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Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

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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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Why another NRM journal?

Welcome to 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 20th 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 field as a whole (though some might disagree). Researchers

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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; 2nd 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; 2nd 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 constituted themselves as distinct fields of study with their own periodicals – e.g.,

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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*.

Volume 3, Issue 1 – Editor’s Introduction

What you are reading is the first issue of the Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies which we have had the honor of editing. The WJCS was created by the late Professor Jim Lewis, a veritable force in the study of New Religious Movements (NRMs), with its first issue published in 2021. We are extremely grateful to the School of Philosophy, Wuhan University for choosing us for this task, and we are equally grateful to Professor Carole Cusack (University of Sydney) for her impeccable editing of the transition issue between Professor Lewis’s editorship and ours, as well as for her guidance in helping us complete this issue. Mrs. Nicole Ruskell assisted with the editorial duties, and we extend our heartfelt thanks to her as well. Brian Frastaci provided thorough copy-editing assistance on a tight deadline, for which we are greatly indebted. We would also like to heartily thank Professor Chao Huang and Professor Pan Zhao at Wuhan University for their aid and patience in the production of this issue.

Adam and I enthusiastically agreed to edit the Journal because we believe in the mission Professor Lewis and Wuhan University established for it. We deeply believe in the importance of studying NRMS from an academic perspective (including sociological, but also historical, philosophical, and comparative perspectives) and that university courses on the phenomenon of NRMs are extremely useful for students of religious studies and other fields to understand essential aspects of contemporary societies and individuals. We also believe these studies are an important field in which to establish academic dialogue between Chinese scholars and scholars from other parts of the world, and that courses on NRMs are a great opportunity to experiment with new teaching methods. Finally, like Jim Lewis, we believe it is important to give space to young and emerging scholars.

In light of this, we have included in this issue two special pedagogy-oriented pieces, alongside the usual journal articles and book reviews. Penned by two eminent scholars of NRMs, Hugh Urban and Markus Davidsen, these pieces explore how NRMs can be taught to undergraduates—and what value there is in doing so. In this third decade of the twenty-first century, conversations around minority religions are of paramount importance, and informed discussions must start in the classroom, if they are to start anywhere. We hope that readers find these pieces both provocative and useful in forging our own pedagogies. Looking forward, we strongly encourage the submission of pieces of this type, and we welcome more submissions of this kind.

Before the pedagogical articles, we feature four peer reviewed articles. Steven Foertsch and Heewon Yang explore, through historical research, qualitative interview, and participant observation, often within the theoretical framework of religious organization ecology, the splintering of the Unification Church following its founder’s passing (2012). Eleonora D’Agostino discusses, on the basis of her fieldwork, the conceptualization of animals among

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exponents of contemporary Italian paganism. Karolina Kaleta analyses the popular devotion to Santa Muerte in Mexico according to concepts included in Diana Taylor's performance theory; Kaleta has carried out fieldwork but also offers an historiographical overview of this devotion. With an interdisciplinary and thought-provoking analysis, Christopher Hartney reads two works by contemporary Australian artist Angelica Mesiti through the lens of Carol Duncan's work on art and the secular. Doing so uncovers the complex entanglements of the state, religion, and the "cultic."

Finally, this issue includes five reviews of recently published monographs. The reviews are authored by, respectively, George Chryssides, Seth Harth, Brian Frastaci, Jacques Parker, and Pan Zhao covering a range of topics from Theosophy to the rise of secularism.

We are proud of the breadth of topics covered by our contributors, the diversity of their academic backgrounds, the significant presence of women and young scholars, and the dialogue between different generations of scholars that this issue represents. We are committed to doing even better in the future and hope that the Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies will become a recognized platform for exchange and conversation among scholars and university instructors from China and abroad.

In the coming months, we will renew the editorial board and establish new submission and peer-review guidelines; and we hope to receive numerous high-quality submissions from scholars around the world.

Happy reading!

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Respecting the Animal Spirit: Contemporary Paganism, Animals, and Re-enchantment

Eleonora D'Agostino

Independent Scholar

Abstract

This article addresses the significant development of secularization theory as it emerged from the collaboration of José Casanova and Charles Taylor. In Casanova's approach, he attempts to maintain the conclusions of sociological and religious studies interpretations of contemporary social processes, based on the original secularization theory; at the same time, his deconstruction of the original theory and the further development of its elements offer an interpretative framework that is particularly suited for the examination of public religious dimensions of the East Central European societies following the political system change around 1990. First, I will review Casanova's main theses on secularization and public religion in order to facilitate the argument following it, in which I will examine the role religion plays in different East Central European democracies in relation to the state, party politics and civil society.

Keywords:

José Casanova; Charles Taylor; secularization; sociology of religion; democracy; public religion

1. Introduction

Contemporary paganism is a useful umbrella term to describe a *continuum* of movements and groups that look up to civilizations of the past and/or of “ethnographic interest” to construct their own religious identities¹ and worldviews. Furthermore, the civilizations taken as references are often seen as examples of good practices in terms of experiencing the world and forging lifestyle politics² and political practices in the public arena.

Talking about this social field, a widespread and multi-sited community of practices, means discussing how it was formed and how it absorbed and often re-enchanted socio-political dynamics typical of countercultures (even *ante litteram*),³ as in the case explored in this paper,

¹ Campbell 2020.

² Giddens 1991.

³ D'Agostino 2022a; 2022b.

of contemporary sensibilities surrounding the world of animals and their rights.⁴

From its very beginnings, contemporary paganism has drawn on references to the animal world developed in past civilizations and/or societies of “ethnographic interest”, whose accounts were disseminated within European and North American contexts from the 19th century onward through the narratives of travelers, ethnographers, and folklorists. This process, fostered by an interest in “other” societies – both European and non-European – provided “alternative” imaginaries to dominant models, useful to re-imagine subjectivities and worldviews. European agropastoral societies, societies of the past, and civilizations of “ethnographic interest” appeared, in the eyes of many, as a set of valuable practices to be reclaimed in order to counteract the negative consequences of industrialization and “modernity”.⁵

Within these dynamics, the role of animals changes and assumes other meanings:

- 1) animals and animal remains are often re-interpreted through worldviews divergent from the “hegemonic norms”, derived and drawn from imaginaries of civilizations of the past and/or “ethnographic interest” (that are, because of this, relevant for people who reject those norms);
- 2) animals and their interpretations nourish reflections upon new contemporary ways to see and interpret them, as well as other living beings, in the guise of subjects and peers of humankind in a vaster world.

2. Contemporary paganism and countercultural inspirations

Before we dive into the topic, it’s important to outline what “contemporary paganism” means in this context. Here the term is used as an umbrella category⁶ that describes a range of practices and narratives related to the perception and interpretation of sacredness; often, through processes of reinvention, these draw on the traditions of civilizations of the past and/or of “ethnographic interest”.⁷ These forms of spiritualities promote sacralities associated with categories such as polytheism, animism, shamanism, and so on.

It was in the 19th century that contemporary paganism took on its most defined form, with the establishment of groups such as the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn,⁸ which represented the forerunners of many of the practices and worldviews

⁴ This article examines one of the aspects that emerged during the author’s ethnographic research on contemporary paganism in Italy, which began in August 2019 and is still ongoing. The research employed both a classical research methodology (interviews, field notes, and participation in events) and a netnographic approach, involving the collection of qualitative data from social media. Starting from a small and recently established pagan festival in Val Brembana (Lombardy, Italy), the author investigated the first-, second-, and third-degree relationships of the participants (40 people) in relation to contemporary paganism. In this context, the names of the individuals involved in the research will be anonymized using pseudonyms.

⁵ Urban 2019.

⁶ In this article, contemporary paganism is used as a category that includes multiple movements and identities, following Michael York’s interpretation and analysis, for whom paganism should be seen as a segmented, polycentric, and integrated network, putting emphasis on the commonalities between the various pagan traditions (York 2009). York’s interpretation of the pagan milieu is still prevailing in the academic sphere, and similar approaches to the subject are still promoted in the Pagan Studies field (Castagnetto Alessio – Palmisano – Pannofino 2026: 4–5).

⁷ The concept describes the interest sparked by travelers’ accounts and ethnographic and folkloric studies in European and North American societies of the time. These productions nourished contemporary paganism as an environment to interpret the world and the sacredness from an “alternative” perspective to dominant models (Urban 2019).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

present in today's pagan milieu. In the formation of this social field, the objects and accounts brought to the "West" by archaeologists, anthropologists, and folklorists played a fundamental role. These were tools through which the public could connect with the "extra-European others" and, in return, with the "European others", the world of popular cultures, following a comparativism that also animated the ethno-anthropological debates of the time. The encounter with these "others" was a fruitful field of reflection for all those who did not identify with the hegemonic models existing in the "West", so much so that this relationship with "otherness" – constructed, imagined, and reinvented in continuous processes of meaning – will be a cornerstone for all those seeking examples and possibilities of being different – even giving them some social and political legitimacy – for their "non-conforming identities".⁹

The "countercultural" aspect, in fact, is a constant feature throughout the history of the movement. A famous manifestation and demonstration of this feature became visible in the 1970s, when the aesthetics and poetics of contemporary paganism – especially in its most Wiccan-like guise – met with ecofeminism and environmental activism, through actions such as those of activist Starhawk, who performed, along with other neo-pagans, ritual performances during the *Earth First!* movement protests.¹⁰

It should come as no surprise that contemporary paganism has so congenially interacted with political movements and sensibilities regarding the relationship between humans and nature: among the processes that influenced the "pagan effervescence" of the 19th century, we find industrial society and its social and cultural consequences. In the face of the negative outcomes of industrialization, a shared sensibility developed, expressed by Romanticism and its protagonists, in which past civilizations and agropastoral life assumed the role of examples of healthier lifestyle compared to the hardships, pollution, and "social pathologies" typical of the urban spaces of the time. At the roots of what we recognize today as contemporary paganism, we find all the experiences that nourished the idea of a "nature religion",¹¹ a concept that would have found fertile ground in Europe and North America as an answer to hegemonic paradigms within economy and politics.

Given its creative nature, it is often difficult to define the boundaries of what is and what is not part of contemporary paganism, and it is common for its participants to adopt a syncretic and inclusive approach toward other social fields that position themselves against hegemonic models.¹² Moreover, it is difficult for researchers to investigate this blurred field through statistical methodologies, but, as noticed by the sociologists Marco Castagnetto Alessio, Stefania Palmisano, and Nicola Pannofino, this is a common feature for most part of the statistical research on contemporary paganism worldwide:

"It is difficult to provide an accurate estimate of the number of practitioners who identify with the different movements present in the country. This complexity can also be found in international research and is essentially caused by the heuristic use of categories that do not distinguish between different contemporary pagan movements and New Age movements or other minority religious movements.

⁹ D'Agostino 2022b.

¹⁰ Feraro 2019; Cusack 2009; Lanternari 2003.

¹¹ Clifton 2009.

¹² Castagnetto Alessio – Palmisano – Pannofino 2026: 10–12.

According to data from the Pew Research Center (2025), the contemporary pagan presence in the United States is about 1% of the total population. These data would confirm the Italian counterpart, as calculated by the Centro Studi sulle Nuove Religioni (CESNUR) in Turin for the year 2024. However, these are downward estimates, based on different definitions and not necessarily relevant to our topic of study. The census of contemporary paganism conducted by the Pagan Federation in England and Wales appears more precise (0.7%) and suggests a research framework that will be necessary for future studies of Italian contemporary paganism. However, the deeper significance of neopagan presences in Italy and in the rest of the world does not lie in their quantitative dimension, albeit a growing one, but rather – as we have seen – in their nature as social laboratories, where innovative forms of social, economic, and political proactivity are often pioneered.”¹³

3. Fragmentation and shared coordinates

Contemporary paganism is an extremely fragmented and diversified social field, albeit vast and composed by groups and individuals who often don't even self-identify as belonging to contemporary paganism, deeming this expression ambiguous. This concept is used here for its heuristic value, aligning with the use of this term in academic and popular contexts.¹⁴ Indeed, it is perhaps more useful to refer to this social field as a continuum of movements, groups, and individuals who, despite their differences and contrasts, have four coordinates that represent all the participants:

- 1) Constant reference to civilizations of the past and/or of “ethnographic interest”, perceived as bearers of good practices for the spiritual, philosophical, and socio-political worldviews for today's society.
- 2) Predominant ecocentric approach to the world, which usually leads to actual socio-political actions to profess a paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism.
- 3) Aversion to globalization and to capitalist systems.
- 4) Suspicion (and sometimes outright hostility) toward monotheistic religions, especially when perceived as assuming a dominant and oppressive role.

The coordinates described here, taken together, represent two aspects of the process of re-enchantment¹⁵ that involves contemporary paganism. On the one hand, contemporary paganism, throughout its historical phases, has always tailored its vision of sacredness to the socio-cultural dynamics of the time, often embracing demands that, more or less accurately, could be defined as countercultural or, at the very least, anomalous when compared to dominant paradigms on a local and/or global scale. On the other hand, contemporary paganism proposes and constructs cognitive, symbolic, and practical processes that re-enchant political, cultural, and social dynamics through the sensibilities and worldviews coined and promoted by the milieu itself. One of the most paradigmatic examples of this attitude is James Lovelock, developer of the Gaia Theory, who, as a declared agnostic, always emphasized that Gaia, for him, was a metaphor and not a goddess. Over time, however, he refined his reflection on the popular spiritual

¹³ Ivi 13.

¹⁴ Lewis – Pizza 2009.

¹⁵ Jenkins 2000.

interpretations of his theory and came to appreciate their positive consequences from a social, emotional, and educational point of view.¹⁶

Furthermore – since it has become an extremely popular social field, through a path started in the 1950s and accelerated by the advent of the Internet and, later, social media – worldviews and practices shared inside the milieu have also reached the general public. Contemporary paganism, indeed, has become an ensemble of imaginaries, ideas, and narratives meaningful even for those who, while not identifying as pagans in a religious or spiritual way, use parts of their worldviews to discuss and reflect about contemporary topics and issues such as globalization, climate emergency, and the consequences of the capitalist economic system.¹⁷

To understand such social dynamics, where influences are often intertwined and it is sometimes difficult to discern what influenced what in the first place, it is heuristically useful to think about the re-enchantment of the Earth¹⁸ as a spectrum, whose poles are:

- 1) Secular forms of ecospirituality that involve a concept of sacredness mediated by biophilic perspectives and connected to the idea of a spiritual wellbeing¹⁹ on a psychological and biological level, often including deep ecology's themes.
- 2) Forms of spirituality that revolve around the idea of a “natural religion”; among them, contemporary paganism is a well-known and prominent case study.

Starting from this suggestion, which brings together “ecospiritual sensibilities” on a spectrum, describing them not in opposition but as a large and complex phenomenon (often beyond stereotypical visions of sacredness and religion), it is possible to better understand how contemporary pagan imagery is circulating in different social fields that are part of the aforementioned spectrum.

Indeed, it is not uncommon for environmental activists to use narratives and symbols born in contemporary paganism to construct discourses and imaginaries, leveraging many of the aspects they share with this milieu, including ecocentrism, anti-globalist views, anti-speciesism, etc. In this regard, for example, *Debitum Naturae*,²⁰ an Italian collective of environmental activists who promote their concerns through art and dissemination of scientific and political data about the environmental struggle and the necessity of a paradigm shift from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric worldview, frequently uses symbols and interpretations of the animal world derived from or shared by contemporary pagan fields, despite the fact that a big portion of the participants of the group are not part of the milieu and even dissent towards any form of religious aggregation.

4. Animals against the myth of infinite progress

In the contemporary pagan milieu, animals are constantly present. The title of this article itself refers to the connection between the milieu and animal realm: it is a quote from the long conversations I had with two members of the contemporary pagan world in Italy, Jane and Michael, who – describing themselves as close to animistic visions of reality – engage in art and

¹⁶ Taylor 2010: 76.

¹⁷ D'Agostino 2022b.

¹⁸ With this concept, we refer to all the phenomena of re-enchantment that involve the theme of the relationship between humans and nature, in an ecologist and/or ecocentric perspective.

¹⁹ Heintzman – Mannell 2003; D'Agostino – Letardi 2023.

²⁰ For more information about the collective see their official website: www.debitumnaturae.it.

craftsmanship that involve the use of animal remains (bones, teeth, horns, etc.) found in nature. From their point of view, it is essential for the spirits of deceased animals to “give their consent” to the use of their remains, an aspect that both Jane and Michael investigate through ritual practices (especially when it comes to skulls).

On the one hand, Jane and Michael highlight the importance and necessity of addressing animal remains, which are handled with respectful intentions and awareness of their spiritual component, for a shared and broad vision of the nature of the world and the universe, which are perceived as fully permeated by entities and spirits. On the other hand, however, they seem to interpret the animal world as very similar and close, if not identical, to the human one; in other words, animals are ascribed will, knowledge, and rights that are, in fact, usually attributed to humans in a big part of current “Western” society.

In Jane and Michael’s speeches and narratives, the need to assimilate and bring the human world closer to the animal one emerges very often, as if the separation between the two worlds – often blamed on the concept of technological progress, so prevalent in contemporary times – is a fracture that is necessary to recombine, re-valuing figures such as the shapeshifter or the hybrid, related to shamanistic phenomena and to what these phenomena have become in social and religious fields not connected to their historical origins in Siberian civilizations.

Jane and Michael also dress in clothes with animal features or that recall ferality during the sacred fire ritual of Orobica Lughnasadh, the pagan festival they organize in Camerata Cornello, a mountain locality near Bergamo in the region of Lombardy in Italy. The festival’s logo is based on a rock carving from Massi della Camisana (mountain rocks famous for ancient inscriptions dating as far back as the 5th century BCE), interpreted by some as the depiction of a ritual practitioner surrounded by canids. For both Jane and Michael, indeed, it is important to aesthetically conjure up what the ancient officiants might have been – following suggestions derived by historical sources – shamanistic phenomena and ideas of hybrid features that mix humanity and ferality.

A novel in a storybook written and published by Michael clearly shows worldviews nourished and constructed by a big part of the contemporary pagan milieu around these topics: the story tells the love between Ceol, a woman with a beautiful voice able to sing “animal songs”, and Vuk (“wolf” in Croatian), the Wolf King, who – disguised as a wayfarer – must travel to bring an important message to the world. From their love a child is born, Farkas, who inherits the nature of both, but never meets his father because of the important mission. Vuk travels to the most remote territories telling the truth about what is coming:

“It’s coming... Cars and exhausts, gray concrete, cold steel, factories yelling hellish screams and wails. Progress is coming! I saw it. I pushed myself among the men, changing my appearance so as not to be discovered. I cried with a broken heart in my chest, but I didn’t give up; I couldn’t give up, because I am Vuk, the Wolf King, the son of the Moon, the last hope of the world.”²¹

The story, then, elaborates on the Progress arriving in the urban spaces, where the Strangers, Progress’s followers, convince the inhabitants to join them, and Ceol – overwhelmed by the

²¹ [Original Italian version] “Sta arrivando... Macchine e scarichi, grigio cemento, freddo acciaio, fabbriche urlanti grida e lamenti infernali. Il Progresso sta arrivando! Io l’ho visto. Mi sono spinto fra gli uomini, mutando il mio aspetto per non farmi scoprire. Ho pianto col cuore distrutto in petto, ma non mi sono arreso; io non potevo arrendermi, perché sono Vuk, il Re Lupo, il figlio della Luna, l’ultima speranza del mondo.”

events – stops singing.

“The Strangers built houses of steel and concrete, then other Strangers razed and rebuilt [the city]. The Strangers were organized, industrious as gears. They acted systematically, issuing laws in their favor, forcing their Progress onto everyone. The green of the woods became the black of the streets. The stone and wooden houses were replaced by sterile buildings, veritable urban monsters. The voice of the river was drowned out by industrial noises, the water became undrinkable, and the animals died, carried away by the waves, seething toxic foam. ‘It’s the price you pay for Progress!’ The inhabitants repeated, similar now in appearance and manners to the Strangers. Even the wolves around the town fled away, like shadows in the night. Nobody was someone anymore, just something. Ceol sang her last song – something poignant and nostalgic – before giving up and closing herself, voiceless, in silence.”²²

Eventually, Vuk sacrifices himself to save the life of Farkas, attacked by the Strangers, and the child is welcomed by his wolf brothers, with whom – after many years – he returns to the city, making the Strangers flee and bringing back light and beauty; and Ceol starts singing again.

This novel, full of well-known tropes, is a significant example in two regards:

- 1) Fantastic and speculative narratives within contemporary paganism play an essential role in transmitting and consolidating over time visions and worldviews, such as the relationship between humanity, fertility, and nature;
- 2) Literary and artistic narratives are among the most used tools to re-semantize and re-enchant social and political discourses.

5. Animals as symbols

Practices, aesthetics and narratives like those of Jane and Michael are common among contemporary pagans. Although, as previously mentioned, the field is extremely fragmented, complex, and highly affected by variations regarding practices and interpretations – often harboring an eclectic and inclusive disposition to blend multiple currents and traditions – animals, shapeshifters, and ecocentric worldviews are a constant reference. And art and craftsmanship promoted and created inside the contemporary pagan milieu are one of the most evident ways in which these practices, aesthetics, and narratives emerge.

For example, animal remains are used to create jewelry or objects, even not necessarily for ritual purposes; this shows that creators and potential buyers are driven by similar behavior and worldviews around the natural world.

While practices and behavior vary from participant to participant, animals are always meant to be respected, with participants recognizing their subjectivities, emotions, and consciousness.

²² [Original Italian version] “Gli Sconosciuti costruirono case di acciaio e cemento, poi altri Sconosciuti rasero al suolo e ricostruirono [la città]. Gli Sconosciuti erano organizzati, operosi come ingranaggi. Agivano in maniera sistematica, impartendo leggi a loro favore, obbligando chiunque al loro Progresso. Il verde dei boschi divenne il nero delle strade. Le casette di pietra e legno furono sostituite da sterili palazzi, dei veri mostri urbani. La voce del fiume fu soffocata dai rumori industriali, l’acqua divenne imbevibile e gli animali morivano, trasportati via dai flutti, ribollenti schiume tossiche. ‘È il prezzo da pagare per il Progresso!’. Ripetevano gli abitanti, ormai simili nell’aspetto e nei modi agli Sconosciuti. Persino i lupi attorno al paese fuggirono via, come ombre nella notte. Nessuno era più qualcuno, ma solo qualcosa. Ceol cantò il suo ultimo canto – qualcosa di struggente e nostalgico – prima di rassegnarsi e chiudersi, muta, nel silenzio.”

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In an interview, Isabella – one of the leading artists in Italy in the field of macabre art on animal remains, whose spiritual identity is influenced by the idea of a paleolithic shamanism²³ – reported that she treats bone remains with fumigations of white sage. She also refuses to create artworks that could violate the dignity of the animal, and frequently draws inspiration from subjects such as prehistoric cave paintings. Furthermore, Jon, another artist who works with animal bone art and who, like Isabella, identifies with the idea of paleolithic shamanism, spoke of the importance of knowing exactly where a bone comes from and what its story is. In this regard, he told an anecdote:

“Once a friend of mine said to me: ‘Look, I hunt and you know it, I have this hawk skull to give you’, and I said ‘Okay, give it to me.’ And in that moment, when I cleaned it and then held the skull of that bird in my hand, I immediately wrote to him: ‘Don’t give me skulls like this anymore.’ Because I felt in that skull a lot, a lot, a lot of anger, and I added to my friend: ‘I’m not asking you how this animal could have died. So please don’t tell me anymore that you have skulls like this, because I’m not interested in it.’ And moreover, to this hunter friend, I told him, ‘If by chance you find remains of carcasses around, that’s fine, that’s fine with me.’ And indeed, one day, he told me that while wandering through the woods he had found a nutria skull, which was already perfectly clean. And indeed, I told him: ‘I’m fine with this, and therefore I’m fine with having it, but animals should never, never, be killed just because you know that you have a friend who can work on this, this, and this.’”²⁴

Jon – who works with the archaeological park of Naquane, in Val Camonica (Lombardy, Italy) – is fascinated and inspired by paleolithic artworks on rocks and ancient animal bones; his art and spiritual imaginary are profoundly influenced by them, too. For Jon, a bone is a bridge between life and death; it encapsulates both worlds, inspiring a sense of sacredness; bones are more than a mere tool for artistic practices.

The examples reported here, which describe a clear ethical behavior linked to ecocentric approaches to reality toward animals and their remains, show a re-enchanting process that involves modern sensibilities around animals and environments as bearers of rights and will. This worldview also inspires spiritual interpretations of incidents and mishaps that involve artists and crafters that show a potential disrespectful attitude around animal remains.²⁵

²³ Here, by “paleolithic shamanism”, we mean a form of contemporary spirituality that follows the interpretation that some academics advanced about prehistoric sacred practices. Such interpretations, based on comparisons, sometimes even very bold (as the ones in André Leroi-Gourhan’s book published in 2001, *Les religions de la Préhistoire*), between prehistory and the societies of “ethnographical interest”, gave birth to various spiritual beliefs that are currently included under the umbrella term “contemporary paganism”.

²⁴ [Original version in Italian] “Una volta un mio amico [cacciatore] mi fa: ‘Guarda, io lo faccio e tu lo sai, ho questo teschietto di falco da darti,’ e io gli faccio ‘Vabbè, dammelo.’ E in quel momento, quando l’ho ripulito e quando poi l’ho tenuto in mano il teschietto di quel volatile, gli ho scritto subito: ‘Non darmi più teschi come questo.’ Perché sentivo in quel teschio tanta, tanta, tantissima rabbia, e ho aggiunto al mio amico: ‘Non ti chiedo come questo animale possa essere morto. Quindi per favore non dirmi più che hai teschi di questo tipo, perché la cosa non mi interessa.’ E in più, a questo amico cacciatore, gli ho detto ‘Se per caso tu trovi in giro resti di carcasse, va bene, questo mi sta bene.’ E infatti, un giorno, mi ha detto di aver trovato girando per i boschi un teschio di nutria, che era già perfettamente pulito. E infatti, gli ho detto: ‘Questo mi sta bene, e quindi mi sta bene averlo, però che non vengano mai e poi mai uccisi animali solo perché sai che hai un amico che può lavorare questo, questo e questo.’”

