, and influencing policy decisions by having sex with Jones. Women had more power in Peoples Temple than their gender, experience, or training would have allowed outside the movement.”<sup>67</sup> These observations have relevance to NXIVM, in which Ranieri retained final control, but relinquished day-to-day authority to multiple female lieutenants.<sup>68</sup>

“At Nancy Salzman's sentencing, victims described the NXIVM president as Ranieri's fiercely loyal enabler and enforcer. They said she turned a blind eye to his worst atrocities and parroted his theories, including his claims that children are “perfectly happy” having sex with adults and that women experience “freedom” during rape.”<sup>69</sup>

### **Conclusion**

NRM scholars argue that a “cult” is just a religion that is disliked or unpopular (because it is in tension with mainstream society), whereas a “religion” is a cult that has acquired social acceptance (and is therefore not in tension with society).<sup>70</sup> Traditionally there has been hostility between NRM scholars and “cultic studies” scholars, with the former accused of being “cult apologists” and the latter accused of uncritically perpetuating a tabloid narrative about “cult” violence, scandal, and sexual deviance. W. Michael Ashcraft has urged scholars to seek a rapprochement between moderate Cultic Studies scholars and the NRM academic mainstream,

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<sup>64</sup> Susan Raine and Stephen A. Kent, ‘The grooming of children for sexual abuse in religious settings: Unique characteristics and select case studies,’ *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 48 (2019), 186.

<sup>65</sup> Paul Harris, ‘Sex Cult Messiah Turns Killer,’ *The Guardian*, 23 January (2005), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jan/23/usa.paulharris>.

<sup>66</sup> Mary McCormick Maaga, *Hearing Voices of Jonestown* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998).

<sup>67</sup> Rebecca Moore, ‘Is the Canon on Jonestown Closed?’ *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 22, issue 2 (2000), 17.

<sup>68</sup> Eric Spitznagel, ‘How Keith Ranieri lured scores of young women into sex slave cult NXIVM,’ *New York Post*, 17 April (2021), <https://nypost.com/article/how-keith-ranieri-lured-women-sex-cult-nxivm/>.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Gavin, ‘Unsealed Letters Show Keith Ranieri’s Cruelty to Top NXIVM Ally,’ *Times Union*, 12 October 2021, <https://www.timesunion.com/nxivm/article/Unsealed-letters-show-Keith-Ranieri-s-cruelty-to-16527112.php>.

<sup>70</sup> Tara Isabella Burton, ‘What is a Cult?’ *Aeon* (2022), <https://aeon.co/essays/theres-no-sharp-distinction-between-cult-and-regular-religion>.

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noting that both perspectives generate productive research.<sup>71</sup> When analyzing NXIVM, there are many red flags that direct outsiders to argue that the “cult” stereotype is warranted: Raniere is a sex addict, has been convicted of statutory rape, and has a long line of women who have accused him of preying on and raping them when underage. In 1979 William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark argued for new religious movement (or cult) origins being in either the leader’s psychopathology or entrepreneurialism, or in subculture evolution of the potential members as the three main ways that such movements begin.<sup>72</sup> Raniere’s personal psychopathology clearly informs NXIVM, and his entrepreneurial skills also played a role. That there was an audience seeking what he offered cannot be denied. When we ask if NXIVM is a religious group or a cult, one strategy is to draw attention to the fact that the group attracted attention when criminal convictions become a deciding fact.<sup>73</sup>

In the history of religion, it is often noted that Christianity was regarded as a cult and members were accused of perverted activities. By the second century they were suspected of holding worship services that were nocturnal orgies involving incest and indiscriminate sex, and that their rituals involved killing babies and cannibalism.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, there were accusations of sexual perversion; some scholars think it is significant that Christians met in secret, while their sacrament of communion was called a “love feast” and wine signaled intoxication. Christians also ate the body and drank the blood of the Son of God, Jesus.<sup>75</sup> Other scholars think that the charges were just the kind of accusation that was commonly made against anti-social groups who were suspicious. Similar charges were made about other fringe religions in the ancient world, and also were made by Christians against heretical groups in the Middle Ages.<sup>76</sup> It is easier for everyone if NXIVM is neither a religion or a cult. It is true that Raniere created structures that paralleled those of Hubbard, that he presented like Jesus or Buddha to his followers, and taught religious-style concepts.<sup>77</sup> Yet what matters is that NXIVM was a corrupt and law-breaking organization and Raniere is a convicted criminal.<sup>78</sup> It may be that it is impossible to conclude whether the combination of self-help and corporate profit-making taught by Raniere was spiritual, or religious, or both. Nevertheless, NXIVM stands as a warning regarding the potential and actual harms that may result from such a high demand organization.

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<sup>71</sup> W. Michael Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), *passim*.

<sup>72</sup> William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, ‘Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models’, *Sociological Analysis* 40, no. 4 (1979), 283-295.

<sup>73</sup> Dan Adler, ‘The NXIVM Loyalists Are Not Backing Down’, *Vanity Fair*, 11 November (2020), <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2020/11/nxivm-loyalists-keith-raniere>.

<sup>74</sup> Andrew McGowan, ‘Eating People: Accusations of Cannibalism Against Christians in the Second Century’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2, no. 4 (1994), 413-442.

<sup>75</sup> Majastina Kahlos, *Religious Dissent in Late Antiquity 350-450* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>76</sup> R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe 950-1250*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

<sup>77</sup> Lauren Kranc, ‘How NXIVM Seduced Hollywood Stars and America’s Most Powerful Elite Into a Barbaric “Sex Cult”’, *Esquire*, 18 October (2022), <https://flipboard.com/@esquire/binge-watch-1ak2103az/how-nxivm-seduced-hollywood-stars-and-america-s-most-powerful-elite-into-a-barba-a-uy5aG70rT0iieSTsx5BqGQ%3Aa%3A3195373-c74e48ec7c%2Fesquire.com>.

<sup>78</sup> Shayna Jacobs, ‘NXIVM “cult” leader Keith Raniere sentenced to 120 years in prison’, *The Washington Post*, 27 October (2020), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/nxivm-cult-leader-keith-raniere-sentenced-to-120-years-in-prison/2020/10/27/acbf8a54-18aa-11eb-82db-60b15c874105\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/nxivm-cult-leader-keith-raniere-sentenced-to-120-years-in-prison/2020/10/27/acbf8a54-18aa-11eb-82db-60b15c874105_story.html).

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