²⁵ D’Agostino – Sperduti 2022.

Even though every aspect of flora and fauna is re-enchanted and interpreted through the processes described, it is animals that historically bring with them a complex and layered symbolism from a transcultural perspective – such as with deer, bears, and wolves – that most often influence the iconography and narratives connected to the re-enchantment of the Earth, shaping contemporary pagan taste and aesthetics. This has also become the subject of self-deprecating irony on how some characteristic narratives could negatively affect the perception of contemporary paganism by general society today, thanks also to the influence of social media and of the entertainment industry.²⁶ In this regard, a pagan who intended to criticize the commodification that has involved contemporary paganism for decades,²⁷ leading a large number of people to define themselves as pagans without much knowledge or depth, stated: “What a coincidence – they are all called Björn and have the bear or the wolf as their spiritual animal.”

This ironic and critical remark shows how the extremely positive views of ferality and the animal world – seen as a wild essence that humanity should reclaim – have entered so deeply into popular culture that they have strongly shaped the stereotypes surrounding contemporary paganism and its affiliates.

6. Animal advocacy²⁸ and re-enchantment

In the previous pages, as well in the extant scholarly literature, contemporary paganism has been discussed as a case study in order to explore two aspects of the phenomenon of re-enchantment. On the one hand, contemporary paganism has been enriched with narratives centered on reflections and analysis (countercultural, too) around the relationship between humankind and environment, in addition to interpretations of civilizations of the past and/or of “ethnographic interest” as examples of good practices about this relationship. On the other hand, however, the contemporary pagan milieu re-semanticizes, in spiritual fashion, many aspects of contemporary society, such as environmental crisis, anti-capitalist movements, etc.²⁹

It is not surprising, then, that modern sensibilities linked to animal advocacy have entered contemporary paganism’s re-enchantment process.

Furthermore, animal advocacy is born by social and cultural inputs that contributed to the emergence of contemporary paganism. Indeed, according to the sociocultural anthropologist Sabrina Tonutti, “the strong sense of protection toward animals that marked the rise of the broader animal advocacy movement grew during the same historical period in which humanitarianism, evangelicalism, and Romantic poetry began to reshape the manners and customs of the time,”³⁰ and in reference to “the development of this 19th-century ‘way of feeling’ and the corresponding social movement occurred, it should be recalled, within a context of widespread industrialization.”³¹ These social and political tendencies led to reflections on the negative outcomes of industrialization itself, the establishment of a strong bond with pets, the

²⁶ Aloï 2009.

²⁷ Ezzy 2001.

²⁸ Here, by “animal advocacy”, we refer to all processes and socio-political practices that focus on the sensibility towards animals, their suffering and their rights; we are aware, however, that within the animal advocacy phenomenon we can find different visions and points of views, paradoxically including the very rejection of the term “animal advocacy”.

²⁹ D’Agostino 2022a.

³⁰ Tonutti 2007: 39.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

emergence of the concept of “compassion,” the widespread fear and suspicion towards technology applied to medicine and science, the spread of vegetarianism as a response to the problems of malnutrition and as a reformist solution to the miserable conditions of the working classes, and the influence of humanism in its numerous forms (anti-slavery, women’s rights, etc.³²).

In sum, contemporary paganism and animal advocacy share some historical, social, and political grounds; and they were also rooted in Romantic visions that saw the past and the encounter with the “otherness”³³ as the starting point for new interpretations of the relationship between humans and nature.

Stemming from similar socio-political needs, the worldviews of animal advocacy have assumed an important role within the contemporary pagan milieu, which have re-invented and re-enchanted anti-speciesism, the choice of predominantly plant-based diet, animal rights, etc.

Moreover, widespread imaginaries of the relationship between “non-Western others” and “Western others” with nature and animal world – re-invented and shaped in the “West”, assuming the role of stereotypes such as the myth of “noble savage” or the idea of “primitive humans in full contact with nature” – have influenced the construction of identities and narratives inside the contemporary pagan universe. For practitioners of contemporary paganism, in fact, European folklore and histories that involve agro-pastoral worldviews and practices, as well as what is testified by the approaches to the world elaborated in extra-European contexts, represent an ensemble of poetics and aesthetics for creating and inventing new identities, politics, and societies.

All these influences merged with countercultural movements in the 1970s, when animal advocacy, deep ecology, and ecofeminism served as additional springboards for the re-enchantment processes cited above.³⁴ This legacy is still alive, reshaping itself in to new ways to socially answer the present and future ramifications of contemporary hegemonic politics and economics.

7. Conclusions

This article analyzed how the animal world is re-enchanted and narrated by contemporary pagans, influencing the imaginaries related to the re-enchantment of the Earth as a larger phenomenon that involves contemporary paganism itself. The contemporary pagan milieu re-signifies, from a spiritual perspective, socio-political dynamics linked to the relationship between humankind and environment, and the emergence of ecospirituality, the birth of deep ecology, and animal rights movements. This social field is also a product of countercultural boosts that often share narratives, aesthetics, and practices with the aforementioned socio-cultural dynamics. These boosts are a reaction to historical processes, sometimes accompanied by negative consequences such as industrialization, the capitalist system, and globalization. Such a reaction has been frequently nourished by reflections and thoughts around “otherness”, encountered in the past or in civilizations of “ethnographic interest”, re-invented as an ensemble of possible answers and

³² Ibid., 86–87.

³³ “Otherness” refers here to the ensemble of practices, worldviews, and symbols belonging to non-hegemonic models in the European and North American societies, such as rural civilizations, as well as civilizations of general “ethnographic interest”.

³⁴ Lanternari 2003.

solutions to the problems of the present.

Following these assumptions, the words of the ethologist and philosopher Roberto Marchesini and the sociocultural anthropologist Sabrina Tonutti regarding what animals represent for contemporary “Western” societies provide an interesting point of view, open to new and further suggestions:

“We are accustomed to thinking of modern Western culture as the triumph of rationality and the defeat of those legacies that once fueled magical thinking. In reality, contemporary imagination is far from having freed the animal from its magical meanings and, in particular, from its sacred use. Even today, at the heart of hyper-technological Western metropolises, amidst the frantic pace of the age of information and globalization, humans still perform magical rites, sacrifices, and acts of divination through animals, using them whenever they must face the challenge of the unknown. [...] [H]umans continue to need the animal as a reference point in their quest for knowledge – or rather, to build solid foundations for their attempts to cross the boundaries of the known.”³⁵

Contemporary paganism has been inspired since the 19th century by accounts and collecting practices related to civilizations of the past and of “ethnographic interest” that represent other ways to interpret and to experience the world, and by intellectual and artistic movements that professed the need to “return to nature,” often in open opposition to dominant religious paradigms. Within these dynamics, animals – the closest to humans among all living beings – have always played a central role, representing the feral counterpart of humankind when discussing encounters and clashes involving the anthropic space and the cultural space.

Within the contemporary pagan milieu, the animal world is invested with symbolic, cultural, and spiritual meanings, and it appears as a recurrent element in narratives about the meeting of humanity and natural wildness. Aesthetics, poetics, and artistic practices within contemporary paganism, in fact, are enriched with references to shapeshifters and human-animal hybrids, involving features taken from historical polytheisms and shamanistic scenarios (even those reinvented by popular culture) with the aim to contrast the negative outcomes of “modernity”.

³⁵ Marchesini – Tonutti 2019: 57.

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Religious Organization Ecology and Schism in the Contemporary Unification Church

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Abstract

Emergent religious groups (frequently referred to as new religious movements) are constantly changing over time, and it is often difficult for academics to follow the many shifts of the tide. One such major change currently underway is a bitter schism within the Unification movement, which has received consistent scholarly attention in the past. Up until this point, though, there has been little academic work focusing exclusively on the ongoing split, and the various organizational reasons as to why it has occurred. Through historical content, qualitative interview, and participant observation analysis of the contemporary Unification movement, we rectify this omission. Findings such as niche mechanics suggest that religious organization ecology is a relevant theory to understand schism in religious organizations and could help reintroduce structure and comparison to cultural studies of religion.

Keywords

Unification Church, Unificationism, Unification Movement, World Peace and Unification Sanctuary, Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, Family Peace Association, Sanctuary Church, Global Peace Foundation, Schism, Religious Economies, Organizational Ecology, Religious Organization Ecology.

Introduction

The Unification Church (formally known as the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, later as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, and pejoratively as the “Moonies”) was founded officially by Reverend Sun Myung Moon on May 1, 1954. The Unification Church is recognized by sociologists as an emergent religious group or new religious movement due to its novel beliefs and relatively high tension with external society (Bromley and Melton 2012; Melton 2004; Stark and Finke 2000; Finke and Stark 2005; Iannaccone 1988). The movement is notable for its relative tension with society, especially during the “cult wars” era of the 1980s to early ’90s. Its theology is a syncretic blend of Korean

ancestor worship and Christian messianism. Mass wedding ceremonies are one of its most notable rituals. The Unification Church claims active membership in 192 countries (Melton 2017), and three million members worldwide (District of Columbia Courts 2021).

After Reverend Sun Myung Moon's death in 2012, the Unification Church splintered into three major groups: the mainline Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, the World Peace and Unification Sanctuary, and the Family Peace Association. The schism of the Unification Church was generated by complex social processes, struggles over authority, and ideologies that sat heavily over the congregation over the final years of Reverend Moon's life. These schismatic groups have essentially been ignored in sociology of religion schism literature (for exceptions, see Introvigne 2017; Chryssides 2017). This makes an update imperative to the field, so that this and many other gaps in the understanding of emergent religious group schisms are reported.

Using a case study of the Unification movement, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, and the World Peace and Unification Sanctuary organizations, we explain the contribution of *religious organization ecology* (ROE) theory to describe this recent schism. This theoretical framework is then reinforced by evidence from inductive historical content analysis, qualitative interview, and participant observation methods. The conclusion discusses the importance of continued study on the Unification movement, and how religious organization ecology could assist in reintroducing structure and comparison to cultural analyses of contemporary religious organizational form (Pitchford et al. 2001).

A ROE Schismatic Framework

Emergent Religious Groups

The term “new religious movement” (Ellwood Jr. 1985; Barker 2022) has a long history of scholarly attention, but often this terminology does not capture the full nuanced position of any given organizational context in time. The very definition of “new religious movement” is a subject of contestation in application, with some scholars suggesting that the actual “newness” of a belief system confers NRM status (post-1940s), with others pointing to organizational form, stigmatization, etc.

Regardless, the term itself downplays the importance of organizations in favor of “movements,” when in reality organizational-ecological considerations are imperative to understand the survival and propagation of religious groups (Scheitle 2007), including *avant-garde* religious groups (Foertsch 2022a, 2022b). In particular, conversions (central to the “movement” epistemology) are ultimately related to organizational tactics at securing membership resources, which then generates the appearance of a “movement.”

Additionally, NRM literature in the sociology of religion specifically is a nebulous concept that appears within multiple paradigms, such as religious economies, secularization, and cultural schematic frameworks (Barker 1993; Richardson 2021; Prophet 2016; Wessinger 2012; etc.). Wholesale integration of the study of NRMs has been attempted by religious economies perspectivist through the process of “church and sect,” where higher-tension movements (such as emergent groups) are labeled as “sects” (Stark and Finke 2000; Finke and Stark 2005; Iannaccone 1988) or “cults.” “Sect” could be considered an oversimplification of the plurality found within the upper boundaries of the religious demands curve, and “cult” is a non-academic

pejorative toward atypical religious organizations (Melton 2004).

In the end, “new religious movement” is a label near-exclusively categorized by negatives—“what they are not.” This allows scholars to capture religious groups as diverse as Wicca, ECKANKAR, Santería, Christian Science, etc. The commonality appears to be a *deviation from the environmental norm or typical religious institution/organization schema*.¹ As such, for our analytic purposes, the theoretical position of Bromley and Melton (2012) is taken as an innovation.

In an article titled “Reconceptualizing Types of Religious Organizations,” Bromley and Melton (2012) outline a typology of religious groups, based on relative tension with the external environment. They name four types of religious organizations: “dominant,” “sectarian,” “alternative,” and “emergent.”² Emergent groups are located outside the accepted boundaries of organizational religion and seek to gain legitimacy as a religious tradition. They are categorized by their “outsider” status, typically indicated by rejection by the outside world, high tension with the external environment, nonconformity to societal expectation of religious organizational form, and persecution (Bromley and Melton 2012: 7; Melton 2004; Foertsch 2022b, 2025). Thus, their societal label is “religiously deviant.” A good example of this organizational type would be the Church of Scientology (Westbrook 2019) or Satanism (Foertsch 2022a, 2022b; Laycock 2020). For the purposes of this paper, the Unification groups analyzed are considered emergent. This is largely due to consistent discrimination faced by the Unificationists from secular authorities in multiple countries.³

There is variation among emergent groups. The term includes groups as different as the Church of Scientology, the Church of Satan, and the Twelve Tribes of Israel, for instance. Even within the Unification movement, there are differences. We contend that these differences are best explained by religious organization ecology theory.

Religious Organization Ecology (ROE) Theory

To elucidate the schism and the many differences between the Family Federation (Hak Ja Han’s group) and the Sanctuary Church (Hyung Jin “Sean” Moon’s group), we integrate religious economies, new institutionalism, and organizational ecology theories. From religious economies theory (Stark and Finke 2000; Finke and Stark 2005; Iannaccone 1988), we draw upon the religious demands curve, consistent demand for religious goods, tension/commitment, impact of environmental regulation, and the consequences of authority and doctrine (Starke and Dyck 1996). From new institutional theory (Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Foertsch 2022c, Sutton and Chaves 2004), we derive the ideas of structural isomorphism, charismatic/legitimate authority, and elite innovation. From organizational ecology (Hannan and Freeman 1977; Scheitle 2007;

¹ In the U.S., this deviance is from the expected congregational Protestant model/schema, which is not uniform to all religious belief systems. These contradictions have been noticed and pointed out in the past perceptively by Edgell (2012), Madsen (2009), and Cadge (2004). See also Melton (2004) for a deep discussion of the concept of “new religion.”

² For some examples, *dominant* would be exemplified by the Catholic Church, *sectarian* groups by the Calvary Chapel, and *alternative* groups by the Kabbalah Center (Bromley and Melton 2012).

³ Reverend Moon was arrested for tax evasion and conspiracy in 1981 and was sentenced to prison in the U.S. He served thirteen months in a federal prison before his release. Reverend Moon was also banned entry to multiple countries in Europe, and even faced criticism at the hands of native Protestant groups in his home country of South Korea. Recent developments regarding the assassination of former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe have led to intense government scrutiny regarding the Family Federation’s dealings.

Scheitle and Dougherty 2008; Finke and Scheitle 2009), we employ concepts of organizational response, resource competition and dependency, niche expansion and contraction, niche specialization and generalization, and environmental conditions. The outcome is a theory coined by Foertsch (2022b) called *religious organization ecology* or ROE, based on research of other emergent religious groups (Satanism and Setianism).⁴

Religious organization ecology (ROE) enhances the theoretical synthesis initially proposed by Scheitle (2007; Scheitle and Dougherty 2008; Finke and Scheitle 2009) with data from “sectarian” religious group schisms (Foertsch 2022b). By consistently holding a focus on schismatics at the highest level of environmental tension (*emergent*—Bromley and Melton 2012) on the demand curve, the wedding of specifically religious economies and organizational ecology theory is reinforced through analyses demonstrating the exclusive effect of *both* competition mechanics and niche on the production of schism (isomorphic organizational form). Thus, ROE cements Scheitle’s (2007) contribution to the literature and extends it, suggesting that religious economies, new institutionalism, or organizational ecology theories cannot by themselves provide a full explanation for individual religious choices and institutional manifestation. By synthesizing them under one umbrella perspective, some of the shortcomings of religious economies (organizational form), new institutionalism (environmental impact), and organizational ecology (individual choice) are buttressed.

Under the umbrella of ROE, the Unification movement and its schismatic organizations compete on the *religious demand curve* for organizational resources to maintain and grow its presence (Stark and Finke 2000; Finke and Stark 2005). The religious demand curve posits that there is a consistent demand for spiritual or religious goods, and that religious organizations meet this demand as “suppliers.” Individuals have preferences for higher or lower tension religious goods, and these are reflected in the type of religious organizations or movements they affiliate with or disaffiliate from. The supply of religious goods is impacted by the *environmental conditions* in which this interaction occurs—for example, high-tension religious goods may be inaccessible to individuals due to national laws banning specific religious organizations. Religious organizations may develop different niche specialties within their competitive environment in order to maximize resources, negotiate tension, and regulate membership commitment (Iannaccone 1988).

Religious organizations have an aspiration for fitness and ultimately niche domination. Attempts to generalize may lead to *organizational stretching*. Organizational stretching is when a generalist organization attempts to expand beyond its initial exclusivity to capture more resources, bringing them into competition with niche specialists. This is considered in religious economies theory a “sect-to-church” shift, which is associated with professionalization of clergy and lower tension with the society (Finke and Scheitle 2009). Accordingly, concessionary changes in beliefs and doctrine are typical during these periods (Stark and Finke 2000; Finke and Stark 2005; Starke and Dyck 1996). We could consider these innovations a function of structural

⁴ In two studies on left-hand path groups, Foertsch studied schism mechanics. Testing theories largely developed to explain Protestant Christianity, he suggests that similar trends can be found in the history of the Church of Satan, Temple of Set, and the Satanic Temple. By using the “exception” to “prove” the rule, Foertsch then goes on to suggest a general theory of religious organizational form—religious organization ecology. See Foertsch (2022a, 2022b).

isomorphism⁵ and conformity (Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Foertsch 2022c). Additionally, the new institutionalist perspective synthesizes well here with religious economic viewpoint on elite innovation and the impact of charismatic or legitimate authority (Sutton and Chaves 2004; Richardson 2021; Prophet 2016; Barker 1993).

Institutionalization (or sect-to-church) also leads to less strictness and an increase in free-riding, which is when a member utilizes religious goods but does not contribute to the organizational resource pool (Iannaccone 1992, 1998). This leads some members to disagree with the authority and direction of existing current leaders. Authority disagreements are thus translated into doctrinal disputes (Starke and Dyck 1996), and individuals choose to reassert the earlier beliefs and distinctiveness that initially drew them to their organization (Foertsch 2022a). These authority disputes also have ramifications for organizational (or isomorphic) form and fitness. Normally discussed in terms of charismatic authority within the institutionalist perspective (Sutton and Chaves 2004; Richardson 2021; Prophet 2016; Barker 1993), these changes also allow for schismatic groups to establish themselves as niche specialists (Scheitle 2007; Foertsch 2022a) by targeting specific resources, beating out the generalist organization. In summary, institutionalizing religions are prone to schism—and these authority disputes are rationalized through doctrine.

ROE theory ideally does several things for our analysis, which grounded theory and other cultural analyses do not. First, it allows for an inductive and comparative research program analyzing how structural forces (such as environmental conditions) directly impact lived experience (Pitchford et al. 2001; Ammerman 2015) (in this case, of schism). Second, ROE performs the function of allowing phenomenological experience to influence the creation of institutional response (i.e., elite or individual agent influence, conformity to isomorphism, etc.—see Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Hannan and Freeman 1977; Foertsch 2022c; or charisma and new institutionalism—see Sutton and Chaves 2004; Richardson 2021; Prophet 2016) while still factoring in the analytical importance of generalizability and structure. This allows culturally embedded arguments to respond meaningfully to charges of a lack of empiricism.

ROE theory synthesizes emergent religious groups, religious economies, new institutionalism, and organizational ecology into one paradigm. Although previously explored in piecemeal, this theoretical synthesis has yet to be applied to a religious organization in full. Thus, informed by ROE theory and past research (Bromley and Melton 2012; Pitchford et al. 2001; Scheitle 2007; Foertsch 2022a; Foertsch 2022b), our primary propositions guiding our case study are:

Proposition 1: Institutionalizing religions will be prone to schism (the religious economies and isomorphic perspective).

Proposition 2: Schism occurs due to disagreements over legitimate authority, which is then retroactively rationalized through doctrine (the new institutionalism and charismatic/legitimate authority perspective).

Proposition 3: Organizational attempts at niche domination are prone to stretching and thus schism, with schismatic groups operating as specialist organizations within an existing or new niche in the religious market (the organizational ecology perspective).

⁵ “Isomorphism refers to the way in which organizations mirror themselves in rationalization, narrative construction, organizational form, and power structure—particularly in the case of weaker or smaller organizations modeling themselves after hegemonic examples.” (Foertsch 2022c: 4)

These propositions are reproduced from a study by Foertsch (2022a) on Satanism, another emergent group. It is important to note that these propositions are both theoretically and empirically interrelated—as one example, charismatic authority and legitimacy could be impacted by environmental tension and membership commitment (Scheitle and Dougherty 2008; Finke and Scheitle 2009). The propositions are thus Weberian ideal types (1978). The purpose of synthesis is to combine seemingly disparate theoretical explanations on schism into the holistic perspective of religious organization ecology. By replicating Foertsch’s (2022a) findings on Satanism with a new emergent case, ROE theory and its propositions will yield greater generalizability, which could then be extended to non-emergent cases. Thus, with these propositions set, we now turn to our methodology.

Methodology

The present study incorporates a variety of qualitative research methods, which is replicated from Foertsch’s studies on Satanism and Setianism (2022a, 2022b). A content analysis of Unification-related documents was done between April 2021 and December 2022. Key resources in this process were found in an online archive of primary sources related to Sun Myung Moon, FFWPU, and the Unification Church (www.tparents.org). This website publicly hosts a startling amount of historical documentation cataloguing every step of the schismatic process (Moon 2010; Moon 2010; Balcomb 2013; Kim and Balcomb 2015). Additional resources on the Family Federation were pulled from Unification Theological Seminary publications: the formal *Journal of Unification Studies* (Mickler 2013, 2014, 2015, 2022) and the informal “Applied Unificationism Blog” (Mickler 2015b, 2016).⁶

To mediate bias within pro-Family Federation sources, historical accounts were also pulled from schismatic organizations and followers led by Hyun Jin (Preston) and Hyung Jin (Sean) Moon. Two key sources from Hyun Jin’s supporters were Jongsuk Kim’s *Split of the Unification Movement* (2017) and *Truth Shall Prevail* by Kwak (2019). Although these sources were undoubtedly in favor of Hyun Jin’s leadership, they provide a helpful counterbalance to the pro-Family Federation perspective.

For documentation on Hyung Jin’s Sanctuary Church, their website (<https://www.sanctuary-pa.org/>) was a crucial resource (Moon 2015a, 2015b). Many historical primary accounts can be found here, ranging from Hyung Jin’s sermons to Sun Myung Moon’s past proclamations. Hyung Jin Moon also has authored several books highlighting his own perspective, one of which is used (Moon 2004). His supporters have additionally provided various theological accounts (Williams 2020). Secondary sources were used to corroborate (Hagerty 2010; Tuan 2012; Dunkel 2018; District of Columbia Courts 2021; Barker 2022; Richardson 2021; Prophet 2016; Wessinger 2012; Introvigne 2017; Chryssides 2017; etc.). This informed both our context section as well as our analysis.

In addition to content analysis, extensive one-on-one interviews with members of the Unification movement were conducted remotely or in person over a one-year time period, beginning in December 2021 and ending in December 2022. These interviews lasted

⁶ A notable figure in these publications is Michael Mickler, whose thorough account of the historical events within the Unification movement is used as a pro-Family Federation source frequently throughout this work.

approximately one to two hours each and included questions about demographic information,⁷ religious life, opinions on doctrine, and each organization related to the schisms (see Appendix A). This was done using snowball sampling, for a total of 21 interviews.⁸ Members of the research team emailed Unification participants to request interviews. Each interviewee was asked to suggest additional participants for interviews. The interviews were transcribed and anonymized. All names attached to interview quotes are pseudonyms.

Social media content analysis was also employed on Facebook, Rumble, and Twitch during this time, particularly amongst the Sanctuary Church. In-person participant observation was undertaken sporadically in New York, NY. Observations included internet arguments, online lectures and speeches, sermons, church meetings, etc.⁹ This helped to create a more nuanced understanding of church functioning, especially as it related to schisms, niche competition, and the resultant factions.

Analytic Strategy

In order to address longstanding problems of generalizability in the study of high-tension religious groups, we follow the recommendations of Pitchford et al. (2001) on how to approach qualitative study. Therefore, this case study is intended to bring the Unification movement and its schismatic organizations into comparison with other religious organizations. We use Pitchford's analytical categories of 1. *organizational history and context* through descent, timeline, demography, and locations and ecologies; 2. *mobilization* through defection; 3. *organization* through rites and rituals, group solidarity and dynamics, and doctrines, costs, and commitment; 4. *governance* through leadership and success and failure throughout data collection and analysis. By doing so, we answer Pitchford et al.'s call for a more unified study of high-tension religious groups through research programs, which we propose our ROE theoretical framework to be.

Informed by this research design, we performed a historical content analysis by aggregating relevant sources on the schisms into the timeline reported in Table 2. Participant observation utilized field notes. These field notes were then compared between the authors to identify general trends and guarantee internal validity. After this stage, we began inductive data collection. For our interview data, coding choices initially focused on our key theoretical propositions: 1. Institutionalization, 2. Authority, 3. Doctrine, and 4. Niche/Environmental conditions. As we gathered data, we added codes specifically focused on gender, nationality, and race. The internal validity of these codes were also tested among the authors. Using this process, we formed our results.

While Hyun Jin (Preston) Moon's schismatic organization Family Peace Association is included substantively in our timeline and Table 2 below, for space considerations we will not go into it at length within our theoretical analysis.¹⁰ Hyun Jin's ousting is used as a background

⁷ Not reported to preserve anonymity.

⁸ Saturation was reached at roughly 13 interviews. Demographic information not presented to protect participant anonymity, but breakdown by nationality is analytically relevant and can be reported: 3 South Korean, 2 Japanese, 1 New Zealander, 7 American. Countries outside the United States were particularly targeted in order to mitigate bias within the sample.

⁹ The primary focus of our content analysis and participant observation was on gathering data relevant to the schisms.

¹⁰ It is important to note that our analysis also does not go into great detail regarding In Jin (Tatiana) Moon's group "iHome Church." This splinter group is vaguely affiliated with the Unification movement, and unlike the schismatic

for our more empirically notable cases: the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Hak Ja Han’s organization), and the World Peace and Unification Sanctuary (Hyung Jin’s organization). More will be said on these two cases in our results section.

Results

In this results section, we provide a historical overview of schism in the Unification movement and then apply ROE to explain the schism. Our theoretical propositions are reinforced through an analysis of schismatic cases.

A Brief Historical Background on Contemporary Unificationism

Table 1 introduces the key persons involved with the Unification movement. It covers Reverend Sun Myung Moon and Hak Ja Han, as well as their children, with a key eye to those who played major roles (intentionally or not) in the development of schismatic organizations.

Table 1: Key Players in the Unification Movement and its Schismatic Organizations (1998-Present)

Key Character Name:	Role:
Sun Myung Moon	The founder and “True Father” of the Unification Movement. Also known as "Rev. Moon," "True Parent," and "Second Adam." Father of many children, most notably Hyun Jin (Preston), Hyung Jin (Sean), Kook Jin (Justin), and In Jin (Tatiana) Moon.
Hak Ja Han	Wife of the late Rev. Moon, and "True Mother" of the Unification Movement. Mother of 14 children by Rev. Moon, such as Hyun Jin, Hyung Jin, Kook Jin, and In Jin Moon. After the death of Rev. Moon, she assumed control of the Unification Movement. She is also known as "Han Mother" and "True Parent."
Hyo Jin Moon	Eldest son of Rev. Moon. A musician, performer, and recording facility executive that unexpectedly died of a heart attack in 2008.
Hyun Jin (Preston) Moon.	Eldest son after the death of Hyo Jin Moon in 2008. The would-be successor of the Unification Movement. He held many leadership positions in Unification related organizations at various times, such as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification International, Youth Federation for World Peace, Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles, to name a few.
Kook Jin (Justin) Moon	Next eldest surviving son of Rev. Moon and Hak Ja Han after Hyun Jin. Known for his command of business matters as CEO of the Tongil Group. Worked to oust Hyun Jin as successor, and later joined Hyung Jin (Sean) to lead the Sanctuary Church.

groups of Hyun Jin (Preston) and Hyung Jin (Sean) was given its blessing by Hak Ja Han (Kim and Balcomb 2015). We limit our analysis to breakaway groups that exit without the blessing of established leaders.

Hyung Jin (Sean) Moon	Youngest successor and son of Rev. Moon. Past leader of multiple Unification related organizations, such as the International Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. Coronated by Rev. Moon to be his successor after the ousting of Hyun Jin. He was pushed out of the Unification Movement after by his mother Hak Ja Han. He later founded a schismatic group called the World Peace and Unification Sanctuary, and leads it as "Second King" to this day.
In Jin (Tatiana) Moon	Daughter of Rev. Moon and Hak Ja Han. She was appointed president of the Unification Church of the United States by Hyung Jin for the purposes of weakening Hyun Jin Moon’s position. She was later removed from this position for an adulterous scandal and birth. She later founded her own organization outside the movement-- i-Home Church.

Table 2 is a timeline of the schisms. We begin in 1994, which was when the shift to the Family Federation occurred and is roughly around the time that Hyun Jin (Preston) Moon was being legitimated and “charismatized” (Barker 1993) as heir to the Unification movement.¹¹ This was the time period in which Hyo Jin Moon was judged unsuitable for the task of leading the Unification movement, making Hyun Jin the most discernable heir apparent. Key dates within the table to note for our purposes are the death of Hyo Jin Moon on March 17, 2008 (Mickler 2015a; Kim 2017: 125), the coronations of Hyung Jin (Sean) and his wife Yeoh Ah in January 2009 (Mickler 2013; Kim 2017: 151–3), Hyun Jin founding the Global Peace Foundation on November 4, 2009 (Tuan 2012), the death of Reverend Moon on September 3, 2012 (Mickler 2014; Kim 2017: 225), the establishment of the Sanctuary Church by Hyung Jin and Kook Jin (Justin) Moon on October 11, 2015 (Moon 2015b), and the creation of the Family Peace Association by Hyun Jin (Preston) Moon’s followers in 2016 (Introvigne 2017). A key recurring theme within our timeline is the appointment of an heir apparent to various leadership positions, and the subsequent removal and reappointment of those more favored.

Date	Event
May 1, 1994	Sun Myung Moon declares that the era of the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (HAS-UWC) is over. A new organization called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU) is implemented with commiserate organizational changes (Mickler 2022).
1998	Hyun Jin (Preston) Moon appointed Vice-President of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification International (FFWPUI) (Mickler 2015a).
2000	Hyun Jin Moon appointed head of World Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles (CARP) (Mickler 2015a).
2001	Hyun Jin Moon appointed head of Youth Federation for World Peace (YFWP) (Mickler 2015a).

¹¹ For space considerations, we do not go into depth on earlier schismatic organizations off of the Unification movement, such as the Living Being Church. Our main focus is on the schisms that occurred after the death of Sun Myung Moon.

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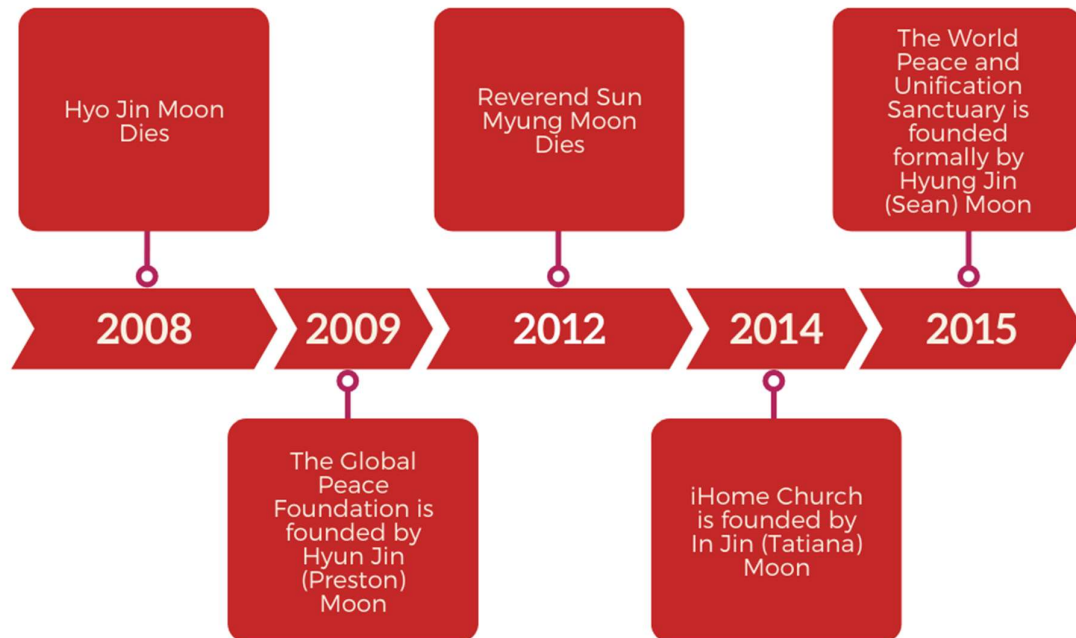
2002	Hyun Jin Moon begins espousing an anti-institutional viewpoint towards the Unification Movement, seeking to transcend religious barriers in what he considered a fulfillment of Rev. Moon's wishes (Kim 2017: 95-6).
2003	Unification holy book <i>Cheon Seong Gyeong</i> by Sun Myung Moon finalized and disseminated (Kim 2017: 233).
2005	Kook Jin (Justin) Moon appointed head of the failing business organization Tongil Group (Mickler 2015a), soon turns its fortunes around.
2006	Hyun Jin inaugurated as Chairman of the Unification Church International (UCI), an organization that controls many assets for the Unification Movement in the Americas (Mickler 2013, 2015a).
2007	Hyun Jin convenes his first Global Peace Seminar and Festival, which begins his world peace tours (Mickler 2015a; Kim 2017: 123).
March 17, 2008	Hyo Jin Moon, the eldest surviving son of the Moons, dies. This has theological ramifications for Hyun Jin's standing as successor (Mickler 2015b; Kim 2017: 125).
April 16, 2008	With support of Hak Ja Han ("True Mother"), Hyung Jin (Sean) Moon appointed Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU) International President and President of FFWPU Korea, ousting Hyun Jin (Mickler 2015b).
May 2008	With support of Hak Ja Han, Hyung Jin appointed as leader of World Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles (CARP), ousting Hyun Jin (Mickler 2015a; Kim 2017: 128).
July 29, 2008	In Jin (Tatiana) Moon was appointed president of the Unification Church of the United States by Hyung Jin for the purposes of weakening Hyun Jin Moon's position (Hagerty 2010; Mickler 2015b, Kim 2017: 134). Some claim this was a purely ceremonial appointment as a pastor rather than chairman (Kim 2017: 142).
August 2008	Kook Jin and Hyung Jin Moon announce the construction of a massive temple called World Unification Temple in Seoul. They criticize Hyun Jin's peace festivals as extravagant and wasteful. Hyun Jin criticizes the temple project, claiming it is contrary to the wishes of the founder (Mickler 2015a).
January 15-31, 2009	With support of Hak Ja Han, Hyung Jin and his wife Yeoh Ah are informally coronated three times by Rev. Moon as the inheritors and pillars of the True Parents (Mickler 2013; Kim 2017: 151-3). Sanctuary Church members later claim this appointed Hyung Jin as the "Second King."
February and early March 2009	Hyun Jin attempts to take control of the board of directors at HSA-UWC (USA—another important funding agency), this is foiled by primarily In Jin, Kook Jin, and Hyung Jin (Mickler 2013; Kim 2017: 158-9; Kook Jin Moon 2010).
August 2, 2009	Hyun Jin Moon successfully takes over the board of UCI (Mickler 2013; Kim 2017: 164-5; Kook Jin Moon 2010).

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November 4, 2009	Hyun Jin severs the formal tie of his Global Peace Festival organization to the Family Federation (Mickler 2013), and then founds the Global Peace Foundation (Tuan 2012), focusing on international and interreligious conferences for dialogues on peace (Kook Jin Moon 2010).
November 18, 2009	Hyung Jin appointed international President of the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), likely by Hak Ja Han (Kim 2017: 172-3).
February 5, 2010	Hyun Jin Moon formally removed as Chairman of the Unification Movement in the United States (Kim 2017: 176).
June 5, 2010	At the behest of Hak Ja Han (Kim 2017, 181), Hyung Jin Moon appointed formally as representative and the inheritor in a proclamation by Sun Myung Moon (Sun Myung Moon 2010; Kim 2017: 185-6).
November 27, 2011	Hyung Jin begins giving sermons deifying Hak Ja Han (Kim 2017: 208).
August 3, 2012	Sun Myung Moon is hospitalized in the intensive care unit for a severe cough (Kim 2017: 219). He goes in and out of intensive care.
September 3, 2012	Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Movement, dies at the age of 93 (Mickler 2014; Kim 2017: 225). Hyung Jin deifies him (Kim 2017: 228-9).
September 2012	Hak Ja Han begins espousing “Only Begotten Daughter” theology, sacralizing her authority and placing it at equal or greater authority than Rev. Moon (Kim 2017: 282).
September 17, 2012	Hak Ja Han publicly declares that she would be leading the Unification Movement, not Hyung Jin (Kim 2017: 246-7).
September 19, 2012	Kook Jin is pressured by Hak Ja Han to resign from his positions, he refuses. Hak Ja Han removes him from his positions (Kim 2017: 248-9). She grants a position to Hyung Jin to remove him from Korea (US Chairman of the Unification Church).
2012	Hak Ja Han revises the <i>Cheon Seong Gyeong</i> , which some claim represents only 20% of the original document (Kim 2017: 235-7; Mickler 2014—see footnote 65). She also recalls volumes of <i>The Sermons of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon</i> and redacts specific sections (Kim 2017: 241-4).
October 29, 2013	A Unification member reports that Hyung Jin has been leading a private ministry outside of Hak Ja Han’s authority in Pennsylvania. Hak Ja Han demands that he “unite with True Parents’ direction” (Balcomb 2013).
March 23, 2013	Kook Jin officially fired as chairman of the Unification foundation (Kim 2017: 253)
March 6, 2015	Hyung Jin officially fired from chairman positions in the international and U.S. Family Federation (Kim 2017: 253).
September 13, 2015	Hyung Jin denounces Hak Ja Han as the “Whore of Babylon” (Moon 2015a).
October 11, 2015	Hyung Jin proclaims himself the Second King of the Kingdom of God, based off Reverend Sun Myung Moon’s coronations, and creates a “constitution” for his followers— <i>The Constitution of the United States of Cheon Il Guk</i> (Moon 2015b). This marks the formal and official beginning of the Sanctuary Church, of which Kook Jin also plays a lead role in.
2016	Supporters of Hyun Jin (Preston) Moon establish the Family Peace Association, separate from the Family Federation (Introvigne 2017).
July 8, 2022	Tetsuya Yamagami assassinates former Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe. The motive is believed to be Unification related, and the Japanese government launches investigations into the Family Federation, heightening tension with the external environment (McCurry 2022).

Apparent from the tables above, the Unification movement has undergone a bitter schism within the past 20 years, with tensions heightening after the death of Reverend Sun Myung Moon in 2012 (Barker 2022; Introvigne 2017). Before Reverend Moon’s death, major players in the Unification movement (Hak Ja Han, Hyung Jin, Kook Jin, and In Jin Moon) systematically undermined the authority of the would-be inheritor, Hyun Jin (Preston) Moon (Kim 2017). After

Figure 1: A Visual Representation of the Unification Movement’s Schismatic Groups (1998-Today)



Reverend Moon’s death, Hak Ja Han has emerged victorious as the leader of the “Mainline Unification movement” (Mickler 2016). Han removed her children Kook Jin (Justin), Hyung Jin (Sean), and In Jin (Tatiana) from their respective leadership positions to secure her standing as top leader. Since then, Hyung Jin and Kook Jin have formed their own schismatic organization—the World Peace and Unification Sanctuary (a.k.a. the Sanctuary Church), which is known for its American identity based around the freedom to bear arms (Dunkel 2018; Chryssides 2017). This organization is led by Hyung Jin, who dubs himself the “Second King.” In Jin Moon has also formed her own organization in May of 2014 (Moon 2014), called “iHome Church,” which was indirectly supported by Hak Ja Han (Kim and Balcomb 2015). See Figure 1 for a visual representation of the Unification Movement’s schismatic groups.

With the historical context set, ROE theoretical analysis follows.

Institutionalization

Our first proposition posits that institutionalizing religions will be prone to schism. Accordingly, due to a sect to church shift, the history of schism within the Unification movement began prior to the death of Reverend Sun Myung Moon in 2012.

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The 1994–1997 transition from the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (HSA-UWC) to the current Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU) initiated by Reverend Moon changed the organizational intent of the Unification movement. There was a novel emphasis on international peace (such as the attempt to replace the United Nations, or the declaration of the “Pacific Rim Era”) rather than on the church itself (Mickler 2022). This could be reasonably seen as an attempt to lower tension with the external environment through sect-to-church innovations. These changes, however, did not immediately undermine the legitimated authority of Reverend Moon, although it did have consequences for his heir apparent. This is especially the case when considering the development of internal factions of the charismatic aristocracy that opposed the appointment of Reverend Moon’s sons as successor over his wife (Kwak 2019; Kim 2017; Joosse 2017; Richardson 2021; Prophet 2016).

The appointment of Hyun Jin (Preston) Moon to various positions in the late ’90s and early to mid-2000s (see Table 2) was undoubtedly an attempt to pass on the waning legitimated charismatic authority of Reverend Moon to a successor (Wessinger 2012; Prophet 2016). Hyun Jin Moon’s appointment as the first successor of the Unification Church signified the implementation of reforms befitting the new era. These reforms, often initiated by Reverend Moon at the behest of Reverend Moon, included grandiose public peace programs, summits with political leaders, and large sporting events (Mickler 2014, 2015). The purpose of these programs was undoubtedly to lower tension with the external environment and integrate the Unification movement with larger society, likely to avoid continued stigmatization (Stark and Finke 2000; Foertsch 2022b). This could be meaningfully compared to organizational attempts at isomorphic conformity (Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Foertsch 2022c: 4).

First-generation factions of the organization began to resist these expensive outreach programs over time, thereby becoming “the resistance of the secularized first-generation members against Hyun Jin P. Moon’s attempt to invigorate the Unification movement” (Kim 2017:93). Kim and Kwak (2019) view this conflict as the beginning of the contemporary schisms within the organization—notably, attributing strain not to the waning authority of Reverend Moon, but his attempts at structural change and his choice of successor. The other members of Reverend Moon’s family used this as an opportunity to jockey for appointment as successor. As Reverend Moon failed to transfer his charisma to the designated successor due to sect-to-church innovations, the declaration of Hyun Jin Moon as heir was rendered illegitimate (Prophet 2016: 39). This gives credibility to proposition 1.

Authority and Doctrine

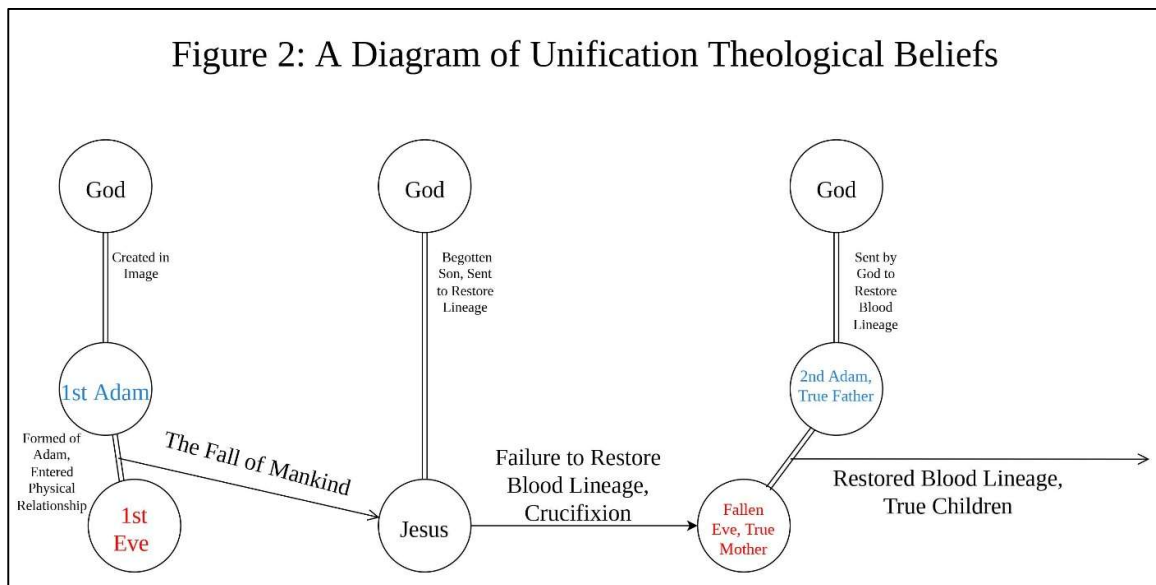
Our second proposition states that schism occurs due to disagreements over legitimate authority, which is then retrospectively rationalized through doctrine. Rightful authority is a recurring theme in the schisms within the Unification movement, with Hyun Jin, Hyung Jin, and Hak Ja Han Moon all claiming to be heir to the legitimized legacy of Reverend Sun Myung Moon.

Hyung Jin Moon was officially named as the successor of Reverend Moon to oust Hyun Jin Moon (Stephens 2015: 2) in 2010. This was a result of an internal power struggle between those seeking to resist reformist elements within the movement, led by Hak Ja Han, Hyung Jin Moon, and Kook Jin Moon (Kim 2017; Kwak 2019: 274–5). The children of Reverend Moon and Hak Ja Han were constantly removed from positions of power to weaken their authority

(Kwak 2019: 432–4, 477). Even though at this point we could regard Reverend Moon’s legitimate authority as appropriately “charismatized” (Barker 1993; Prophet 2016; Richardson 2021), his waning ability to command the burgeoning movement in old age led to a crisis of organizational identity (Kim 2017). Moreover, the continued struggle by major familial players to attain the absolute heir apparent appointment within the movement further exacerbated confusion, likely supported by various factions within the movement (Kwak 2019; Kim 2017).

It is unsurprising that Reverend Moon is often regarded as a charismatic leader among many members of the Unification movement (Barker 1993; “John,” Anonymous Family Federation Member, 2022). Although his charisma waned greatly later in life, the presence of Reverend Moon alone was still adequate to postpone the fissures within the organization at least superficially. With the death of the founder, the scene quickly changed, and the holistic social processes that generated schism came to the fore.

The death of Reverend Moon in 2012 marks the official schism among the three leaders within the Unification movement, with their focus on the legitimization of their leadership (Prophet 2016; Richardson 2021), which is a finding in line with Sutton and Chaves (2004). Much of the authority dispute within the Unification movement retrospectively took on theological justification, with various points of contention. Figure 2 is a quick overview of the basic theological premise of the *Divine Principle* of Sun Myung Moon (1977). While it does not capture the nuance or importance of many theological points, it is a good faith attempt at representing the complexity of the restoration of blood lineage doctrine as told through our interview subjects.



A “lower” level is assigned to the Eve characters (the First Biblical and Second “True Mother” Eve), extending the notion of Eve’s corrupting and subordinate relation to Adam from Biblical Genesis. This implies the inherent fallen nature of humanity, and the necessity of Reverend Moon’s role as an uplifter of the human lineage. It places the woman in the object or receptive role of the male subject, which is reaffirmed by interview subjects:

Eve’s role is an object partner by Adam and through Adam. Basically, because Adam

is God's manifestation. So, Eve, eventually, is also the wife of God through Adam. Not directly, but through Adam. Eve is, you know, the helper, you know we call objects partner, subject, and object...the object should kind of be subject. Subject has dominion over object. However, if you go back to the Divine Principle, if in a subject object united in love, you know it's certain you know kind of circling motion and object can be subject and subject can be object. You know in love relations that this is not, you know, master and slave relationship, you know. You know object and woman is not just constrained, but you know proper position, but through that you know she can have the same position well enough, you know. ("Akane," Anonymous Sanctuary Member, 2022)

Contention between Family Federation and Sanctuary doctrinal beliefs is most apparent through the theological implications of these concepts, which bear heavily on their respective views of the "True Father," "True Mother," and "True Parents." These theological beliefs are important to note because they change when legitimate authority (Prophet 2016) succession is problematized. We describe these theological beliefs below.

Before major schismatic activity, it seems any perspective on Reverend Moon's nature regarding Original Sin was tolerated. This means that it was left ambiguous whether Sun Myung Moon was originally conceived by God as a divine Messiah without sin, or if he came into his sinlessness after he accepted his divine mission, much like a prophet of the Old Testament. After the schism with Preston (Hyun Jin) Moon's group in 2009 and later with Hyung Jin (Sean) Moon's group in 2015, we see a deification (Messiahship) of Reverend Moon within the schismatic organizations, a comparison to Christ (Williams 2020), and an assertion that Reverend Moon was born without Original Sin. This process of sacralization could be considered an attempt to capitalize on Reverend Moon's now-passed routinized charismatic authority (Wessinger 2012). In the mainline Family Federation led by Hak Ja Han, however, we do not see this type of sacralization, and Hak Ja Han periodically attempts to subvert Reverend Moon's divine image, one way being the assertion of his birth under Original Sin.

Lots of new teachings seem to be coming from Mother. They claim True Father and God are inside of her. She is the only-begotten daughter. She was born sinless. Father fell. She is replacing the texts that Father ordained. The new Constitution does not mention the Bible or the Divine Principle. Even Father's picture is gone and only Mother's is left. There is too much to mention, but it is all there to see and surely more and more will keep coming. (Stephens 2015:4)

Likewise, the nature of "True Mother" Hak Ja Han is called into question on a theological level, reifying challenges to her legitimacy in leading the movement. Schismatic groups such as the Sanctuary Church view Hak Ja Han as the "Whore of Babylon," a "Fallen Eve" only given importance and redemption through her marriage with the Messiah Sun Myung Moon (Moon 2015a; Kwak 2019: 461). This position downplays the role of Hak Ja Han as the progenitor of the restored blood lineage of humanity by birthing the True Children, making her no different or better than any other woman. It also subverts her theological status as the would-be leader of the Unification movement. One anonymous member of the Sanctuary Church deems Hak Ja Han a heretic:

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Well, we believe she's a she's a heretic...She had, she received so much love from him [Reverend Moon] and he didn't ask much from her...That said, she has taken a position to grab control of Family Fed; Father Moon has designated his youngest son [Hyung Jin Sean Moon] three times publicly and videotaped ceremonies as his sole heir and successor. And then he even wrote a declaration in which he said that. And he said any other is a heretic and destroyer and he asked her to read it out loud. And we have that on videotape. So he couldn't have made it clearer...I think Han is basically a narcissistic money grabbing power hungry person who's surrounded by people who are corrupt and want to use her for their own ends. ("Jerry," Anonymous Sanctuary Church, 2022)

In response to this subversion of her legitimacy, Hak Ja Han and her supporters adopt a stance that deifies herself and downplays the sanctity of the True Father. This perspective had been in development since the waning authority of Reverend Moon in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Kwak 2019; Kim 2017). This is done through the "Only Begotten Daughter" theological innovation, self-divination, and significant revisions to the original meaning of the Divine Principle (Kim 2017; Kwak 2019: 452–3, 459). She argues, along with theologians associated with the Family Federation,¹² that she was the Messiah sent to restore the blood lineage of humanity through the redemption of Eve. She argues that she was born without Original Sin, unlike Reverend Sun Myung Moon, who only received his remission of Original Sin once he was called to lead the Unification movement (or marry her).

Since the passing of the founder in September 2012, the Unification movement had claimed that "True Mother was the God of the day, and True Father of the spiritual realm was the God of the Night." Alongside these claims, some Unification movement theologians at Sun Moon University developed that "True Mother was the female aspect of the messiah" and educated believers accordingly...Going one step beyond the idea that Hak Ja Han was "the female aspect of the messiah," Hak Ja Han began to claim she was "the only begotten daughter" from 2014 onwards, an idea that the Unification movement is teaching as doctrine. (Kim 2017:257).

As we can see, these theological innovations by Hak Ja Han were not present until her authority as the inheritor of the Unification movement was questioned. Likewise, theological arguments made by schismatic groups such as the Sanctuary Church to subvert Hak Ja Han's authority (Wessinger 2012) were solidified after the death of Reverend Moon and the split with the Family Federation. As such, it is concluded that these bitter theological disputes currently underway in the Unification movement are less about doctrine or orthodoxy and more about political legitimacy and authority (Starke and Dyck 1996, Foertsch 2022a, Prophet 2016), in line with proposition 2 and new institutionalism perspectives.

Niche Conditions

Our third proposition is that organizational attempts at niche domination are prone to stretching

¹² Kim 2017 specifically mentions Taek Yong Oh pg. 270–80, 300, Hang Je Kim, pg. 292–4, Seok Byeong Kim pg. 295–6, and Kwak 2019 mentions Jin-Chun Kim pg. 465–6.

and thus schism, with schismatic groups operating as specialist organizations within an existing or new niche in the religious market. A good example of niche domination within the Unification Church's history can be found in its "Mass Wedding Ceremony," which contributed substantially to the movement's rapid growth in membership in the early 1990s (Barker 2018). One of the hallmarks of the Unification Church, this ritual is the most important part of its Blessing Ceremony divided into five parts. The mass wedding was incorporated when Reverend Moon sought to bridge the tense Korea–Japan relationship through international marriages. An anonymous theologian of the Unification movement commented that the mandatory marriage was a tool used by the members of the Unification Church to invite new members who could not find a spouse in a competitive Korean marriage market in the 1980s ("Yuri Han," Anonymous Family Federation, 2021). Through this innovation, the Unification Church successfully utilized untapped resources and capitalized on its Neo-Confucian/Christian eastern and western (international) syncretic niche, leading to increased fitness, survivability, and eventually isomorphic advantage over similar religious institutions like the early breakaway Jesus Morning Star or Shincheonji (Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Hannan and Freeman 1977; Foertsch 2022c).

This highly unique syncretic niche comes from a blend of western and eastern ideas that appeal to people from international backgrounds. Of course, this syncretic fusion was not possible until after the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, which opened the doors to East Asian immigration to the United States, suggesting the importance of environment on the existence of specific religious niches (Foertsch 2022a, 2025) and membership resources (Scheitle and Dougherty 2008; Finke and Scheitle 2008). Unificationism theologically draws from Christian concepts such as Original Sin, a Messiah, and Fallen Eve (Kim 2017). Hence, on the surface, the Unification movement may seem to be an isomorphic reiteration of Christianity with minor changes, including the position of Reverend Moon as Messiah (Williams 2020).

Upon closer inspection, however, it is not difficult to discover South Korean Neo-Confucian influence, with some examples being filial piety or the emphasis on hierarchical family structure. Many participants testify to the syncretism of eastern and western identities as a key aspect of the Unification movement. One anonymous member of the Family Federation commented that they felt the name "Unification" fits the characteristic of the movement well:

You know, I mean, there's interesting interaction between the West and the East. Uhm, sometimes often, sometimes friction. So, I would say you know, the tradition is a lot of the Asian culture and traditions filter into our church and at every level in terms of holidays, ritual liturgy. Just basic ways of interacting...I would say that's a big part of the church and the church intentionally, so the church intentionally. The theme is unification, so we try to harmonize the different cultures as best we can. That's not always easy, but it can be very rewarding. ("John," Anonymous Family Federation Member, 2022)

Another participant also described how the Unification movement attempts to harmonize western and eastern ideas together through music:

Uh, there was a long period of time that you know, like the so-called holy music was limited particularly to Korean and the Japanese music. But there's a lot more American songs, even some European songs that have been incorporated into that. I

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think Africa, that's still—I don't see so much African but I think that I won't be surprised if you look 20 years from now that there will be a lot more incorporation of African song and ritual into our movement as well...I think there's a lot of you know, syncretism. ("Tim," Anonymous Family Federation Member, 2022)

Overall, the Unification movement managed to establish its religious niche in both the East and the West through its idiosyncratic fusion of religious ideas that were familiar to both populations. Furthermore, it secured membership through the promotion of mandatory marriage, a unique feature that enabled it to win a competition for resources (in this case followers) over many new religious movements. This niche domination was tenuous, however, especially along cultural lines.

The latent differences between eastern and western culture would later become prone to exploitation through schismatics, especially after the death of Sun Myung Moon. Although Reverend Moon's death seems to be the trigger to the instrumentalization of these differences, they preexisted his death by decades and contributed to various breakaway groups during his life (a good example being Zimbabwean Cleophas or "Black Heung Jin" who formed a breakaway group in Africa in 1988—see Barker 2018; Fefferman 1990).

Hyung Jin (Sean) Moon's religious innovations to capitalize on new resources (Scheitle and Dougherty 2008) began before his 2015 formal break with the mainline Family Federation. After he was announced as the official heir to Reverend Moon and Hak Ja Han, Hyung Jin Moon implemented various rituals from 2009–2010 onward. This can be interpreted as Hyung Jin Moon's attempt to legitimate his position as the future successor after Hyun Jin Moon was ousted due to his frustrated efforts to reform the Unification Church, since Hyung Jin Moon identified himself as the direct opposite of Hyun Jin Moon (Kim 2017; Kwak 2019). Such rituals included uniquely western spiritual healing services (much like Pentecostal rituals), the building of a Seoul megachurch in emulation of U.S. pastors, and the Cheonboksik ceremony, which many eastern members deemed ungrounded in the identity of the Unification Church:

Hyung Jin Moon carried out experiments in which he tried to change the Unification movement's traditional symbols and rituals sometimes in a Buddhist way, sometimes a Catholic way, and sometimes in a Protestant way based on his subjective experience and knowledge. Hyung Jin Moon disregarded the Unification movement's history and traditions without taking into consideration the characteristics that a new religion's rituals should have...Although externally he seems to accept the methods of worship and the culture of other religions, such practice is an affront to those respective religions. Such behavior lacked identity as the international president of the Unification movement. (Kim 2017:117)

Hyung Jin Moon's reformation of the rituals failed to capitalize on the Unification Church's religious niche despite his efforts. This is likely because there was an increasing difference between the eastern and western Unification movement. Hyung Jin received many of these ritual innovations from years of religious study and leadership in the United States, which he discusses in his book *A Bald Head and a Strawberry* (Moon 2004). This meant that when he was recalled to South Korea with the intent to reenergize the eastern dominant Family Federation, his western style of worship was resisted, ultimately losing him support with the traditional South Korean

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membership “cultic aristocracy” of the movement (Richardson 2021; Prophet 2016; Joosse 2017). This allowed Hak Ja Han to excommunicate Hyung Jin Moon in 2015 following the death of Reverend Moon with the support of the Korean cultic aristocracy. This led to the formation of the Sanctuary Church.

Both the Family Federation and the Sanctuary Church respond to environmental conditions appropriate to their contexts, and as such have developed different niche specialties within the overall international Neo-Confucian/Christian syncretic religious niche using innovations that negotiate tension and commitment (Iannaccone 1988). For example, the Family Federation in recent times has developed “churchlike” features that have lowered tension with the external environment, and the Sanctuary Church has developed an organizational and theological perspective that is geared towards the United States environment. Both organizations have an aspiration of niche domination. The Unification Church before the schism attempted to dominate this syncretic niche, and this led to organizational stretching, which the Sanctuary Church capitalized on.

The Sanctuary Church, led by Hyung Jin Moon, attempts to form exclusivity over resources within its western religious niche even further. Hyung Jin Moon tactfully attempts to gain membership by isomorphically adopting organizational forms familiar to available membership resources—a direct response to his environment (Scheitle and Dougherty 2008; Finke and Scheitle 2009). In the context of Sanctuary’s primary location, the United States of America, this is done by incorporating concepts that appeal to Americans (Dunkel 2018; Moon 2015a, 2015b). For example, the Rod of Iron theology innovation likens firearms to the weapon of God (Dunkel 2018; Chryssides 2017). Although a highly controversial topic, it nevertheless succeeded in attracting American gun rights activists and militia groups, hence reasserting itself as a niche specialist and capitalizing on western membership and financial resources. Contrary to the institutional norm of the Unification movement as a primarily East Asian membership movement, this is an effort to capitalize on specific ethnic resources—White Anglo-Saxon Protestant men. It can be concluded, then, that the Sanctuary Church has different resource dependencies (Scheitle and Dougherty 2008; Finke and Scheitle 2009). Although not a member of the Sanctuary Church, a respondent following the Family Federation described how other schismatic groups differ from the mainline Family Federation in ethnic composition:

I think that that narrative is actually more culturally influenced and has many negative impacts in things because there is a lack of, um, I guess it’s in a sense it kind of kills the individual, you know? Coming from East Asian society it’s like Korea and Japan where they’re homogeneous nations, there is pressure to conform and I see that reflected in our own movement. And so in some ways I see Preston and Sean and Justin’s breakaway schismatic groups as a kind of uh rebellion against the homogeneity and kind of and overemphasis on the individuality which also in and of itself is problematic too. And almost an overcorrection. But I do see that that being a little bit the driving impetus of the splits. (“Mandy,” Anonymous Family Federation Member, 2022)

A member of the Sanctuary Church (“Akane”) confirms the relative lack of ethnic segregation within the organization, saying that “Sanctuary doesn’t actually quite care about nationalities, you know, discrete color blind and you know...the barrier between races should be eliminated.”

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Since America is composed of various ethnic backgrounds, contrary to homogenous countries such as Korea and Japan (where Unification membership is found in large numbers), the Sanctuary Church attempts to capitalize on its domestic religious niche by purposefully avoiding discussions on race and ethnicity. One Sanctuary Member (“Jerry”) perceptively noted the potential pitfalls of this effective innovation, however: the difficulties in recruiting populations outside White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, particularly the African American community. The Sanctuary Church nevertheless is more inclusive of other non-eastern members and innovations than the mainline Family Federation, which is composed primarily of Korean and Japanese members.

Other perceptive isomorphic innovations used by Hyung Jin and his Sanctuary Church include the use of the Bible as a legitimator and Christian messianic/eschatological language (Moon 2015a; Williams 2020). Biblical apocalyptic accounts are frequently used in Hyung Jin Moon’s sermons, rather than the scriptures of the Unification movement. The notion of using the Bible instead of Unification-specific sacred texts mostly came about as a response to Hak Ja Han’s leadership. Together with the frequent defamation of Hak Ja Han, Hyung Jin Moon’s sermons can be seen as a way for the Sanctuary Church to carve out a specialization within the syncretic religious niche by establishing itself as an alternative to those who may object to the current trajectory of the Family Federation. This method especially appeals to former American members of the Family Federation, as one member testified to:

It’s crucial that each family understands the Kingdom, not the church organization. Each family or individual needs to have, um, a direct relationship with God and a direct relationship with the King...if we need an organization, we would be returning to Family Fed. We need to avoid that. And people tends to, especially you know, Japanese and Koreans, tends to have organization, because culturally it’s easier. But always we have some sort of fight between Kingdom and organization...It’s always a risk to return to Family Fed situation...[in Sanctuary compared to Family Fed] there’s more individual personal responsibility. Not waiting for each of us to get external instructions but each of us, yeah, each of us have our own responsibility without telling without you know order or command. (“Jerry,” Anonymous Sanctuary Church Member, 2022)

Finally, Hyung Jin Moon attempts to capitalize on the American membership resource through an appeal to the American ideotype of individuality. Decrying the Family Federation as hierarchical and non-democratic, Hyung Jin and Kook Jin Moon have attempted to coopt the idea of American democratic idealism through the creation of *The Constitution of the United States of Cheon Il Guk* (Moon 2015b), which theologically establishes a divine kingdom on Earth. This document speaks to the importance of each individual man as their own “king” within their own family “kingdom,” led by the “Second King” Hyung Jin Moon only symbolically. This undoubtedly appeals to Americans and those easterners who are dissatisfied with the hierarchical organization of the Family Federation, which is largely constructed around eastern concepts of authority.

In sum, the Sanctuary Church seeks to isomorphically capitalize on niche specialization and western membership resource exclusivity (Foertsch 2022a; Scheitle 2007; Scheitle and Dougherty 2008; Finke and Scheitle 2009), in line with proposition 3. Hyung Jin Moon’s original

westernizing reforms failed to stretch the Family Federation's ability to operate within its eastern niche, leading to his expulsion. Hence, Hyung Jin's Sanctuary Church operates as a niche specialist and the Family Federation remains a niche generalist. The Family Federation has difficulty competing for American membership resources, which is seen in the Sanctuary Church's apparent membership growth, and relative stagnation within the Family Federation. It is clear that the environment the Unification movement operates within has played a key role in the formation and continuation of niche schismatic organizations.

While the implications are not yet fully evident, the recent assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has undoubtedly increased environmental tension with society in the case of the "mainline" Family Federation (McCurry 2022). The assassin Tetsuya Yamagami allegedly carried out this act due to large financial donations his mother gave to the Unification movement, thus impoverishing his family. Due to Shinzo Abe's political connections with the movement, Yamagami presumably chose him as a target.

This increase in environmental tension was noticeable during our data collection period, when respondents from the Family Federation became much more difficult to contact. This suggests a tightening of membership and information, likely in response to governmental inquiries into the Family Federation's financial dealings in Japan. It is unknown how the increased environmental tension in Japan will impact the future organizational form of the international Unification movement, but it is possible that it may lead to a reversal of sect-to-church (Stark and Finke 2000; Finke and Stark 2005).

Conclusions and Implications

The purposes of this study were: 1. To bring scholarly attention to the ongoing schisms within the long-studied Unification movement (Barker 1993, 2022; Introvigne 2017; Chryssides 2017), 2. To bring Unificationism into meaningful comparison with other religious organizations (Pitchford et al. 2001), 3. To forward religious organization ecology as an alternative theory to cultural analyses of contemporary religious organizational form. As the gulf within the Unification movement widens, our results support the relevance of religious organization ecology (ROE) in explaining schisms within emergent religious groups (Bromley and Melton 2012; Melton 2004). In particular, our findings of the impact of church-to-sect mechanics (proposition 1), authority and doctrine (proposition 2), and niche conditions (proposition 3) complement previous research on this topic.

While much of the contemporary research on new religious movements and emergent religious groups exists within the cultural sphere of lived experience (Ammerman 2015), ethnography, and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lichterman 2002), the need for a comparative, institutional, meso-level, organizational theoretic framework remains pressing (Foertsch 2022b; Pitchford et al. 2001). As sociologists attempt to theorize generally about how specific institutions isomorphically influence micro-interaction (Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Hannan and Freeman 1977; Foertsch 2022c), the need to reintroduce structure into the conversation surrounding high-tension religious groups remains paramount, especially when faced with positivist criticism.

Schisms within high-tension religious groups are a fruitful and valid case for analyzing the influence of meso-level processes, such as organizational niche and environment on institutional and individual religious choices (the choice to schism). High-tension groups that are perceived

as religiously deviant remain a hallmark case, through the analytic ease of which academic outsiders can gauge their relative environmental tension. But these mechanics can and should be tested on cases with lower-tension environments or exclusivity. By developing ROE theory further, we approach a meso-level perspective with generalizability that can speak not only to high-tension religious groups such as the Unification Church, but also schisms within dominant, sectarian, and alternative religious traditions (Bromley and Melton 2012; Scheitle 2007; Scheitle and Dougherty 2008; Finke and Scheitle 2009). Further research is needed (with a keen eye to the ongoing Methodist schism).

These findings are not without their limitations. It is possible that our research participants were not representative of the entire Unification movement. We have tried our best to include demographic variability (gender, race, nationality, and ethnicity) within our sample, and capture structural influences through historical comparative content analysis.

Our analysis does not analyze Hyun Jin's Family Peace Association or In Jin's iHome Church at length for space considerations, but this does not mean that an analysis like ours cannot be done on these organizations. Future studies on Unification schisms should seek to reproduce our findings with other cases, such as the Family Peace Association. It would be meaningful to revisit the impact of Shinzo Abe's assassination on environmental tension. Additionally, content analysis and participant observation, especially online, could misrepresent the movement. Particularly in the case of the Sanctuary Church, online-only content may be made more extreme to conform to the general process of online political extremism (Olteanu et al. 2018). To combat this issue, we have attempted to corroborate our participant observation and content analysis with interview and historical comparative data. Nevertheless, additional data and analysis would be valuable.

Finally, our interview participants could have held biases towards other groups within the Unification movement. The recent creation of these schismatic groups was not without anger and resentment on both sides. We have attempted to remain neutral in our approximation of the events that generated these schisms by corroborating opinions with historical content produced by all sides and including all relevant available perspectives. We hope that our good-faith study provides the movement with some clarity, but we are under no presumption that we have captured the holistic nature of this story in its entirety. The need for continued research is pressing.

Religious organization ecology has a strong potential to expose the importance of race, gender, and nationality as religious resources within an ongoing negotiation with the external environment, which was previously observed by Scheitle and his colleagues (2007; Scheitle and Dougherty 2008; Finke and Scheitle 2009). To wit, religious organizations typically utilize functions of membership homogeneity—impacting conversion, legitimate authority, leadership choices, institutional structure, and more. In our own study we noticed the importance of nationality and race in generating niche specialization, specifically in the case of Sanctuary Church. By expanding this line of inquiry on the interrelatedness of our propositions, religious organization ecology theory can build upon its predecessors and emerge as a truly meso-level research program (Pitchford et al. 2001) that incorporates intersectional explanations when one analyzes religious organizational form. Some research questions to this effect could be “How often do interracial congregations schism?” “How successful are international religious movements in institutionalizing?” “How does a difference in allocation of resources (financial, membership) change the organizational manifestation of ethnic congregations when compared to

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mainline Protestants?” etc. One line of inquiry that could be particularly enlightening, for example, is the relative availability of racial, gendered, and socioeconomic environmental resources and their potential impact on the generation of the recent Methodist schism.

Ultimately, it is our hope that this study sheds light on the Unification movement as a continued case of interest for sociologists and academics generally (Barker 2022; Introvigne 2017; Chryssides 2017), as well as the relevance of religious organization ecology theory in reintroducing structure to conversations surrounding religious schism. By embedding cultural case study within structural explanations, cultural analysis will only grow stronger and become more adept at responding to challenges from the hegemonic positivist camp.

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Archives and Repertoire in the Analysis of the Visual Dimension of the Contemporary Mexican Folk Cult of the Saint Death (Santa Muerte)

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Abstract

The article provides a historiographical overview of the cult of Santa Muerte and is the result of field research conducted in Mexico between 2022 and 2025. Its objective is to analyze the latest trends within the cult of Santa Muerte in Mexico, employing the analytical tools proposed by Diana Taylor in her performance theory, which is based on the concepts of the *archive* and the *repertoire*. Both terms prove highly functional in describing contemporary and hybrid religious phenomena, which draw from diverse sources and are in constant flux. Their application enables the identification of the origins of these transformations as well as their religious and cultural contexts. This approach makes it possible to demonstrate how seemingly unrelated *archives* are translated into the *repertoire* of practices associated with the cult of Santa Muerte, which extend beyond strictly religious rituals to encompass a wide range of habitual activities – performances of everyday life – for which Santa Muerte serves as a context, background, or point of reference. Since many papers analyzing the cult of Santa Muerte focus primarily on the cases of Mexico City, the State of Mexico, and the Mexican diaspora in the US, this article aims to fill the gap by presenting examples from other regions of Mexico, such as the states of Veracruz, Yucatán, Quintana Roo, Puebla, and Chiapas.

Keywords:

Santa Muerte, Mexico, performance, folk Catholicism, figures

Introduction – the History of the Cult and Research on It¹

The image of Santa Muerte contains clear inspirations drawn from the iconography of the High Middle Ages and motifs such as the *danse macabre* and the triumphs of death, which, along with

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Spanish evangelizers, arrived in the territories of present-day Mexico in the 16th century (Flores Martos, 2008: 57; Malvido, 2005: 20–27). Baroque art during the Golden Age (*Siglo de Oro*) was particularly inclined to explore *vanitas* themes, with props such as skulls, scythes, and hourglasses frequently appearing in paintings illustrating still lifes (Jagłowski, Sepczyńska, Frankowiak, 2008: 7). A significant context for the contemporary perception of the figure of Saint Death was the widespread presence in pre-Hispanic art (especially in sculptures and reliefs) of the image of the skull, as well as the existence of deities such as Mictlantecuhltli and Mictecacihuatl, depicted as skeletons (devoid of soft tissues or ritually flayed) (Díaz, Rodgers, 1993: 56). The earliest references to the veneration of a figure in the form of a human skeleton in the territory of the Viceroyalty of New Spain come from the archives of the Holy Inquisition in the second half of the 18th century (Archivo General de la Nación, Inquisición, XVIII, v. 1037, f. 288). However, it should be noted that in the form known today, this cult has existed since the 1940s (Michalik, 2012: 606–607). All practices, rituals, and beliefs associated with Saint Death are consistently rejected by the Catholic Church, which does not recognize this cult² and classifies it as heresy (Flores Martos, 2008: 59).

The rapid rise in the popularity of the cult and the number of its devotees at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries was linked to two events: the establishment of the first public altar dedicated to Santa Muerte in Mexico City by Doña Enriqueta Romero Romero in the notoriously dangerous Tepito neighborhood (Quiroga, 2011: 283–287), and the arrest of kidnapper and murderer Daniel Arizmendi López, in whose home the police discovered figurines of the patroness and an altar dedicated to her (Chesnut, 2012: 15–16). The latter incident led the media, especially the tabloid press, to extensively explore the theme of the mysterious cult, associating it with marginalized social groups, the criminal underworld, and satanic practices (Michalik, 2018: 8). Saint Death gained negative notoriety and began to be identified almost exclusively with environments of former prisoners, drug dealers, or individuals involved in sex work, despite the fact that sources documenting the earliest manifestations of the Santa Muerte cult indicated its connection to love magic (Lewis, 1964: 306; Olavarrieta, 1977: 116). Today, many scholars emphasize the egalitarian nature of the cult, as well as its syncretic potential and capacity to absorb influences from other religious and cultural phenomena (Afro-Caribbean and neopagan beliefs, New Age movements, the influence of gothic and gore aesthetics), noting that labeling this phenomenon as a narco-religion contradicts the current state of research (Malvido, 2005; Flores Martos, 2008; Perdigón Castañeda, 2008; Michalik, 2011).

One of the characteristics of Mexican folk religiosity is the construction of altars and chapels (both in public spaces and in private homes) dedicated to chosen patron figures. This practice is also typical among the devotees of Saint Death – such places of worship can be encountered in squares and city plazas, in private residences, or in workplaces such as marketplaces, workshops, or hair salons. The “equipment” for these altars, including statues, candles, and incense, can be easily purchased in devotional and esoteric goods stores, which are numerous. For example, at the Mercado Lucas de Gálvez market in Mérida, the capital of the state of Yucatán, there are several such stalls, while on República de Uruguay Street alone,

² The term “cult,” used also in the title of this article, is employed here in its classical, descriptive sense (from the Latin *cultus*) to denote a form of religious devotion or veneration, not a sectarian or coercive religious group. In this context, it refers to devotional practices directed toward Santa Muerte, which are typically voluntary, decentralized, and not dependent on formal membership, exclusive structures, or imposed leadership.

located in the historic center of Mexico City, there are as many as four.³ Some devotees of Santa Muerte express their devotion to the patroness by wearing jewelry or getting tattoos depicting her image (Kaleta, 2024: 299). This relationship is often deeply personal, and Saint Death is affectionately referred to as the “White Sister,” the “White Girl,” the “Pretty Girl,” or even “Skinny One.”⁴ The most important feast day is November 2, sometimes described as Santa Muerte’s “birthday” or her “patronal feast” (modeled after the fiestas held in honor of Catholic saints officially recognized by the Church). Among the various forms of celebration, particular emphasis should be placed on processions and pilgrimages, such as the annual pilgrimage organized in Mérida since 2013, which has inspired numerous followers throughout the Yucatán Peninsula and beyond. These events are marked by a joyful atmosphere, elaborate decorations (with statues of the patroness often specially adorned for the occasion), and musical accompaniment provided by mariachis or street bands playing, for example, cumbia.

Due to the diversity of sources surrounding the cult of Saint Death, the specificity of this phenomenon, its dynamic development – especially in the last two decades – and the numerous controversies surrounding it, this subject represents an exceptionally attractive area of research. The academic literature features a variety of theoretical approaches to this topic. The earliest publication in which the figure of Santa Muerte was mentioned was Toor’s 1947 work devoted to Mexican folk culture. However, in the context of the chronology of scholarly works addressing this topic, it is worth mentioning *The Children of Sanchez* (Lewis, 1961), which, due to its wide publishing reach and the subsequent film adaptation released in 1978, had a significantly broader impact than Toor’s monograph. An anthropological perspective is presented in one of the earliest Spanish-language monographs dedicated exclusively to Santa Muerte, authored by J. Katia Perdigón Castañeda (2008). In contrast, a more popular-science approach characterizes the work of R. Andrew Chesnut (2012), which also stands as the first English-language study on this subject.

The historical roots of this cult have been explored by Elsa Malvido (2005), who extensively examined thanatological issues in Mexico, and by Juan Antonio Flores Martos (2007). A detailed analysis of rituals is provided by Juan Ambrosio (2003), while an interdisciplinary perspective characterizes the collective work edited by Alberto Hernández (2016). A similar approach can be observed in the monograph edited by Will Pansters (2019). The relationships between Santa Muerte and other unorthodox religious cults, analyzed through a semiotic methodology, have been examined by Piotr G. Michalik (2011, 2018). The connections he highlighted between the cult of Saint Death and Afro-Caribbean beliefs were also studied by Kali Argyriadis (2014) and Nahayelli Juárez Huet (2014).

The issue of stigmatization of Saint Death’s followers has also been a subject of scholarly reflection, often linked to other social issues. The feminist context of stigmatization was discussed by Manon Hedenborg-White (2014), while the relationships between the stigmatization of Saint Death’s followers and undocumented migration appear in the works of William Calvo-Quirós (2022, pp. 216–269) and in the collective publication by Eduardo González Velázquez, Eduardo García-Villada, and Timothy Knepper (2019, pp. 63–76). The

³As of November 2024.

⁴The information is based on interviews with devotees of Saint Death conducted during five research expeditions to Mexico between 2022 and 2024 (Mexico City, Mérida, Puebla, San Cristóbal de las Casas, Oaxaca, Tlaxcala).

economic background of this problem has been analyzed by Julie Cupples and Kevin Glynn (2020, pp. 117–134). The publication dates of these works indicate a marked increase in interest in this subject over the past decade. While the analysis of individual rituals has been the subject of the aforementioned publications, the reflection on the aesthetics of the cult and the phenomenon of intentional theatricalization have not been addressed in any of them. Among the few publications that address visual aspects, it is worth mentioning the work of Perdigón Castañeda (2015: 43–62), dedicated to the garments placed on the figures of Santa Muerte and their function and significance. Perdigón Castañeda is also the co-author (together with Bernardo Robles Aguirre) of a chapter devoted to the practice of tattooing the image of Santa Muerte by her devotees (2019: 158–182). The aforementioned publications by Michalik (2011, 2018) likewise refer to the aesthetic appeal of the figure of the patroness; however, individual elements (symbols, attributes, etc.) are analyzed primarily within the semiotic perspective adopted by the author. A pilgrimage in honor of Santa Muerte in Chetumal (Yucatán State), which exhibits certain theatrical elements, is mentioned by Higuera-Bonfil (2015: 96–109); however, these considerations are primarily anthropological in nature, and the performative aspect of these rituals is not addressed by the author.

Although the aforementioned publications have examined individual rituals, they have not addressed the aesthetical dimension of the cult or the phenomenon of intentional theatricalization of certain rituals. For this reason, it is worth examining this phenomenon using tools from performance studies, as they allow for capturing aspects of the cult of Saint Death that have thus far eluded studies grounded in anthropological, sociological, or religious approaches. The application of the conceptual framework proposed by Diana Taylor in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* is also justified by the methodological potential of performance studies in anthropological research as a means of challenging the ongoing dominance of Western thought in this field (Taylor, 2003, p. 7). Particularly intriguing from the perspective of research on practices originating from or inspired by the Indigenous cultures of the Americas are Taylor's proposals for new nomenclature – drawn directly from the specific regions under study – where “performance” might be replaced by *ollin* (Nahuatl: movement) or *areíto*, a term describing the religious dances and songs performed by the Taíno people (op. cit., pp. 14–15). Taylor herself highlights the functionality of this approach in the context of broadly understood Latin American studies:⁵

Conversely, Latin American studies (like other area studies) have much to offer performance studies. The historical debates concerning the nature and role of performance in the transmission of social knowledge and memory, allow us to think about embodied practice in a broader framework that complicates prevalent understandings (...) The methodology we associate with performance studies can and should be revised constantly through engagement with other regional, political, and linguistic realities (op. cit., p. XVIII).

⁵Thus, not only in the cultural, social, or religious context but also from the perspective of political transformations, among others.

Moreover, despite the partial randomness and unpredictability regarding the future transformations of the cult of Santa Muerte,⁶ certain key trends can be identified among the practices currently gaining popularity, which merit closer analysis. These trends are particularly pronounced in the iconographic sphere, which, in the case of Saint Death, evolves with exceptional dynamism and exhibits an unparalleled susceptibility – compared to most other religious phenomena – to external influences such as other cults and spiritual practices, works of popular culture, and folklore.

Manifestations of the Cult of Saint Death as Performance – Theoretical and Methodological Aspects

Particularly useful terms for describing these transformations appear to be Diana Taylor's concepts of the *repertoire* and the *archive*. The *repertoire* is especially relevant as it encompasses “performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (Taylor, 2003, p. 20), while the *archive* is understood as “documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change” (op. cit., p. 19). These concepts allow for a comprehensive analysis of the ritual sphere, including transformations in imagery and the private theology of individual devotees, as well as an examination of the influence of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage on the contemporary form of the cult of Saint Death.

Furthermore, they enable research that is not hindered by the complexity and diversity of the cult's sources or its modern transformations, which draw not from a singular *archive* but rather from multiple *archives*. Taylor herself highlights the potential of applying her theories in this manner, emphasizing: “The repertoire too, then, allows scholars to trace traditions and influences. Many kinds of performances have traveled throughout the Americas, leaving their mark as they move” (op. cit., p. 20).

The diversity of sources from which both the figure of Santa Muerte and the broader transformations within her cult originate – including ritual practices, devotional objects, the saint's imagery, as well as her attributes or ontological status – suggests that Taylor's concept of the *archive* should, in this case, be understood as multiple, independent *archives*. Their common point of convergence emerges only through the *repertoire* – the enacted set of activities, or performances, associated with Saint Death.

It is important to emphasize that this *repertoire* is not limited solely to rituals or religious practices dedicated to the patron saint but extends to the entirety of behaviors and actions for which Santa Muerte serves as a significant context, background, or point of reference. This is illustrated by the example (discussed in greater detail in the following section) of an individual with a tattoo depicting Saint Death. The tattoo remains constantly visible on the devotee's skin, even in everyday situations unrelated to the ritual sphere, and additionally serves an aesthetic function as a body ornament.

A distinctive feature of ritual practices within the *repertoire* is their ephemerality, particularly when contrasted with the permanence of elements belonging to the *archive*: “The question of disappearance in relation to the archive and the repertoire differs in kind as well as

⁶See also: Taylor, 2003, pp. 10–11.

degree” (op. cit., p. 20). This presents a significant challenge, especially given the essential condition Taylor imposes on elements of the *repertoire*: “The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission” (op. cit.).

Another distinguishing characteristic of the *repertoire* is that, by its very nature, it resists forms of recording or attempts at preservation, since “A video of a performance is not a performance, though it often comes to replace the performance as a thing in itself (the video is part of the archive; what it represents is part of the repertoire)” (op. cit.). Paradoxically, however, it is precisely this ephemerality and elusiveness that constitute not only the essence of the *repertoire* but also its strength. A single element – such as a theatrical performance, a song rendition, or the enactment of a ritual – is not limited to the event itself or to the individuals actively involved (“actors” understood as “agents,” or “individuals engaging in intentional action based on prior assumptions”). Rather, it carries within it a unique and unrepeatable context, atmosphere, and interactions with spectators or observers.

This is neither a weakness nor a flaw of the *repertoire* but rather its unique characteristic – one that cannot be fully “archived”: “Embodied memory, because it is live, exceeds the archive’s ability to capture it. But that does not mean that performance – as ritualized, formalized, or reiterative behavior – disappears” (op. cit.).

The transformations occurring within the cult of Saint Death are highly dynamic, driven by the continuous growth of its followers, the influence of popular culture, and syncretic processes. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain broader trends that frequently emerge and appear to be independent of geographical or social conditions. It is important to emphasize that the trends discussed and analyzed below serve as illustrative examples rather than an exhaustive account of the phenomenon, as the diversity of currents within the cult of Saint Death is remarkably vast.

At the same time, the outlined directions of change are particularly pronounced and have a direct impact on the aesthetic sphere. Moreover, their origins are deeply rooted in specific traditions, making it possible to trace the flow between *archives* and the *repertoire* with precision.

Despite the aforementioned elusiveness of elements within the *repertoire*, it is crucial to emphasize that this very characteristic also entails a susceptibility to change – an aspect of particular significance when studying phenomena undergoing such intense internal and external transformations as the cult of Saint Death:

As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning. (...) Dances change over time, even though generations of dancers (and even individual dancers) swear they’re always the same. But even though the embodiment changes, the meaning might very well remain the same (op. cit.).

As Diana Taylor points out, the application of these two complementary theoretical tools enables an in-depth analysis of the complex elements of contemporary culture, bridging historical background with its manifestations in everyday life:

The archive and the repertoire have always been important sources of information,

both exceeding the limitations of the other, in literate and semiliterate societies. They usually work in tandem and they work alongside other systems of transmission – the digital and the visual, to name two. Innumerable practices in the most literate societies require both an archival and an embodied dimension (op. cit., p. 21).

Mexican Folklore as a Source of Reinterpretation of Saint Death's Image

An undeniable icon of the Mexican Day of the Dead that has permeated popular culture is *La Catrina* – a caricature created during the Mexican Revolution by illustrator José Guadalupe Posada⁷ as a critique of the unreflective adoption of Western models among certain segments of the Mexican elite and bourgeoisie (Posada, 1910). The figure of a female skeleton dressed in a Victorian gown and adorned with an elaborate hat was later popularized by Diego Rivera in his mural *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park* (Rivera, 1946–1947). However, it is important to emphasize the inherently playful nature of *La Catrina*, whose presence – such as in the form of the characteristic makeup stylized as an ornately decorated skull – at festivities in late October and early November is primarily intended for entertainment and is not associated with religious practices.

Nevertheless, due to the visual resemblance between Saint Death and *La Catrina*, as well as their shared origin in Mexican culture, confusion and misinterpretations between these figures frequently arise. While such instances are not excessively common within Mexico itself, they occur regularly in Europe. This has been evidenced by my field research conducted in Madrid, which included in-depth interviews with owners and employees of stores specializing in Mexican handicrafts and religious artifacts, as well as observations of products referencing Mexican culture.⁸

Due to its skeletal form, *La Catrina* has gradually become an integral element of *Día de Muertos* celebrations, although the holiday itself has undergone significant transformations throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. In fact, the grand festivities of the Day of the Dead, as they are known today, are a 20th-century result of the nationalist policies implemented during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas del Río (1934–1940) (Malvido, 2007). Furthermore, in the second decade of the 21st century, these celebrations gained additional international recognition and visibility through films such as *Salma's Big Wish*, *Coco*, and *Spectre*. As a consequence of this lack of distinction between the Day of the Dead festivities, the figure of *La Catrina*, and Saint Death, they have increasingly merged into a single phenomenon associated with the motif of death in Latin American culture.

Paradoxically, although the conflation of *La Catrina* with Santa Muerte stems from mistaken assumptions, a contemporary phenomenon can be observed in which Saint Death is consciously and intentionally made to resemble *La Catrina*, incorporating elements of the *repertoire* associated with her (e.g., gowns, makeup, floral decorations). The image of the patron saint undergoes a particular form of aestheticization – not by concealing the skeleton or skull but by emphasizing attire and head coverings. Mexican folklore and folk traditions related to death

⁷Originally under the name *La Calavera Garbancera*.

⁸For example: clothing, cosmetics, or food products – on product labels such as spicy sauces (<https://roleski.pl/nowe-sosy-meksykanske-poco-juanita-i-santa-muerte-juz-dostepne-w-sklepach-sieci-lidl/>) or blush from the “Día de Muertos” edition (<https://wibo.pl/roze-do-policzkow/santa-muerte-color-changing-blush-742.html>) – a colorful skull and the inscription “Santa Muerte” appears.

(as well as their later reinterpretations through popular culture) have become an *archive* or a kind of repository that, in certain contexts, “supplies” Santa Muerte with symbols and ornaments.

This variant of the patron saint, referred to as *Santa Muerte Catrina*, has gained significant popularity over the past two decades and has spread among devotees. She is popular not only in the form of figurines placed on altars but also as a tattoo, although in this context the aforementioned confusion conflating Saint Death with La *Catrina* frequently occurs. Don Ramón, the owner of a religious goods store and founder of one of the oldest public chapels dedicated to Santa Muerte in Mérida, observed:

People who buy Santa Muerte Catrina are those who already have several statues – large, small, in different colors – but they want something new (...) This is not the typical image of La Santísima, but it looks beautiful, it is different from the usual one [in a dark robe with a hood and a scythe in hand – author’s note], and that’s why they also want to have this one.⁹

The celebrations of *Día de Muertos* are not the only *archive* rooted in Mexican folk traditions from which Santa Muerte devotees draw. Another notable example is the incorporation of aesthetics reminiscent of the *quinceañera* celebration. This ceremony, marking a girl’s 15th birthday, symbolizes her transition into adulthood in the presence of family and friends. The central attributes of the *quinceañera* are an elaborately decorated gown and a tiara – elements that have now also become decorative features of Santa Muerte statues. These adornments may be crafted directly by the devotee or custom-made to order (Kaleta, 2022, p. 49).

The Influence of Pre-Hispanic Heritage on Contemporary Ritual Practices

One of the richer *archives* from which Santa Muerte devotees currently draw inspiration is the pre-Columbian heritage of Mesoamerica. Although the origins of the Santa Muerte cult are clearly linked by scholars to the expansion of Christianity in the Viceroyalty of New Spain (Malvido, 2005, pp. 20–27; Michalik, 2011, pp. 162–165), contemporary practices reveal elements that reference pre-Hispanic beliefs and iconography, as well as their pop-cultural reinterpretations and imaginings of the times before the Conquest. This broadening of the *repertoire* of practices dedicated to Santa Muerte results in the *Aztecization* (Kania, 2018, p. 216), or more broadly, *paganization*¹⁰ of this cult.

A distinctive feature of this process is the *Santa Muerte Azteca* figure, which can be found in the majority of esoteric shops.¹¹ What sets it apart is primarily the multicolored feathered headdress, a traditional attribute of certain deities and the rulers who served as their earthly representations. However, it is often stylized to resemble headgear more typical of Indigenous

⁹Interview with Don Ramón, Mérida, 25.06.2022.

¹⁰In this context, the term “pagan practices” refers to beliefs and rituals of pre-Columbian origin, not limited solely to Aztec roots but also encompassing a set of activities undertaken by the Maya, Zapotecs, and others. These practices, especially during the Postclassic period, permeated the culture of the Triple Alliance states (Tenochtitlán, Texcoco, and Tlacopan) (Frankowska, 1987).

¹¹For example, in the case of Mercado Lucas de Gálvez in Mérida, 12 out of all 13 stalls offered such figures, while in San Cristóbal de las Casas, all five herbal-esoteric shops located near Mercado de la Caridad y Santo Domingo and Mercado Viejo had them available.

peoples from the Great Plains or Canada.¹² In some versions, additional ornaments are included, inspired by pre-Columbian reliefs (especially those referencing Indigenous calendars such as the Aztec Sun Stone or the Mayan Haab) and stone masks. The deliberate turn of Santa Muerte devotees towards Indigenous cultures can be analyzed on several levels – it certainly has an identity dimension, as it clearly indicates an identification with the pre-Hispanic past of the region and the need to emphasize not only the presence of ancestral heritage in this area but also the ongoing “activity” of pre-Columbian deities.

The growing interest in (re)constructing¹³ ancient rituals is evident not only in the case of the Santa Muerte cult, as indicated by Michalik (2011) and Argyriadis (2014), but also within Mexican New Age movements and local neopagan groups. However, it should be noted that these manifestations often have a very superficial character, frequently even contradicting the current state of archaeological or anthropological knowledge. An example of this is the widespread use of the term *Azteca* to refer to this version of the patroness’s figure, even when the Indigenous population in a given area (e.g., the Yucatán Peninsula or Chiapas) mainly belongs to Mayan groups. The *Santa Muerte Azteca* thus becomes a collective representation of the idea of indigeneity, although it is important to emphasize that, despite the continued spread of this cult and its growing number of followers, it remains primarily an urban phenomenon, mainly attracting Mestizos.¹⁴

In addition to the use of props characteristic of pre-Columbian cultures to manifest one’s identification with Indigenous heritage, the Aztecization of the figure of Santa Muerte also demonstrates a belief in the continuity of the existence of deities from the pre-Hispanic period and a conviction about their agency. The belief in a direct connection between Santa Muerte and Mictlantecuhтли or other figures from pre-Columbian pantheons has often been mentioned by respondents. The patroness, who is rejected and condemned by the Church, thus becomes a kind of bridge between Catholicism and the Indigenous practices that were systematically eradicated during the Spanish colonization; this connection also corresponds with her popularity among those excluded or socially marginalized for various reasons. It is worth noting that the presence of Indigenous motifs in the cult of Santa Muerte is not limited to the visual sphere; in some cases, it also extends to the ritual aspect. This is exemplified by the involvement of *concheros* groups in the artistic framework of ceremonies dedicated to Santa Muerte organized in the city of Veracruz, as noted by Flores Martos (2008, pp. 64–66). Performances by *concheros* were also observed during the patroness’s day celebrations on October 31, 2024, in Mérida. The appearance of this particular dance in the context of a cult with such complex origins and significant internal dynamics of transformation is particularly interesting due to the occurrence of a kind of flow

¹²It is worth noting the similarity between the headdresses placed on Santa Muerte figures and those seen on statuettes depicting Native American warriors from the USA (sometimes referred to by sellers as “Indio Apache”). Figurines of archers or horsemen can be found mainly in larger esoteric shops, while in smaller stalls, they appear less frequently than images of Buddha, Santa Muerte, or Saint Jude Thaddeus.

¹³Due to the colonizers’ widespread practice of destroying Indigenous material heritage and banning the cultivation of traditions, many contemporary rituals unrelated to the agrarian sphere are more of an illustration of modern perceptions of the past rather than an accurate reconstruction of actual ceremonies. An additional factor motivating such (re)constructive activities is so-called ethno-tourism (Fernández Repetto, Estrada Burgos, 2014).

¹⁴As noted by Schwartz-Marín and Silva-Zolezzi (2010), the issue of belonging to specific ethnic groups is also controversial. From a genetic perspective, approximately 60% of Mexico’s population can be classified as Mestizo, while around 30% belong to Indigenous groups. However, based on cultural affiliation, up to 90% of contemporary Mexicans can be considered Mestizo.

between the *archive* and the *repertoire*. As Taylor points out:

The rift does not lie between the written and spoken word, but between the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual) (Taylor, 2003, p. 19).

In this specific case of the contemporary *concheros* dances, it is important to highlight their sources, which – alongside Aztec dances and the *Danza de Moros y Cristianos* brought by the Spaniards – also include early colonial chronicles and artifacts found by archaeologists, especially musical instruments (González Torres, 2005, pp. 113–149). These are objects originating from the archive, which gain their update in contemporary repertorial practices. Thus, the *concheros* dances not only represent an important example of Mexican syncretism but also illustrate the interpenetration and mutual influences between the region's material and immaterial heritage, much like the case with the figure of Santa Muerte, albeit on a smaller scale. The significance of these dances, especially the subversive potential of the *Danza de Moros y Cristianos*, is also emphasized by Taylor:

Transcripts, normally understood as written copy or documents, transfer archival knowledge within a specific economy of interaction. This mock battle (the Dance of Moors and Christians) makes clear that it's the embodied nature of the repertoire that grants these social actors the opportunity to rearrange characters (Taylor, 2003, p. 31).

As indicated, a key feature of this cult is the lack of orthodoxy and dogma, as well as openness to innovation and the individual needs of its followers. This is manifested in the private rituals of individual *devotos*, some of which show strong influences from Native American cultures. This is evidenced by the statement of a Santa Muerte devotee from Veracruz,¹⁵ who compared his tattoos of Saint Death to the body modification practices performed by Maya elites.¹⁶ This is a very unique attitude towards tattooing images of patrons, as most of their bearers treat them more as amulets, talismans, votive offerings, or thanksgiving gifts. However, it should be noted that this issue is relatively underexplored, with most researchers focusing on collecting material from specific environments – such as among incarcerated individuals or former prisoners (Predigón Castañeda, 2008, p. 57; Vargas, 2017, p. 113; Higuera-Bonfil, 2015, p. 99).

The Syncretization of the Cult of Santa Muerte and Afro-Caribbean Beliefs

Drawing from the *archives* and remnants of pre-Columbian cultural *repertoires*, as well as attempts to reintegrate certain artifacts and practices into the structures of contemporary everyday life, are significant yet not the only transformations occurring within the image of Santa Muerte, the ritual sphere, and even the ontological domain. In recent years, scholarly interest in the connections between the cult of Santa Muerte, spiritism, and Afro-Caribbean belief systems such as Santería has grown considerably (Michalik, 2018; Juárez Huet, 2014; Argyriadis, 2014).

¹⁵Interview with Roberto L. F., Mérida, 12.07.2022.

¹⁶For example, tattooing, skull deformation, inducing strabismus, scarification, and piercing of the ears, nose, and lips.

Particularly intriguing is the multidimensional relationship between Santa Muerte and Yemayá – an orisha present in Yoruba beliefs, associated with the sea, the element of water, and love (de la Torre, 2004, pp. 72–74). Unlike Aztec mythology, the cosmology of enslaved individuals and their descendants, forcibly transported from Africa to the colonies of the so-called New World, has not been extensively documented. Referring to Spanish chronicles that recount the destruction of pre-Columbian heritage (e.g., Durán, 1994; de las Casas, 1998), Taylor observes that “written documents have repeatedly announced the disappearance of the performance practices involved in mnemonic transmission” (Taylor, 2003, pp. 36).

Paradoxically, despite the absence of a traditionally conceived archive, the ritual practices of the Yoruba, Bantu, Igbo, and Fon peoples have endured. As Taylor indicates, this persistence is due to the fact that “nonverbal practices – such as dance, ritual, and cooking, to name a few – that long served to preserve a sense of communal identity and memory, were not considered valid forms of knowledge” (op. cit., p. 18). In contemporary times, a phenomenon parallel to the Aztecization of the Santa Muerte cult is the incorporation of elements derived from Afro-Caribbean practices, particularly Afro-Cuban Santería. One of the most emblematic examples of this syncretism is the complex relationship between Santa Muerte and the aforementioned Yemayá.

On a visual and symbolic level, Santa Muerte adopts from Yemayá certain attributes, including her characteristic color (white), prominently defined breasts and hips, and half of her face. As a result, she is most commonly referred to as *Santa Muerte Encarnada* (Spanish for “Incarnate/Embodied Holy Death”). Another variant of this figure is Santa Muerte depicted with a pregnant belly, a representation particularly favored by women praying for fertility or a safe childbirth (Michalik, 2018, pp. 15–16). This version, especially prevalent in the coastal state of Veracruz (Flores Martos, 2007, pp. 292–302),¹⁷ places a strong emphasis on femininity, motherhood, and love. These attributes, in turn, influence the ritual sphere, as the coexistence of Santa Muerte and Yemayá – or their hybrid representations¹⁸ – is most commonly observed in love-binding rituals known as *amarres* (Chesnut, 2012, pp. 121–133; Papenfuss, 2022, pp. 9–10).

The complex relationship between these two figures within a broader historical and social perspective in the state of Veracruz has been analyzed by Argyriadis (2018, pp. 817–852). This particular example clearly illustrates a distinctive feature of Santa Muerte – her exceptional capacity to “absorb countless elements from heterogeneous visual codes, ritual grammar, and belief systems” (Michalik, 2018, p. 17).

The oldest, most widespread, and characteristic example of syncretic processes between Santa Muerte and *Santería* is *Santa Muerte de Siete Potencias*. The seven-colored figurines of the patron saint, with each color corresponding to a specific domain of influence (e.g., red for love, blue for wisdom, gold for wealth), gained popularity as early as the late 20th century (Thompson, 1998, pp. 405–436). Due to the ubiquity of this version of Santa Muerte – widely

¹⁷In the state of Veracruz, there is Catemaco, commonly known as *Ciudad de los Brujos* (Spanish for “City of Witches”), which plays a key role as one of the centers for syncretic processes occurring within the cult of Santa Muerte and its relationship with Santería (Papenfuss, 2022, pp. 1–20).

¹⁸For example, the mentioned *Santa Muerte Encarnada* or other variants, such as the White Sister – *Hermana Blanca* – or the White Flower of the Universe – *La Flor Blanca del Universo* (Flores Martos, 2007, pp. 292–302).

available in the vast majority of esoteric shops¹⁹ – it has been frequently referenced by scholars in the context of connections between the Santa Muerte cult and Afro-Cuban practices (Chesnut, 2012, p. 26; Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, 2018, pp. 70–71; Quiroga, 2011, p. 286).

However, it is important to note that the theory linking specific colors to prayer intentions or domains of influence is deeply rooted in Western esotericism and alchemical traditions. Joscelyn Godwin (2017) highlights this in his work, presenting a series of tables that illustrate various configurations of relationships between colors and their meanings or applications (Godwin, 2017, pp. 455, 458, 461). For this reason, the interconnections between Western esotericism, alchemy, *Santería*, and the Santa Muerte cult require further investigation to accurately delineate the direction of the exchange of elements among these traditions. The seven-colored Santa Muerte is also referred to in some contexts as the “rainbow” Santa Muerte, which, combined with her perception as a patroness of the excluded and stigmatized, makes her a particularly appealing figure for LGBTQ individuals. The complex relationships between non-heteronormative and non-cisgender individuals and Mexican folk-Catholic cults are discussed in greater depth in the work of Karina Bárcenas Barajas (2019).

The Influence of Mexican Catholicism on the Image of Santa Muerte

The most widespread image of Saint Death is that of a female skeleton clad in a long, hooded robe, holding a scythe. This depiction appears not only on ritual paraphernalia such as statues of various sizes and candles, but also on clothing items, jewelry, and tattoos. In this case, clear inspirations from late medieval art are evident – motifs such as *danse macabre* and *memento mori* found in both visual arts and literature – as well as from Baroque aesthetics, particularly *vanitas* and temporal motifs.²⁰ This closely relates to the aforementioned origins of the cult, which are rooted in Christianity. It also corresponds with the fact that the vast majority of Santa Muerte devotees consider themselves Catholics (Perdigón Castañeda, 2008: 139–158). However, beyond the classical depiction of the skeleton in a habit, there are also other representations of Saint Death that are clearly inspired by elements of orthodox Catholicism.

Due to Santa Muerte’s pronounced tendency to assimilate artifacts, aesthetics, and rituals – both archival (e.g., those documented in chronicles) and those still practiced within the *repertoires* of various cultural or religious groups – Michalik has referred to Santa Muerte as the “Gluttonous Saint” (Michalik, 2018, pp. 17), while Flores Martos describes the phenomenon as *el culto canibal* (Flores Martos, 2008, pp. 61–62). From this perspective, the comparison between Santa Muerte and the figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe appears even more intriguing. As Taylor notes (2003, pp. 45–50), the Virgin of Guadalupe originally emerged as a transformation of the pre-Columbian goddess Tonantzin, whose name in Nahuatl means “Our Venerable Mother.”²¹

¹⁹All 13 devotional stalls at Mercado Lucas de Gálvez in Mérida had *Santa Muerte de siete potencias* figurines, while among the 23 esoteric shops located at Mercado de Sonora in Mexico City, as many as 22 of them sold such figures.

²⁰In this context, particular attention should be paid to the attributes meant to illustrate fragility, transience, the passage of time, the inevitability of death, and decay, which appear in still-life paintings. The hourglass, globe, balance scale, sword, and skull are among the typical attributes commonly seen on figures of Saint Death, although their prevalence is surpassed by that of the scythe.

²¹The goddess Tonantzin is also linked to the Virgin Mary by the epithet *Coatlaxopeuh*, which can be translated as “she who crushed the serpent.” The apparition of the Virgin Mary to Juan Diego also took place on the hill of Tepeyac, which was the center of Tonantzin’s cult.

William Madsen classifies the results of such processes as *Christopaganism* (Madsen, 2011), while Taylor employs the term “satanic equivocation” (2003, p. 44), emphasizing that this dynamic allowed worshippers kneeling before the image of Guadalupe to direct their prayers to Tonantzin, with whom the Virgin came to share lunar symbolism, the motif of battling the serpent, the role of a protective deity, and key places of worship.

In contemporary practice, however, it is Mary who has become a “donor” of symbols and attributes, which are subsequently adopted by Santa Muerte. Among the elements borrowed from the Virgin of Guadalupe are the starry mantle, the halo, and the crescent moon – features visible in the earliest known depictions of Santa Muerte, dating back to the first half of the 20th century (Michalik, 2018, p. 14). A particularly prominent variant in figurines is Santa Muerte wearing a crown, with hands clasped in prayer, surrounded by a characteristic nimbus. Additionally, many stores offer *Santa Muerte Piadosa*, a representation mirroring the classical Pietà composition, in which the patroness cradles either a human skeleton or a female body, depending on the version. In some instances, Santa Muerte is even directly identified with Our Lady of Guadalupe (Michalik, 2011, pp. 171–173).

Awareness of this relationship is significant both among Santa Muerte devotees and orthodox Catholics, some of whom strongly oppose this syncretism, despite their general acceptance of the Santa Muerte cult and tolerance toward its followers. This issue was most frequently raised by Catholics²² during interviews on Mexican folk saints, as exemplified by the statement of Doña Carmela:

I don't mind that people pray to her (Santa Muerte). For example, I pray to Our Lord God, but everyone should do as they please. Just don't turn her (Santa Muerte) into another Virgin of Guadalupe, okay? Because that's not allowed, that's not acceptable. And that's exactly what I don't like.²³

The deeply rooted veneration of Catholic saints in Mexico also influences the ritual practices associated with folk saints, who are not officially recognized by the Church. A notable example of this phenomenon is the widely available figurine of Santa Muerte seated on a rearing horse, often holding a lance with the blade pointing downward. This imagery is clearly inspired by Saint George battling the dragon. Another, somewhat less common, variant of the “warrior” Santa Muerte is an image depicting her in full armor, sometimes with angelic wings. In this case, the religious connotations are less explicit than in the Saint George–inspired representation, yet references to Christian hagiography emerged in interviews conducted with vendors. When asked about these particular figures, sellers at esoteric product stalls described Santa Muerte as a “warrior of God”²⁴ or compared her to Archangel Michael: “She has wings like an angel, but one with a sword, like Saint Michael.”²⁵

²²The term used for individuals who identified as Catholics but were not associated with religious practices that were not accepted by the Church, nor with the cult of non-canonical saints.

²³Interview with Doña Carmela, Mérida, 26.06.2022.

²⁴Interview with Doña Sol, San Cristóbal de las Casas, 07.07.2022.

²⁵Interview with Luisem G., Mexico City, 11.02.2023.

Concluding Remarks

The pursuit of originality and the incorporation of new elements to enrich and diversify ritual practices is a defining characteristic of the Santa Muerte cult. The expansion of its *repertoire* and the search for inspiration in other religious movements and aesthetic traditions drive transformations in both the image of the patroness and the ways in which devotion is expressed. In addition to the devotees themselves – who engage in such experimentation by decorating altars, dressing statues, and organizing events dedicated to the patroness (rosaries, novenas, processions, and pilgrimages) – a significant role is played by vendors of religious artifacts, who continually seek to diversify their inventory. This dynamic fosters the emergence of various, often surprising, hybrid forms, such as the figure described by Michalik of a Buddha statue with a small image of Santa Muerte enclosed within its transparent belly (Michalik, 2011, pp. 171–173).

Spontaneity is also a crucial factor in the development of certain practices, as exemplified by the tradition initiated by Doña Enriqueta Romero of dressing large-scale Santa Muerte statues in elaborate gowns.²⁶ These kinds of interactions influence the personal theology of individual followers, and given the continuous growth of the cult and its openness to innovation, the practices and cosmologies associated with Santa Muerte are in a state of constant evolution. They absorb artifacts, rituals, beliefs, and aesthetics from a wide range of sources – including non-religious phenomena – making the trajectory of these changes difficult to predict. Moreover, beyond the strictly religious or ritual context, these transformations are also evident in the sphere of everyday life. This is closely related to the aforementioned esoteric market, which in Mexico is remarkably extensive and continues to develop in a dynamic manner.²⁷ As a result, the changes described can be observed not only during visits to public or domestic altars or while participating in rituals in honor of the patroness, but also while walking through the city or traveling by public transportation. Santa Muerte is present in jewelry (necklaces, bracelets), clothing (especially T-shirts, though sweatshirts, caps, and even footwear can also be found), tattoos, and other decorative elements (such as vehicle or helmet stickers, and graffiti on buildings). The conceptual tools proposed by Taylor, such as *archive* and *repertoire*, provide a framework for tracing the origins and development of these transformations. The notion of *repertoire*, in particular, allows for a comprehensive understanding of the practices and activities in which Santa Muerte serves as a point of reference, context, or backdrop. In this way, it becomes possible to fully appreciate the extraordinary nature of the Santa Muerte phenomenon, which should not be confined solely to the religious sphere, as it also extends into a broad spectrum of *everyday performances*.

²⁶Doña Enriqueta Romero is the madrina of one of the oldest chapels dedicated to Santa Muerte, established in 2001 on Alfarería Street in the Tepito district of the capital. The statue displayed there was dressed in a wedding gown that had belonged to Doña Enriqueta, who claimed that she no longer had space for it in her home and thus offered it to Santa Muerte. Both the image of the patron saint in a bridal gown and the practice of dressing larger statues in various costumes (nowadays, one can find Santa Muerte dressed as a fairy or Santa Claus, for example) quickly spread among devotees and have become one of the most dynamically growing trends (Quiroga, 2011, pp. 279–300).

²⁷This is evidenced, among other things, by the large number of shops and stalls offering devotional items and paraphernalia – mentioned in the present work – which can be encountered at numerous urban marketplaces throughout the country.

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The “Cultic” and Secular Epic Art: Modernity’s Priests, Carol Duncan, Angelica Mesiti, and the Great White Space

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Abstract

This article considers two examples of contemporary art practice, their use of ritual and the secular-cultic deployment of this ritual. To do this, it will propose an original analysis based on a “cultic” paradigm to examine the framing, placement, and impact of this art – one that delineates creative production through the genre of the epic and the conditions of secular Modernity. Two compelling examples of video/installation art by the Australian artist Angelica Mesiti (1976–) will be deployed. It will suggest that the “secular” settings of this art enable the emotive and ontological use of secular gallery space, and that this legitimises several secular-sacred ultimate concerns. The “cultic” analysis used here will be drawn from the theories and methodologies of Carol Duncan in her examination of art and the secular. It will extend her thinking to fully examine the use of the “cultic” as managed by the official systems to reinforce the state’s totalising claims to authenticity.

Keywords:

Atmospheres, Religion and Contemporary Art, Epic, Angelica Mesiti, Carol Duncan, the Cultic, Art Gallery of New South Wales

Introduction

Speculation on contemporary art practice need not necessarily be a *pressing* concern of the scholar of new religions. In this research, however, I seek to examine two examples of contemporary art production by one artist in order to examine how this art is used by the state in a “cultic” way. What follows is no study of the unquestionably religious; rather, it is set on the fringes of this field. This should enable us to better examine some of the terms we use in our methodological approaches to the secular as a “religious-but-not-religious” space. Thus, I will focus on artefacts, atmospheres, and behaviors that are not regularly taken to be religious, cult-like, or cultic. Working with examples (that remain “questionably”

religious) will provide me with the chance to better examine how our concepts of religion and the cultic are constructed and compromised by the ongoing conditions of Modernity. I will use two outstanding examples of video art from the Australian artist Angelica Mesiti.¹ I make this choice not because Mesiti simply *does* art. Rather, I will demonstrate here how she maintains a particular talent for working in an “Epic” genre – making a style of art that reflects on narrational and highly emotive dimensions of Modernity and the national. This places her creative work in a particular category of practice that affords her art a special use for the Modern, secular, public art gallery. It is in this atmosphere that the “cultic” dimensions of art can be most fully explored. The purpose of this essay is then, at the end, to make a more complete assessment of how we can speak of the “cultic” (and the religious) as an operational dimension of the secular.

Terms and Methodology

“Cultic”, although it appears in the title of this journal, is not commonly used in English. It points directly to “cult” – a word that scholars of new religions and high-demand groups shy away from. The debate is long and well known, but “cult” comes with a pejorative use in the popular media and operates as a category that seeks to reserve deviance and even criminality for the field of “new” or less official religious activity – when of course the link between deviance, faith, and criminality can be found quite easily in old and official religions as much as in the new. *The Oxford English Dictionary* simply says of “cultic” that it pertains to a religious cult.² But as an adjective, “cultic” does lift itself away from the “cult” debate somewhat. Moreover, both “cult” and “cultic” carry a shadow of the French *culte* – which less pejoratively indicates ritual action and worship more than it refers to novel power structures and charismatically based institutions. *Culte* is also evocative of a *τέμενος* (*temenos*). A *τέμενος* (*temenos*) required a particular action or respect as one approached it, but the space did not necessarily require those who crossed its boundaries to understand a complex theology or dogma, meet a priest, or acknowledge a guardian institution. It was a space that existed in opposition to more ritualized and urbanized spaces. Colin Campbell developed the concept of “cultic milieu” under the tone of this institutional informality.³ His term points to a more vernacular series of spaces and groups, more likely to operate *underground* or well outside the given expectations of the religious mainstream. This is what I take “cultic” to be in this research, but in a secular, Modern mode, it describes something much more than just an oppositional practice. As a sub-culture, Campbell’s “cultic” movements present alternatives and challenges to both the status quo and the power assumptions which manifest within a particular society’s accepted worldview. This is why, in their study of Campbell, Kaplan and Lööw speak of these less formal groups as “oppositional” subcultures.⁴ This brings me to the heart of what I am investigating here: can

¹ Angelica Mesiti, “Angelica Mesiti Official Site,” n.d., accessed December 1, 2025, <http://www.angelicamesiti.com>.

² *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second, vol. 4, ed. J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner (Clarendon Press, 1989), under “Cultic.”

³ Colin Campbell, “The Cult, The Cultic Milieu, and Secularization,” *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972).

⁴ Jeffrey Kaplan and Hel’ene Lööw, eds., *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of*

we link the idea of an “oppositional” subculture to a state-funded institution, and if we can, what does this mean for Modern secularity?

This article will be, then, guided by the question: what is it that the “oppositional” cultic milieu actually opposes? If we use a Marxist paradigm, we might say it opposes “established power structures” or the “prevailing hegemony”. This may be, but the “status quo” in Modern democratic systems is a subtle, multifaceted manifestation of power and compromise. The state certainly retains the right to deploy the blatant use of legal force, sometimes even fatal force against its citizens when needed, but often the Modern state seeks to create a totalizing response for its citizens – one that always aims to amplify and reinforce its authority and authenticity. This totalizing response means that while there might be oppositional subcultures (Campbell’s cultic milieu), these more fringe cultures are met by the “oppositional” cultic actions of the state itself. If this “oppositional” response did not happen, then the claims of the state would not be total. Here I differ from the work done by Martha Nussbaum. In her great project of examining (and seeking to make more impactful and useful) the political emotions of Modernity, she conceives of the state as a collective project where citizens seek to engage with the republic at multiple levels, including the deeply emotional.⁵ I think her approach is mostly sound, but there is a naivety here as well. Her thinking, however, raises a tension between the affective labor of the state and the affective projects of oppositional subcultures, a tension that Nussbaum approaches from a different but illuminating angle. As we will see with Duncan, when we come to the political uses of the state-funded gallery, significant late-Feudal and aristocratic models are rolled over into Modernity for the sake of the continued prestige of the state’s authority. This is done in a way that *compels* the citizen to recognize the legitimacy of prevailing power structures at various emotional levels *despite* the rational and democratic contributions citizens might collectively make to the life of their polity.

In her *Civilizing Rituals* (2010), Duncan gives a particular history of the rise of the state-sponsored secular art gallery.⁶ She begins with showing how this idea develops from the princely *Wunderkammers* that emerged in European courts from the 1600s onwards. In these displays of artefacts and art, the local prince was able to demonstrate his taste and refinement, and, by extension, declare his authenticity as a ruler on aesthetic and emotive levels. These princely collections added to the ruler’s prestige and his legitimacy – particularly to those courtiers and genteel members of the middle classes who were granted invitations to these ostensibly private royal collections. Duncan traces this prestige-granting cultural machinery as it applies to the developing secular state. Not surprisingly, one part of the republican legitimacy sought by revolutionaries in France after 1789 was founded when they converted the Louvre Palace into the world’s first state-funded public gallery. She writes:

In a relatively short time, the Louvre’s directors (drawing partly on Italian and German precedents) worked out a whole set of practices that came to characterize art

Globalization (AltaMira Press, 2002).

⁵ Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁶ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (Routledge, 2010).

museums everywhere. In short, the museum organized its collections into art-historical schools and installed them so as to make visible the development and achievement of each school.⁷

Of this trend, more recent examples abound where the state art gallery gives the impression of aesthetic and historical arbiter on behalf of its citizens. The gallery is also a guardian of the precious and the sacred things of the state.⁸ These objects certify the national story. To pick another example, and sticking with France, let us consider how the celebration of the “epic” destiny of the state and its precious things was utilized by the power structure. We can note the work done by the restoration monarch Louis-Philippe (r. 1830–1848). He transmogrified numerous galleries at Versailles into a public museum which celebrated “all the glories of France.” This included numerous exhibits extolling the exceptional character and achievements of Napoleon and the First French Empire. In this way, the Orleans monarch rested an amount of his legitimacy upon his role as custodian of the legacy of those national leaders who preceded him (including one from the competing house of Bonaparte).⁹ Such uses of the museum and the gallery lay bare the political uses of authority after the public gallery became a part of the Western experience. Galleries, however, can also be more subtle in their affective emotive experiences and in the legitimacy they grant.

Duncan examines the modern reality of what gallery spaces mean and focuses on their ritual aspects carried out in and around what she calls the “great white boxes” of the gallery. Here she is referring to those spaces in the gallery in which permanent displays are set and sometimes rearranged, but more importantly she is interested in those spaces where temporary exhibitions are regularly erected, advertised, and, after some time, packed away again. These temporary exhibitions create an “event” of note in the ritual year of the state and bring new focus to particular aspects of what the state is able to aesthetically present and the ritual experiences that go with them. So it is into these boxes that the learned and priest-like technicians of the state’s collected treasures (i.e. professional curators), arrange and rearrange exhibitions of artefacts for maximum affective impact. These are the “civilizing rituals” of her study’s title. She concludes:

The museum’s ritual program and mass advertising imply each other. Together, they construct a new individualist self, one which exists at the centre of a boundless, a-social universe that is both spiritual and material. In the cult of high art, this self strives for spiritual, implicitly male, purity by transcending the limited and finite material world.... In the museum’s liminal space, the modern soul can know itself as above, outside of, and even against the values that shape its existence.¹⁰

In light of this work, I propose that we can now see a concatenation of rituals taking place

⁷ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 24.

⁸ Zoe Alderton, “The Secular Sacred Gallery: Religion at Te Papa Tongarewa,” in *Secularisation: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Christopher Hartney (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

⁹ The life of this preservation of Bonaparte’s prestige had an interesting afterlife, for after the very brief interregnum of the Second Republic, the House of Orleans was replaced by Napoleon III.

¹⁰ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 131–132.

throughout the life of the Modern polity. The first level of action is the slow ritual of selecting, commissioning, and appropriating the storehouse of artefacts that may be displayed by the state in its galleries. The second ritual level is the curatorial preparation of the displays and exhibitions into ideal pathways of thematic comprehension in these “white boxes.” Here, the ordering of various objects and the research and narration created to frame them demonstrates the care and insight the state applies to the preservation and comprehension of the objects so gathered for exhibitions. This is often completed with an ideal movement in mind as a viewer will pass through the exhibition. Then come the advertising campaigns that announce a new ritual line has been established in the gallery. When an exhibition opens – there is an imagined “ritual” path that viewers will take as they move through the displays – here is the third level of ritualization. Then we come to the ultimate level of ritual, which I want to concentrate on below. In some cases, there is a fourth level of ritual. It may be that the objects on display will relate to or seek to replicate cultic ritual activity themselves. This is the case with the two artefacts chosen as examples here.

In these ways, the Modern state creates its own cultic behaviors to emotionally, ritualistically, and religiously confirm its own authenticity. From this proposition we should consider, as we proceed, the following problematic: as the “status quo”, can the Modern state engage in “cultic” behavior if that behavior is deemed “official”? Here I will argue yes, but as we will see, this “yes” comes with a confronting sub-clause in the Modern social contract.

Any “cultic” action of the state cannot be directly addressed as religious because of compelling legal reasons. In Modern nations such as Australia and the United States (and no doubt many others), it may be calamitous to assert that the state carries out its own cultic and religious activities – given that such activities are expressly forbidden by various Modern constitutions. This sub-clause will then present the scholar of religions with his or her first hurdle: that those who participate in the cultic behavior of the state are probably the first to deny its cultic nature and are paid (with wages) to deny it. Moreover, it is the implied duty of the scholar of religion to academically substantiate those constitutional clauses that make this distinction. In the way we define religion as scholars, we also maintain categories laid out in the Modern constitution. Fitzgerald has argued that recent definitions of religion, and the activity of religious studies, do nothing but reinforce constructed Modern categories that obscure political and economic realities by singling out a “non-political” and “non-economic” activity which gets labelled “religion”. Nevertheless, Fitzgerald misses the import of the legal reality.¹¹ In Australia, it is Clause 116 of the Commonwealth Constitution that compels the state to abstain from establishing a national religion. In the United States, there is both the First Amendment, and Document 1828 of the Inland Revenue Service that confirms this. It follows that if I expand my definition of religion to encompass “official” cultic activity, an unconstitutional breach is suddenly highlighted.

Therefore, can the religious rituals of state can be excused as simply “cultic” – so that (forgetting the Classical Greek example of a τέμενος and the cultic requirements of being in

¹¹ Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

that space) such things are not really religious? For when we look at Australia, we quickly find a cultic activity that also operates as my nation's most successful new religion. It is found in the sacred spaces, worship systems, memorial temples, and annual rituals we officially make to commemorate our war dead.¹² When, however, I came together earlier this year with a number of scholar-colleagues to plan out a monograph for the history of new religions in Australia, collectively we agreed to leave out the study of this national cult. Is it a new religion? I would strongly argue that it is. Yet because it is an *official* state cult, it really does not fit the themes of challenging innovation, deviancy, social renewal, and unofficial fringe existence that determine the category of new religions in Australia. It is, we might say, constitutionally off the radar.

Now that we have turned this examination of the cultic into a question of “official” and “oppositional” ritual behavior, let us apply this to the operation of the state gallery. We have already seen how the cultic milieu encompasses more oppositional movements. I suggest here the “cultic” also includes official and state-managed ritual action – actions that reinforce authority structures – so that now we thus find ourselves in a system where the state takes part in cultic behaviors while simultaneously denying a connection to any official religious activity. State-funded art galleries don't come with their own theologies, but they clearly play with ritual and affect. And we can see this in the following analysis of Mesiti's works as artefacts that embody ritual and generate official affect.

The first of her works I discuss was displayed in 2009 as one of the finalists for an Australian religious art prize.¹³ It was quickly acquired by the (state-owned) Art Gallery of New South Wales – which is the context in which I explore it here. The second art work was commissioned by the same gallery in January 2020 and developed to its installation at the end of 2024.¹⁴

Rapture (Silent Anthem)

This is a 10'10"-long piece of video art that made news upon its first display in 2009. It was the first work of video art to win the Blake Prize for Religious Art – a well-known national art prize. I encountered *Rapture* in an exhibition curated at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2013. The exhibition was entitled *We Used to Talk About Love*.¹⁵ The video was playing on a screen suspended by wires in space as if hovering by its own power four feet

¹² Ken Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (Melbourne University Press, 2008); Christopher Hartney, “States of Ultimacy and the Cult of the Dead Soldier: The ANZAC Tradition, The Secularisation Paradigm, The Charisma of Materiality, and Civil Religion as It Is Embodied in the Australian War Memorial, Canberra,” in *Secularisation: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Christopher Hartney (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014); Zoe Alderton and Christopher Hartney, “ANZAC Celebration During the COVID 19 Pandemic: Observations from Fieldwork in Katoomba, New South Wales,” *Fieldwork in Religion* 16, no. 1 (2021): 8–34.

¹³ Zoe Alderton, “The Limits of Taste: Politics, Aesthetics, and Christ in Contemporary Australia,” *Literature and Aesthetics* 21, no. 2 (2011): 65–93.

¹⁴ Art gallery of New South Wales, ed., *Angelica Mesiti: The Rites of When [Exhibition, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 21 September 2024–11 May 2025]* (Art Gallery NSW, 2024).

¹⁵ <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/we-used-to-talk-about-love/>, See also: *Natasha Bullock* (ed): *We Used to Talk About Love*, (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2013).

above the floor. The room was white, and a single wooden bench invited some of the viewers close to the screen to sit and watch. What appeared on the screen in a loop could be described in the following manner:

A fade from whites to colours slowly takes place on the screen. Faces begin to appear, young faces. It is as if the forms of their existence are drawn out of a summer haze. The eyes of the youths are wide and locked into something devotional that is just ahead of them. What we lack is any kind of frame for where or how these faces may be in the world. What entrances them? Over the 10 minutes of video, we never see what they see. We only see that they are focused on the same point. Their faces and their eyes move in slow motion. It is a cinematic style that has recently been excessively used to signal moments of grave and sometimes cosmic import. A form of narration is implied by the lack of context – if we keep watching, perhaps a *dénouement* will allow us a frame, a context. This never comes. The eyes of these youths are upward-focused and adoring, they are rhythmically nodding – their action intimates music, or ritual, or both, but the watcher of the video hears nothing. The slow motion of the action gives the video an aura of rapture or of drugged timelessness. Additionally, because of a lack of reference we are excluded from their rapture. We remain outside observers. Thus, these faces become “sacred” at the very least in the Latin meaning of that word (“*sacerdos*”) – as something set apart. This exclusion of the audience from any connection of these faces to the “seen thing” is something that images at a regular speed would emphasise less.

Through various scenes, there is a kind of spray washing over the screen – is it mist? – sweat? – something tangible invades the ether. The crowd seems to be reveling in its joyous power, as Canetti has it, so that although the camera may focus on particular individuals, it is their existence in the corporate nature of the crowd and their fascination that also fascinates us.¹⁶ The slow motion provides the viewer with the details of each eye movement, each point at which each face seems to focus and refocus on whatever it is they are watching. Mouths open, sudden manifestations of intense happiness burst across the faces shown. Then there is a white-out. It suggests that sun, heat, and water have overwhelmed the capacities of the camera to capture something. Then images return from the white-out. We refocus on the mouth of a young girl; her teeth are interlaced with braces. She is screaming, but then her mouth falls into a broad and satisfying smile. She is screaming but all the time, silence fills the gallery room.

One of the final scenes has a group of boy-men leaping on the spot; their actions seem tribal, their mouths chanting lyrics or incantations. Wet hair, heads thrown back in screams of delight which we cannot hear (Keats: *Ode on a Nightingale*, ‘the unheard song is sweetest?’). Their eyes, as with every face in this video, focus on the one particular spot, as if just off screen is some miraculous moment, and we, the audience, look for this too. Their trance-like eyes bulge at what they see, and yet, like every other face we have watched, they remain always unaware of the camera – so that we look at them as though we are hidden by

¹⁶ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (Noonday Press, 1998).

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a veil. In confronting the life erupting ecstatically on this screen, we find ourselves on the wrong side of death as all this life pours out before us.

A long, perhaps parting, shot on a single face, watching in powerful expectation. Then more boys leaping, half-elegant, half-beastly, animalistic, ecstatic, Bacchic? Their faces are packed together, they brush against each other in a delirium – the slow motion seems to make their bodies uncontrollable. This sense of the ecstatic, however, is framed by a staid and official gallery. The contained and dispassionate viewers around me give no reaction. Does this help to fuel the nation-authorizing cultic functions of this gallery space?

In this way, *Rapture* demonstrates how unofficial ecstatic practices can be absorbed into the ritual architecture of the state gallery. Its affective intensity becomes permissible because it is mediated through curatorial authority, allowing the institution to host quasi-ritual experience while still affirming its secular credentials.

The Expanding Nature of the Art Gallery of New South Wales

Naala Nura (Country Facing)

Before I go on, I should note that between this 2013 exhibition of *Rapture* and the 2024 debut of *The Rites of When*, the state gallery, which is the site of the display of both artworks, was substantially expanded into two complexes. The original building of the Art Gallery of New South Wales opened in 1911 and has only recently been given the specific indigenous name “Naala Nura”. This was on 16 April 2024, when its companion building came online. The portico of this first building resembles an ancient Greek temple. The original section is constructed externally of sandstone and contains long formal galleries. All of this is windowless.

Entering the main door requires going around a chicane that ensures no external natural light or noise can enter too far inside the galleries. The lighting and the climate are strictly controlled. All the spaces have CCTV cameras installed, and security guards mill constantly around the artworks. The building sits on prime city real estate on the edge of a city park (“The Domain”). On the far side of this park is the state parliament, the courts, and the legal quarter, and beyond this the central business district of Sydney. To the immediate north of this building, we find the city’s botanical gardens and the harbor. The building was expanded extensively at its rear in the lead-up to 1970 to celebrate the bicentennial of Captain James Cook’s arrival in Botany Bay. All these elements – from the building’s position, to its Classical look, to its climate control, to its security features – declare that it is an “official” space. What sets it apart from its neighboring gallery is that Naala Nura is able to display art that has been made with domestic spaces in mind. It is an impressive building, but it can easily accommodate the kind of small art one might have at home.

Naala Badu (Sea Facing)

This new complex is not so much an extension to the original building but a completely new stand-alone building. It has been placed on land that borders the botanical gardens to the north. Naala Badu is distinguished from the original building by its glass construction and

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by the fact that most of it is built under the headland of Woolloomooloo Bay. The spaces here require a larger art than would be housed in a domestic space. It requires, in fact, a huge art that only the richest individuals and corporations of government could acquire, store, and display. This is most evident in the basement of the new building. Naala Badu is founded upon what was previously a vast hidden oil reservoir. This was built for navy use during World War II. This great empty cistern had 125 concrete columns supporting the building above. It is a space evocative of the Basilica Cistern in Istanbul (although the Sydney version is redolent of the scent of crude oil). It has 2,200 square meters in floorspace, with walls that are seven meters tall. It is known as “The Tank”. It was in The Tank that several floor-to-ceiling screens were set up to display Mesiti’s *The Rites of When* (hereafter “*Rites*”), a 34-minute immersive video experience. Unlike the mostly glass building above it, The Tank can be rendered so lightless that it is hard to see where one is walking. On the day that I experienced this artwork, the screens of Mesiti’s video art were the only source of light here.

The Rites of When

Unlike *Rapture*, which was displayed on one large but human-relatable screen in the old building, in The Tank, *Rites* was displayed on multiple seven-meter-tall screens around the space. Because of the pillars, there was no perfect space where the viewer could see every image at once, and the viewer was required to walk about – forming their own ritual paths as they went. The giant screens in this gargantuan darkness were presenting beautiful slow camera moves. Often an image would begin on one screen and pass slowly to the others, being replaced by new images on the first screen. When I entered, multiple images of snow-covered pine forests were being broadcast. Given that outside the gallery, Sydney sweltered in an intense summer heat, these initial images dramatically marked a change in realities between The Tank and the city around it. I was overwhelmed by a sense that these images were from the far north of the northern hemisphere. I felt geographically displaced, yet newly cool.

A running plan outside The Tank described how these scenes were laid out.

Prelude: Celestial Nebula

First Movement: Hibernial Solstice: The Longest Night

- I. Winter Geometries
- II. Procession
- III. Grand Dance
- IV. Bonfire
- V. Effigy

Reprise: Celestial Nebula

Second Movement: Aestival Solstice: The Longest Day

- VI. Summer Harvest
- VII. Solstice

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VIII. Weather Makers

IX. Ecstatic Collectivity

Here is not the place to give a fully detailed description of this artwork. I hope it will suffice to put instead my field note descriptions of my first experience of the work:

4 January 2025. (After the snow-forest scenes) 7-meter-high human figures move in procession. They shunt from ritual movement into dance. This dance is like ritual movement. There is a beauty and a certainty in the movement of these 7-metre high figures. There is a choreographed knowing in the bodies as though they regularly deploy these steps. After some time concentrating only on the figures themselves, it becomes clear that they are dancing around a fire. An effigy is brought forward and burnt in what seems ritual offering (an observer has made the comparison to Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man*, 1973).¹⁷ Then a celestial nebula explodes across all screens. Is this a reset of the chronology of the narrative/seasons?

Suddenly great aerial views of a combine harvester slowly mowing the grain of a great wheat field are shown. It is harvest time. Again – a reminder of the knowledges of natural time that urban humans mostly miss.

Then there are “weather-maker” scenes – these are the most beguiling. The finger-clicks of the ritual dancers slowly turn into applause, then into ritual thigh-slapping – all of it like a storm coming on, and rain pelting down. Flourishing is now the theme? And then a wild dance to celebrate being itself – one where we celebrate knowledge of full granaries and a certain future.

The editing is complex, but seamless. The ritualists move from one great screen to another around and around the space as if in procession. As the audience we watch them from an imagined centre. Everyone on these huge screens is greater, grander, bigger.

The music is precisely composed and edited to bring on wonder and ecstasy. This goes to demonstrate Mesiti as one of the great magi of Australian ecstasy and epic. In this experience of the art I was part-blissed out, but not fully in ecstasy.

Of her ritual intent, Mesiti says:

I feel like our hyper-capitalist, Western, urban, technological way of living has led us adrift. And so with this work, I was making a quasi-science fiction, utopian, speculative adventure about our out-of-sync world. What would it look like if we made up new rituals and communal activities for the present that were about trying to realign with natural cycles? These ideas are what the title of the

¹⁷ H.R. Hyatt-Johnston, “A Darker, Clearer Sky,” Artist Profile, n.d., accessed November 30, 2025, <https://artistprofile.com.au/a-darker-clearer-sky/>.

work is reaching towards.¹⁸

Here we can see that an oppositional cultic milieu is developing, allowing Mesiti to give us a new sense of ritual. What sets her aims apart from Colin Campbell's, however, is that this "oppositional" and "underground" response to the prevailing technological inevitabilities of Modernity are in fact commissioned, funded, and displayed by the state. Mesiti makes clear the intense religious dimensions of her structure and source material for this overwhelming experience. It is an experience included in the totalizing claims of Modernity, but its religious impact is mollified by its artistic and its gallery framing. Within Duncan's schema, *Rites of When* demonstrates how the "great white box" can host ritual behavior without ever naming it as such. Its choreographies, processions, and seasonal mythos produce an unmistakably cultic form of experience that the institution contains, neutralizes, and ultimately incorporates into its official narrative of cultural legitimacy. In this way, the Modern state can include the cultic and maximize its affective appeal over the populace. The "underground" is included in the mainstream, the oppositional cultic milieu does not oppose, and the secular state continues as a religious/not-religious entity.

Mesiti and Epic

When examining *Rapture* and *Rites*, it seems clear that some manifestation of a ritual dimension of the religious is being captured and broadcast to visitors inside a secular gallery space. These works show that the divide between oppositional cultic practice and official state ritual is far more porous than our secular frameworks admit. I have showed *Rapture* to numerous classes (without any framing and who had not seen it before). Many guess that the video is being recorded at some kind of religious revivalist youth or Pentecostal youth meeting.¹⁹ They note that there is an ecstatic (albeit unheard) singing that must be taking place. The youths in the video are mouthing words as if joined in a common chant. In *Rites* there are clearly soundtrack and ritual sounds (the finger clicking and slapping) evident. In both instances, genuine worship could be taking place – but Mesiti refuses to give us the full context of what may be really happening.

These video works (and others she has completed) show Mesiti playing with the genre of epic. This is a hard genre to precisely define, and it relates more often than not to literature than to high art production.²⁰ But epic is able to link the values of a particular peoples to narratives of significant affect and actions that seek to compel large-group coherence.²¹ Peter Sloterdijk has sought to examine this through his various philosophical ruminations

¹⁸ Art gallery of New South Wales, *Angelica Mesiti: The Rites of When [Exhibition, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 21 September 2024–11 May 2025]*, 114.

¹⁹ Indeed, because it was shown to them by academics from a religious studies department in that department, their responses can be influenced by the framing of *Rapture* in that instance. The point here is that it is easy to consider *Rapture* as a video that captures a religious service.

²⁰ See for example: Catherine Bates, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521880947>.

²¹ The close to the kind of "grand narrative" which Lyotard feels has gone missing from Western society. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester Univ. Pr, 2005).

on the greater structures that hold nations and civilizations together.²² The mix in Mesiti's work between extreme emotion and ritual action begin these work's claim to inclusion in the epic genre, the way they are used in official buildings with particular narrative uses confirms it.

Conclusions

In both works then, there is a powerful emotive and experiential dimension at work behind the ritual actions displayed on screen. It is an affective power put into the video by Mesiti, and she has done much to transfer this power to her audiences. Similarly, the Modern priest/technicians/curators of the gallery who commissioned *Rites* back in 2020 specifically to be sited in The Tank are hoping this emotional affectivity will be immersively experienced by those visiting the gallery. What these technicians will not do is claim that the state directly endorses the celebration of religious emotion. Constitutionally this would be a bridge too far. What these technicians are able to *officially* do, however, is contract Mesiti to do *something* in the space. Based on her previous work (for example *Rapture*), they might guess that her commissioned installation would be cultic, but they can deny responsibility for what it eventually becomes. Nussbaum hints at this in her analysis of two substantial national (and epic) poets. She says of Walt Whitman's emotive contribution to American dissent and stability as well as Rabindranath Tagore's similar emotive contribution to India and Bangladesh that

...the space for subversion and dissent should remain as large as is consistent with civil order and stability... [one way of addressing] these worries is for the state to offer ample space for artists to offer their own different visions of key political values. Whitman and Tagore are much more valuable as free poets than they would be as hired acolytes of a political elite, Soviet style.²³

In this way Mesiti is valuable to secular Australia. She is a "free" agent creatively, and yet what the state is willing to purchase from her (*Rapture*) and commission from her (*Rites*) has a clear cultic dimension that helps seal the deal. It is a cultic activity that can be put at arm's length from the state through the technical professionalism of their cadre of curators. Nussbaum in her quote above may speak of "political values" alone, but it is clear in the examples she uses of Whitman (and his poem *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed*) and Tagore (and his poem *Amar Shonar Bangla*) that these statements of secular political values are showered in a totalizing emotive impact that makes them also deeply religious and epic – but additionally in a cultic sense. It is clear that through Mesiti's artefacts, secular society facilitates and condones (1) the powerful experiential and emotional outpourings of captured in their contents and (2) ability of the state to turn its official site, for example, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, into something that *contains* the cultic. The analysis reworks Campbell's cultic milieu by showing that the state has developed its own parallel

²² Peter Sloterdijk, *Globes* (Semiotext(e), 2011); Kenny Selamatan, "Playing With Spheres: Preliminary Sketches on the Use of Peter Sloterdijk as Methodologist in the Study of Religion" (Honours Thesis, University of Sydney, 2025).

²³ Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, 7.

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milieu in which ritualized affect is produced, curated, and legitimized. In this way the totalizing claims to authenticity made by the state give out experiences of high religious emotion, but strictly on the state's own secular terms. What emerges from this is a need for a broader account of religion that recognizes how modern states curate their own forms of ritual intensity, not only at the cultic margins of society but at its highly funded and authorizing cultural center.

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Book Reviews

***Jehovah's Witnesses*. Chu, Jolene & Ollimatti Peltonen. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2024. ISBN: 9781009509763 £55 (hbk), 9781009375184 £18 (pbk). Online ISBN: 9781009375191.**

Available with open access at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009375191>

Since 1942, Watch Tower articles have been written anonymously, and only a very small number of external publications have been written by a named Jehovah's Witness office bearer. Hence it is unusual for Jolene Chu and Ollimatti Peltonen, who work at the World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses and the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses respectively, and both of whom are lifelong Witnesses, to have penned this short book on the Watch Tower organization. *Jehovah's Witnesses* forms part of a series of Cambridge Elements in New Religious Movements, each of which is roughly 30,000 words in length, and it covers the basics of Jehovah's Witnesses' beliefs, practices, and organization in five Sections: History, Doctrine, Identity, Organization, and Interaction. The book covers the usual topics that one might expect: blood transfusion, political neutrality, preaching work, disfellowshipping, *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, and prophecy. Regarding the last of these, the authors are to be commended for acknowledging that prophecy can fail, and they usefully note that the Society regularly lists doctrinal changes as "Beliefs Clarified". Perhaps surprisingly, there is no mention of Armageddon, although the authors refer to the expected Paradise on earth and the 144,000 who will rule with Christ in heaven.

It can be debated whether the insider or the outsider is in a better position to discuss a religious organization. Certainly, Chu and Peltonen present a more reliable account of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society than the huge number of ex-member and Protestant evangelical counter cult critics. The authors rightly decided not to expound Watch Tower teachings by constantly prefixing them with qualifications like "Jehovah's Witnesses believe..." However, one consequence of this is that it is not always clear which are their distinctive doctrines, and which beliefs and practices are held in common with mainstream Christianity. For example, they affirm that Jesus Christ was a created being, having pre-existed as the Archangel Michael, and that he became the Messiah at his baptism, that they do not accept the Trinity, and that the holy spirit (which Watch Tower publications invariably spell in lower case) is Jehovah's active force rather than a person. It would be interesting to have some explanation of why Jehovah's Witnesses depart here from these mainstream doctrines, although obviously 30,000 words severely restricts what can be explained.

Being insiders has the obvious advantage that the authors know their material well, but their position also creates problems. Jehovah's Witnesses generally decline to read material that is written by "apostates" – that is, those who have left the organization either through dissociation (formal resignation) or through disfellowshipping. There is also internal literature that is restricted, most notably the elders' manual *Shepherd the Flock of God*, and which is cited and discussed by external neutral scholars, as well as by opponents. I do not know whether the Society's hierarchy grants special authorization to approved

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personnel who work at the World Headquarters or the European Association, but such material is not discussed in this volume. The lack of discussion of counter cult literature entails that the authors do not reply to typical criticisms that are made of Jehovah's Witnesses. One obvious example is the mention of child protection (p.40), where the authors point out that children are never separated from parents at Kingdom Hall meetings, and that the Watch Tower organization has produced literature on the topic and seeks to comply with the law of the land. It would have been helpful to make some response to critics, who will no doubt point to numerous legal cases where Jehovah's Witnesses have been convicted of child abuse in the United States, Britain, Australia, and several European countries, and where the Society has been compelled to pay compensation. In this connection, the authors might usefully have commented on the controversial "two witness" rule, which goes unmentioned.

Perhaps inevitably, insider authors will be drawn to minimizing the distance between the ideal and the real. The authors write, "Avoidance of marital infidelity, alcohol abuse, gambling, uncontrolled anger, materialistic excess, and similar harmful or wasteful practices enables Witness families to direct financial and emotional resources to the nurturing of healthy family relationships" (p.60). These are values that the Society seeks to promote, but this statement makes it sound as if Jehovah's Witnesses are perfect! Conversely, the authors mention "serious violation of moral standards, such as sexual misconduct, substance abuse, violence, fraud, and occasionally apostasy, that is, public denigration of the faith or aggressive efforts to turn others against the community" (p.42). They rightly point out that these are potential causes of disfellowshipping, which, on the one hand, indicates Jehovah's Witnesses' high expectations, but on the other hand acknowledges that there are occasions when such misconduct happens.

The book ends by noting that scholarly research on Jehovah's Witnesses has been lacking until recently, and the authors itemize a number of recent doctoral theses that have been successfully approved. Although it seems logical to look into the future of publications on the Watch Tower organization, I am not convinced that it is particularly helpful to readers to be directed to erudition that they will probably not be tempted to consult. The works cited tend to be supportive of Jehovah's Witnesses, but equally there are several highly critical postgraduate theses which I have examined, and which have been approved by these candidates' universities.

To sum up, I would rate Chu and Peltonen's *Jehovah's Witnesses* as a readable and concise introduction to the Watch Tower Society, but one which is inclined to view it through rose-colored spectacles. So long as the reader bears in mind that it is very much an insider account, the book is worthy of commendation.

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***Networks and the Spread of Ideas in the Past: Strong Ties, Innovation and Knowledge Exchange.* Collar, Anna, ed. London: Routledge, 2022. 316 pp. \$57.99 paperback; \$49.29 e-book. ISBN: 9780429429217 (e-book).**

Can scholarship on premodernity benefit students of modern new religions? One potential commonality between the two spheres lies in their use of network methodologies. On the premodern side, Anna Collar has recently (2022) edited a volume for Routledge: *Networks and the Spread of Ideas in the Past: Strong Ties, Innovation and Knowledge Exchange*. Its contributions grapple with applying social network analysis to subjects temporally ranging from the Iron Age to the late medieval period (eighth century BCE–fourteenth century CE).

Both Collar’s previous monograph (*Religious Networks in the Roman Empire* (2013)) and the present volume engage with Mark Granovetter’s important article, “The Strength of Weak Ties” (1973). In Granovetter’s model, crucial for information transfer and therefore innovation are the “weak ties” between people: these are the less intimate, more distant connections, as opposed to the clusters of “strong ties”—the more intimate, repeated familial relations and friendships. Because strong ties tend to be tightly clustered and redundant, new information is harder to come by without the more distant, weak ties linking these clusters to other networks.

Collar uses this volume to critique this model—and indeed to push social network analysis in a direction more interesting than developed in her earlier book. Collar emphasizes trust, affect, and emotional ties among close contacts as crucial for innovations to actually take hold within networks. This means telling a more granular, more local story: the historian pays closer attention to the contexts and qualities of interactions among intimates. Collar’s 2013 book was more happy to credit the sheer weight of social ties with introducing innovations and allowing the spread of ideas, but the present volume looks more to the actual content and specific contexts of interactions between actors in strong-tie networks. Rather than remain at the level of the “unfeeling nodes and edges” of social network analysis (p. 22), the historian is meant to live in the more affective world of the strong tie—because trust, reciprocity, and intimacy in repeated interactions are necessary for an innovation to truly take hold.

As with most edited volumes, the pieces in this one engage with this “return to the strong tie” in different ways and to different degrees. The book is organized into three parts centered on “Sanctuaries”, “Narratives”, and “Systems”. The chapters’ order also runs chronologically, covering the late Iron Age, Hellenistic period, Roman period, and late antiquity, with a final chapter on the late Middle Ages.

Rather than totally reproduce this organizing schema for this review, I instead slightly modify it: I cluster the chapters around how each piece could be comparatively useful to understanding how the strong tie may benefit the study of new religions.

First: three chapters highlight how particular spaces and events act as hubs to facilitate the formation of strong tie networks and thereby engender innovation.

Megan Daniels (ch. 2) focuses on the spaces of cultic worship in the late Iron Age/Archaic Greek sphere (roughly the ninth to sixth centuries BCE). She asks how the nude female figurine, already widely distributed throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Near

East, came to be so popular in Greek worship settings. Daniels credits “cross-cultural sanctuaries” with acting as the “wide bridges” that connected Greeks with other elites. In these hubs, there developed a shared notion of the divine–human relationship in which the female deity nourished and thereby supported the male ruler. This is just one important possibility, however. The focus on local context means other conceptions of relations with the divine using this figure were possible. Daniels nicely illustrates how particular spaces create the clusters that allow innovations to spread—but also how those clusters shape those innovations to particular purposes.

Christina Williamson (ch. 5) looks to Greek festivals as a hub for the forging of close contacts in the Hellenistic period (late fourth century to first century BCE). Comparing them with modern festivals, Williamson casts ancient festivals as “portable communities” that created strong ties between the people involved in them. Not only the sheer fact of collecting people in a given location gave festivals this power, but also certain important frameworks—for example, claims of ultimate kinship between the cities represented at a festival, or the associations of performers involved, or the elites who made up the ambassadors and observers to the festival. All these represent more intimate contacts than those presumed by a view of festivals as essentially temporary conglomerations of weak ties.

John Mooring (ch. 3) also works with the importance of festivals: he agrees that they supplied the strong ties necessary for innovations to spread. The innovation in this chapter’s case was the rapid adoption of coinage by Greek cities in the latter sixth century BCE. In an era with obviously no telecommunications, pan-Hellenic festivals could facilitate the intimate networking among elites required for such innovations to take hold. Mooring raises the question of whether modern events analogous to these ancient festivals could have functioned similarly.

Three other contributions in this volume highlight the tensions between the diversity and unity of religious expression in the ancient world. What does it mean, in other words, to dub a constellation of phenomena a singular “religion”? The contributors here focus on the particular contexts of ancient religions—the local—in making a given religious expression the way it was.

Sandra Blakely and Joanna Mundy’s chapter (ch. 4) looks at the mysteries of the Great Gods of Samothrace in the Hellenistic period. While this cult was geographically located only on this island, its initiates carried their status as such across the Mediterranean. Blakely and Mundy describe the diversity of initiates’ presentations of this cult as they variously intertwined with their local, civic, and associational contexts. When initiates interacted with their own local strong ties, in other words, the depiction and meaning of the mysteries of Samothrace changed in diverse ways. Blakely and Mundy thus offer a model for considering diaspora religion in local settings.

Kevin Stoba (ch. 6) also stresses the importance of locality in producing diversity of religious expression, here for the Mithras cult, popular in the Roman period. He focuses on the oft-differing depictions of the “tauroctony”—the moment when the eponymous hero of the Mithras cult wounds or slays a bull. Stoba finds that the depictions of the tauroctony were typically highly local, and resemblances between the various tauroctonies often unpredictable, not even being coherent regionally. He links this diversity with a denial that the Mithras cult was a unified phenomenon in the Roman Empire: rather the cult was highly

local, and its ties to other groups were idiosyncratic. This view of the Mithras cult offers interesting comparative material with ancient Christianity, or really any movement without a centralizing authority, in the tensions between local and global expression.

Finally, Nathanael Andrade (ch. 7) builds on his previous work on the late-antique spread of the cult of Saint Thomas from the Roman Empire to the Near East and India. Contrary to the above two pieces' view of diversity, however, Andrade focuses on a remarkably unified phenomenon: the narratives about the relics of Thomas across the Mediterranean, Near East, and India were quite similar. He argues that these narratives were forged in preexisting networks (which he delineates as commercial, ecclesiastical, diplomatic, and pilgrimage), all of which operated on strong ties based above all on trust. These networks allowed the narrative of Saint Thomas to not only cover long distances but also maintain relatively high homogeneity.

The last section of three chapters corresponds to the "Systems" grouping. These contributions are interesting because they turn towards including components of networks that go beyond just human-human connections. They further illustrate the benefits of analyzing not just strong-tie networks themselves, but the forces shaping and complicating them as well.

Rebecca Sweetman's contribution (ch. 8) interacts unevenly with the volume's central concern about strong ties. There are still some points of interest here, however. Sweetman asks about the advent of monumental Christian building activity in late antiquity throughout the eastern Mediterranean (after the Roman emperors adopted Christianity, in other words). She uses these buildings as a synecdoche for the spread of Christianity in general to a given city, asking more about the *how* than the outcome. Sweetman rightly notes the importance of preexisting networks in these cities. One of these networks relates to imperial patronage: did networks built on euergetic money flows already exist? Sweetman also brings up an interesting point about the destruction of former "pagan" sites and the effect this could have had on the cultural memory of those sites in general—this was a gap that could be filled by a Christian site afterward. She further notes that cities with a reputation as sites for education—cities with preexisting philosophical networks—were less disposed to be Christianized until later than other cities.

Kilian Mallon (ch. 9) departs from the book's focus on increases in innovation to a contrary case: ecclesiastical law in late antiquity. Here, the concern of church authorities was in *preventing* innovation, in checking the spread of undesirable information—that is, heresy. Mallon argues that elite bishops (at least ideally speaking) tried to restrict the number of ties a lower-level clergyman could forge with others, for instance by restricting his mobility and relegating his strong ties solely to his bishop. Applying this model to other religious situations in which mobility and sociality are legally restricted could be interesting.

Esther Lewis's chapter (ch. 10) jumps to late-medieval Bristol, which had a reputation at the time as a hub of heretical activity. Lewis performs social network analysis on surviving wills from Bristol to confirm the picture of Bristol as a center for Lollardy (a proto-Protestant movement inspired by John Wyclif) in particular, and to demonstrate that geography and neighborhood were more important than conventional boundaries like the parish in shaping both orthodox and heretical networks. There are two benefits as I see it in this chapter. One, Lewis reminds us that we shouldn't look solely to insider boundaries and

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demarcations—we should consider external factors that could shape networks as well (here geography). Two, Lewis’s chapter is a good antidote to viewing theologically deviant religious movements as necessarily socially deviant as well: Lewis found that the networks of orthodox and heretic were shaped by the same factors, and both included elites as members. While this kind of situation may not necessarily be true everywhere, one could nevertheless productively compare the forces shaping new religions’ networks and those of their more “mainstream” counterparts.

Networks and the Spread of Ideas in the Past ultimately shows that scholars of premodernity are taking network approaches in interesting directions. Importantly, scholars are also qualifying social network analysis to make it more attentive to local specificity—and therefore more useful overall. The turn to the strong tie makes historical work more interesting because it requires attention to detail, context, and often less quantifiable data like ideology, affect, trust, and values. The pieces in this volume no longer merely consider the position and number of ties and nodes in a network, but require considering the context and place of those connections. In so doing, they expand our understanding of what belongs in the definition of a “network”.

These kinds of expansions on network methodology may prove helpful to people working on more modern materials. The non-antiquarian could probably consult one or two of the pieces as needed for comparison’s sake, but the chapters are largely written to the standard of specialists. (The reader should also be prepared for many places in which Routledge’s copyediting was distractingly deficient.) That said, this volume represents an interesting contribution to the use of network approaches in the humanities. Even though the book is broad in scope of topics, the interested reader should still be able to take something away from every one of the contributions.

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***Theosophy and the Study of Religion.* Charles M. Stang and Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2024. 370 pages. Ebook. \$191.00. ISBN: 9789004694163.**

Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm is no stranger to the intersection of scholarship and the esoteric, as his 2017 *The Myth of Disenchantment* attests. The present edited volume, co-edited with Harvard's Charles Stang, extends several themes only briefly explored in that earlier work. This collection turns its attention especially to the reciprocal influence between the academic study of religion and one of the most consequential religious movements of the late nineteenth century: Theosophy.

The editors frame the book's thesis as an attempt to expose "Theosophy's complicated relationship with the study of religion" (3). Part 1 assembles a disparate set of essays on the origins of Christianity and other religions, but their contribution to the overarching thesis remains uneven. Denise Kimber Buell, for instance, offers a stimulating comparison between Theosophical readings of the New Testament and the writings of prominent biblical scholar Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), yet she stops short of establishing any direct influence. Likewise, Charles Stang's account of Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), cofounder of the Theosophical Society, and her engagement with the early Christian figure Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–c. 253) concludes by casting Origen as a resource for theological creativity beyond orthodoxy, but by contrasting Blavatsky's interpretations with contemporary retrieval theology, Stang appears to undercut the book's central argument.²⁴ Chapter 3 explores the late-career fascination of E. R. Dodds (1893–1979), a renowned Oxford professor of classical Greek culture, with paranormal phenomena, though it at times digresses into anecdotes about the author's own connection to Erma Pounds, the alleged reincarnation of Blavatsky. Here again, the overlap between Theosophy and religious studies proves tenuous: both Blavatsky and Dodds shared an interest in spiritualism, but little more.

The next two chapters, by seasoned esotericism scholars Wouter Hanegraaff and Olav Hammer, recalibrate the volume toward its stated aim. Hanegraaff demonstrates how G. R. S. Mead (1863–1933), a famed member of the Theosophical Society, illuminated the "nonrational" dimensions of the Hermetic tradition—elements largely ignored in his own day but now gaining recognition—and how these insights were the direct result of his Theosophical commitments. Hammer, conversely, shows how academic models of cultural origins (decline, diffusionism, and evolutionism) were appropriated by Blavatsky into her sweeping theories of religious and cultural history. Both essays stand out for their clarity, scholarship, and direct relevance to the book's thesis.

²⁴ One could likewise question Stang's interpretation of Origen. For instance, Stang embraces, without argument, the contention that Origen held to a version of reincarnation, a common assertion that has been seriously challenged (see, for instance, Cyril Wohrer, "Pop Patristic Reincarnation? A Critique of Origen's Alleged Doctrine of Reincarnation", *Religious Studies and Theology* 31, no. 1 (2012): 91–103). Stang also suggests that "conciliar orthodoxy runs against the grain of [Origen's] thinking" (67) when, in fact, Origen strictly maintained that only those beliefs should be held that are not in conflict with the tradition of the church and apostles (see his *On First Principles* Preface §2).

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Part 2 of the book shifts to the conversation of race and its often-troubled connection to both Theosophy and religious studies. Too often, this topic has been sanitized by apologists eager to downplay the racial theories of early Theosophists. Erin Prophet opens the section by acknowledging Theosophy's entanglement with scientific racism while also noting that the Theosophical Society "transcended and subverted it by providing a theology of human possibility that could appeal to all races" (145). Stephen Finley follows with a welcome recovery of Robert T. Browne (1882–1978), an African American Theosophist who rubbed shoulders with many of the most prominent fellow African Americans of his day. Finley summarizes both the life and teachings—what he calls Browne's "Afro-Theosophysics"—and how his religion and race were inseparably intertwined. Julian Strube's chapter echoes Prophet's concerns, arguing that Theosophy adopted many of the racial hierarchies of its own day even in their attempts to subvert them. Strube further contends that modern scholarship has ignored the Indian contributions to Theosophical thought—a feat made possible by labelling Theosophy as a form of *Western* Esotericism. He argues that Theosophy not only appropriated but also fueled Hindu revivalism and Indian nationalism.

Part 3, perhaps the strongest portion of the book, explores Theosophy's engagement with Asian religions. Isaac Lubelsky examines the asymmetrical relationship between Blavatsky and the man often regarded as the founder of religious studies, Max Müller (1823–1900): while she revered him, Müller distanced himself from her and the Society. Indeed, despite Theosophists' occasional successes in securing scientific converts, Lubelsky suggests that organizations such as the Society for Psychical Research actively undermined their efforts for very *unscientific* reasons, such as a desire to eliminate competitors. Michael Gomes continues the focus on Müller, noting his dismissal of Theosophical "esoteric Buddhism" in favor of an exoteric interpretation. Ironically, more recent scholarship has sided with the Theosophists, especially regarding Tantra, leading Gomes to conclude that Theosophists "began a debate that would influence later studies in Asian religions" (260). Arthur Versluis closes the section with a sharp critique of the scholarly tendency (one found even within other chapters of this book) to conflate divergent traditions of Theosophy. Distinguishing the thought of Christian mystic Jakob Böhme (1575–1624), Blavatsky, and French philosopher Henry Corbin (1903–1978), he warns against reducing them to abstract commonalities. His chapter is also striking for its transparent dismissal of hyper-rationalistic systems (such as Blavatsky's) and its admiration for Buddhist meditation, a contrast that underscores his claim that such rigid systems obscure rather than facilitate mystical experience.

The final section, called "Theosophy and Language," features contributions by Gauri Viswanathan, James Santucci, and coeditor Josephson Storm. Viswanathan shows how Blavatsky synthesized Eastern and Western concepts, thereby mediating Hindu thought for Western audiences, including Gandhi (1869–1948) himself, whose exposure to Sanskrit texts through Theosophy shaped his spiritual formation. Santucci follows this with a remarkably detailed account of Theosophy's critical role in the Sanskrit revival in India—a movement that continues apace today. The closing chapter by Josephson Storm traces the roots of one of the twentieth century's most important philosophical movements, linguistic relativism (i.e., the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), to its Theosophical source, noting that

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Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941) first published in a Theosophical journal and credited the movement with shaping his views. Josephson Storm thus reinforces the central contention of the volume: that religious studies did not emerge solely from the rationalist impulses of skeptics and liberal Protestants but was equally shaped by the speculative energies of Theosophists and esotericists.

In the end, the success of the volume's endeavor proves uneven. Some chapters make genuine contributions to reimagining the history of the discipline. Josephson Storm's essay, in particular, offers the most compelling and forceful articulation of the central thesis. However, other chapters engage the theme only obliquely, and this lack of sustained focus ultimately blunts the project's impact. The result is less a fundamental unsettling of the established narrative than a modest reframing of it. This is not to say the work lacks value; scholars of both Western esotericism and the history of religious studies will certainly find much here that rewards attention. But the ambitious aspirations of the editors are only partially realized. Still, the collection marks an important beginning, even if the broader path it gestures toward remains to be charted.

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***Early Twentieth Century New Black Religious Movements in the United States*. Darrius D. Hills. Cambridge Elements: New Religious Movements. Cambridge University Press, 2025. \$23.00 Paperback; Ebook and hardback available. 65 pp. ISBN: 9781009534451 (Paperback).**

This short volume is a wonderful introduction to the various new and alternative religious activities of Black Americans in the early twentieth century. *Early Twentieth Century New Black Religious Movements in the United States* argues that “activism and identity negotiation,” through new Black religious movements, “provides a powerful means for the self-(re)construction and survival of Black communities in an anti-Black world” (1).

Chapter 1 discusses not a specific group of religionists, but the general movements of Conjure and Spiritualism in Black America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hills uses these two movements to frame the later attempts of Black religionists in the Nation of Islam, the Moorish Science Temple of America, and Father Divine’s Peace Mission to create and center Black agency in a white supremacist society.

Chapter 2 details the Nation of Islam (NOI) in this agentic frame. For Hills, the particularistic view of what “Islam” is to the NOI is the defining characteristic to “Black Muslims’ sacred imagination, pursuit of social liberation, and material flourishing against the backdrop of anti-Black racism” (23). Hills traces well the NOI origin myth for whiteness and Blackness through the machinations of the ancient scientist Yakub, as well as the NOI’s theology, rituals, and practices—like a particular prescribed diet—that helped Black Americans pursue “alternative conceptions of Black meaning-making” (31).

Chapter 3 contends with the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA) and its racial theology. Hills covers the naming conventions, dress choices, dietary restrictions, and more of the MSTA, and convincingly argues that these outward religious markers contested the “racial apartheid in American society” (37). His chapter concludes with an interesting analysis of an MSTA ID card, which directly proclaims that the holder is a citizen of the United States.

Chapter 4 covers Father Divine and his Depression-era Peace Mission. Hills admits that the categorization of Divine’s Peace Mission (PM) as a “Black” movement, since it was overtly interracial, is a bit strange, but he argues that the PM has a non-racial theology behind it that is worth studying (42). Divine and his PM employed New Thought theology to enact (non-)racial change in America. Divine viewed racial terms like “white,” “Black,” etc. as meaningless terms that carried no real descriptive weight. Divine’s ideas “offered members a theology and social platform emphasizing the denial of race as the determining feature of a person or community’s value” (56).

Hills’s conclusion discusses the implications of studying new Black religious movements through the lens of waywardness (from Saidiya Hartman), anarchy (from J. Kameron Carter), and others. Hills invites readers to “see the study of religion and Black religious studies in particular as part of a methodological approach that strengthens our understanding of the many ways racialized groups navigate and negotiate the terms of their collective existence under varied regimes of power” (62).

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Hills adds little in terms of empirical analysis of new Black religious movements. But empirical analysis is clearly not the point of the book. When examined as an overview, this work is fantastic. Hills regularly pulls from historian of religion Judith Weisenfeld's *New World A-Coming* (2017), which has the analytic depth that this overview does not have. Weisenfeld's book and others in Hills's bibliography allow readers to explore this topic further. Scholars and students alike interested in learning more about new Black religious movements in early-twentieth-century America would certainly benefit from reading this concise text.

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***Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory.* Steve Bruce. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 243 pp. \$39.03. ISBN: 9780199584406.**

Steve Bruce's *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* is one of the most systematic and determined defenses of the "secularization thesis" in contemporary sociology. It not only reiterates the classical sociological propositions regarding religious decline but also responds to the multiple challenges posed by theories of "religious revival" and "desecularization" over the last thirty years.

In the first three chapters, taking sociological empirical analysis as his starting point, Bruce strictly defines the concept of "secularization." He inherits definitions from Bryan Wilson and others, arguing that the core of secularization lies in social differentiation driven by modernity: that is, the institutional autonomy of spheres such as politics, the economy, education, and science has caused religion to lose its overarching function of integrating the social whole. Religion has retreated from the public sphere into private life and no longer plays a central role in education, welfare, or law. Bruce also summarizes three empirical dimensions of secularization: the overall decline of religious beliefs and practices; the functional differentiation between religious institutions and social systems; and the privatization and individualization of religious influence. He emphasizes that the "secularization" discussed in sociology is an unintended consequence of a variety of complex social changes accompanying modernity. It is neither a form of historical fatalism nor a teleological view of history. By doing so, he attempts to detach secularization theory from the accusations of the past, returning it to the status of an empirically verifiable social scientific proposition.

The middle and later parts of the book (Chapters 4 to 9) can be viewed as a point-by-point rebuttal of anti-secularization theories, constituting the main body of Bruce's "defense of an unfashionable theory." In Chapter 4, Bruce responds to Grace Davie's theory of "believing without belonging," pointing out that it is in fact a simultaneous decline in both belief and belonging. Addressing David Clark's claim that the apparent religious booms in certain periods seem to be revivals, Bruce argues, when viewed from a temporal dimension, religion in the same region remains in a state of decline. In the subsequent Chapters 5 through 7, Bruce criticizes several specific anti-secularization theories. Regarding the contemporary phenomenon of "spirituality," he points out that these practices lack institutionalization and intergenerational transmission; therefore, they cannot form sustainable religious structures and can only be viewed as the "consumerization of religious fragments." Regarding "Religious Market Theory" (Rodney Stark), he argues religion is not a consumer product. Its fundamental logic differs from the market—for example, one cannot "compare prices"—and religious participation is actually lower in religiously diverse areas.

Regarding "American Exceptionalism," Bruce uses intergenerational statistical data to point out that American religion has shown a continuous trend of decline; more importantly, the "internal secularization" (psychologization of faith, liberalization of morals) within American churches shows that even in a society with superficially high participation, religion is tending towards the secular in both structure and concept. When facing the politicization of religion in the Global South, Bruce insists that these movements are

essentially “political mobilization rather than religious revival.” In his view, many revival movements are a mixed reaction to modernization crises and nationalism, where religion is merely a slogan used by the movement rather than its substance.

Bruce’s book is clear in argumentation, consistent in logic, and rigorous in structure. Using a large amount of data from British and Nordic societies, he reiterates the long-term declining trends in indicators such as religious belief, church attendance, and religious education. The data is empirical and the research method is transparent, making the book’s argument concise and powerful. It comprehensively responds to many questions and claims opposing secularization theory, and can be said to be the most complete defense of secularization theory to date. Furthermore, his book discusses not only religious issues in Europe and America but also analyzes regions like Asia and Africa, which were previously ignored by Western secularization research. However, the book also has some problems. His refutation is mainly based on his functional emphasis on the concept of religion itself—that is, the religion he defines must be an institutional social integration mechanism. He emphasizes the social function of religion while downplaying religion as a faith experience. Moreover, Bruce treats all evidence and phenomena unfavorable to him as not being religious phenomena, excluding them from the scope of discussion.

We specifically comment here on Bruce’s discussion of New Religious Movements (NRMs). Does the revival of NRMs in the twentieth century represent a religious revival? Bruce believes that, on one hand, NRMs are not significant in scale overall; more importantly, the New Age movement itself is a manifestation of religious secularization. He points out that the New Age movement is essentially an individualistic, consumerist, and self-centered religious form. It emphasizes personal judgment and self-preference rather than standardized doctrines and rituals. From the perspective of community maintenance, New Age movements are often very loosely organized and do not emphasize the commitment of believers to the organization. From the perspective of doctrine, New Age movements do not have rigorous doctrines; their views are often a collage of traditional religious views and certain modern viewpoints. These all indicate the secularized characteristics of these spiritual movements, meaning that religion is not for worshipping the sacred, but for self-satisfaction. In the next chapter, Bruce further discusses the issue of superstition. He points out that the phenomenon of superstition also cannot prove the failure of secularization theory. The quantity of superstition itself is decreasing, and its functions are being replaced by modern technology and education. In particular, its function has shifted from praying to gods for blessings to “enhancing self-confidence,” a psychological purpose of self-satisfaction.

Overall, in these two chapters, Bruce’s conclusion is that neither spirituality nor superstitions are sufficient to refute secularization theory; they are themselves important manifestations of religious secularization, representing a transitional stage from institutional religion to secularity. Although Bruce deeply reveals the secular core of the New Age movement, in his discussion of “spirituality” in Chapter 5, he discusses only the New Age movement and some loose spiritual activities, such as fortune-telling, yoga, and horoscopes, and completely fails to mention the many highly influential NRMs of the twentieth century, such as Scientology, Soka Gakkai, and the Unification Church. These sects not only possess complete doctrines and rituals, but their organization is even stricter than traditional

religions, with clear transcendent objects of belief. They actually possess the characteristics and functions of the traditional institutional religion advocated by Bruce. Bruce argues that it is the loss of these social integrative functions that leads to secularization and individualism, but how can he explain these strictly organized, highly mobilized forms of NRMs? In his book, Bruce briefly mentions that the actual scale and influence of these movements are very small (p. 102). However, in fact, we know that to this day, the Unification Church, for example, still exerts significant influence on the religious and political spheres in South Korea and Japan. These NRMs cannot be simply classified as so-called spiritual religion that merely satisfies personal needs; on the contrary, they represent a collective form. The absence of these NRMs from Bruce's discussion is undoubtedly a major gap in his argumentation. Furthermore, why were these NRMs generated in the twentieth century—a time of advanced religious secularization—and why do they possess such huge social influence and attraction? Does this validate Stark's religious market theory that "high tension leads to high commitment," or is it the "cross-pressures" produced by the breakthrough of the "immanent frame" discussed by Taylor in *A Secular Age*, or is it a resistance to secularization? This phenomenon of "counter-institutionalization" that still stubbornly exists, as well as its deep tension or internal relationship with secularization theory, and the forms of religious existence in a secular age, still require us to continue exploring on the basis of Bruce's work.

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Pedagogical Reflection: The New Religions Course at Leiden

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Abstract

This brief article discusses the context, purpose, content, and assessment procedures of the New Religions course at Leiden University, the Netherlands. Catering to a diverse population of Dutch and international students, the course aims to introduce the specific field of new religions, as well as to train students in the critical and comparative ('study-of-religion') approach to religion. Concretely, students examine a representative range of new religions and forms of alternative spirituality, and are introduced to theories on such topics as conversion and legitimization. In addition, the course includes an excursion to the Scientology Church in Amsterdam and an evening symposium. Assessment in the course is twofold: first, students are divided into groups that each analyzes one new religion in depth. In the final paper, students compare a selection of the new religions treated in class and confront theoretical distinctions and hypotheses with the empirical evidence.

Keywords:

New religions, alternative spirituality, teaching religion, sociology of religion, comparative religion, syllabus

Since 2004, Leiden University (the Netherlands) has offered a course on new religions. The course currently attracts about fifty Dutch and international students every year; between 2012 and 2025, I taught the course eleven times. With a combination of sociological and comparative approaches, the course introduces students to a range of new religions and forms of alternative spirituality from around the world, which students are taught to systematically analyze and compare. In addition to lectures and group assignments, the course includes an excursion to the Scientology Church in Amsterdam and an evening symposium on a varying theme. In this brief article I sketch the context, purpose, content, and assessment procedures of the New Religions course at Leiden, in the hope that aspects of the course may prove inspirational to colleagues who already teach a similar course or who are in the process of designing such a course. Three appendices follow the article proper: (a) the course syllabus, (b) the 'Model for Analyzing (New) Religions' that students use to

analyze the new religions of the course, and (c) the instructions for the final paper in which students compare a selection of the new religions discussed throughout the semester.

1. Context and Purpose of the New Religions Course

The New Religions course at Leiden has been a mandatory course in the BA Religious Studies since 2004. The course is situated in the second semester of the first year and has a study load of 5 European Credit Points (ECs), which is to say that students are expected to use a total of 140 hours (5x28) on attending classes, studying the course materials, and completing the two course assignments.

In addition to students in the BA Religious Studies, the course attracts a variety of Leiden students from other programs who take it as an elective or extracurricular course. Furthermore, after the language of instruction changed from Dutch to English in 2013, the course has become increasingly popular among exchange students. Of the forty-eight students who followed the course in the spring of 2025, seven were students in the BA Religious Studies, eight were students in the minor program Religion in a Changing World, nineteen were Leiden students taking it as an elective or extracurricular course, and the fourteen were exchange students from all over the world, including two students from China. An additional twenty-four students had signed up for the course but had to be turned down because the lecture room that had been reserved for the class was too small.

The great diversity in the student population means that students begin the course with different levels of background knowledge and with different expectations. Students in the BA Religious Studies and the minor Religion in Changing World have already been introduced to several religious traditions. These students are also familiar with the study-of-religion approach to religion which is ‘critical’ in the sense that it may conflict with religious self-understanding, but which always remains respectful and aimed at sincerely understanding what moves and motivates those involved. By contrast, the majority of students in class have no prior exposure to the study of religion, and often the New Religions course is the only course on religion they take at university. The motivation of these students to join the course is often personal: some hope to find religious inspiration for their own lives; others have watched critical documentaries about ‘cults’ and hope that the course will demonstrate in further detail just how ridiculous cults are.

To cater well to the various student groups, I have designed the New Religions course to pursue three objectives:

1. To introduce students to a representative set of new religions (i.e. formally organized groups) and forms of alternative spirituality (i.e. loosely organized milieus and currents);
2. to introduce students to themes of importance to the field of new religions which also contribute to an understanding of religion in general (namely conversion, religious leadership, magic, the structure of religious traditions, origin and development of religious traditions, and forms of legitimization and persuasion in religion); and

3. to introduce students to (or deepen their mastery of) the study-of-religion approach to religion, i.e. an approach which is analytical, critical-but-respectful, and comparative.²⁵

In the first class, I discuss these objectives explicitly with the students. In what follows, I will discuss how I selected the content for the course and designed the assignments to promote the objectives of the course.

2. Content and Structure of the New Religions Course

The course introduces students to a representative range of new religions and forms of alternative spirituality. The exact list of new religions/alternative spiritualities changes slightly every year, but the criteria for selection are constant:

- The course includes formally organized new religions, or ‘cult movements’ to speak like Stark and Bainbridge (1979), as well as loosely organized forms of alternative spirituality in the form of ‘client cults’ (e.g., angel therapy) and ‘audience cults’ (e.g., the readership around Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret*).
- The course always includes new religions/alternative spiritualities with roots in different parts of the world.
- The course includes new religions that have served as case studies for landmark studies in the field of new religions; concretely, the Unification Church and Scientology are always included (cf. Lofland & Stark 1965; Barker 1984; Wallis 1984).

The course is structured so that we start with formally organized groups that are easily recognized as new religions and end with loosely organized forms of alternative spirituality. In an average year, the course includes ten main cases, divided roughly as follows:

- *Group 1: Formally organized new religions:* Scientology, the Unification Church, the International Raëlian Movement, and ISKCON. (Sometimes I use a different UFO religion than the International Raëlian Movement, such as the Aetherius Society or Heaven’s Gate. In the session on conversion, students additionally become acquainted with the Dutch angel-focused new religion From the Source of Christ (Uit de bron van Christus)).
- *Group 2: Semi-organized new religions:* Wicca and Satanism. (These religions are approached as ‘milieus’, within which we may discern different traditions, currents, and organizations. In 2023, I incidentally included Santo Daime as a third tradition within this group).
- *Group 3: Alternative spiritualities/New Age groups:* *The Secret*, Angel therapy movement, and Jediism. (Sometimes I use a parody religion, such as the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, instead of Jediism).

²⁵ In a series of methodological articles, I have discussed what such a study-of-religion approach might entail (Davidsen 2012a; 2012b; 2020a; 2020b). These articles are not part of the New Religions syllabus, but I discuss them with more advanced students. As the New Religious course draws on the methodological principles laid out in these articles, they may be useful for some readers.

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- *Group 4: Historical antecedents to contemporary alternative spirituality:* The Theosophical Society. (Besides theosophy, I introduce in less detail also spiritualism and new thought as important ‘deep roots’ for contemporary alternative spirituality).

Roughly half the sessions in the course are devoted to discussing these ten cases. As a textbook for these sessions, I use Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein’s *Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements* (2012), which I have complemented with thematic articles, primary sources, and the use of documentaries in class.

The course always attracts a few students who are members of the new religions that we study in the course. There are always a few Wiccans, and we have also had Satanists, Unificationists, and ISKCON members. The last couple of years, several students in the course have been into such alternative spiritual practices as are popular among Generation Z, including manifestation, mindfulness, and reality shifting. Common to these students is that they enter the course with a positive personal view of religion and sometimes the hope that the course will bring inspiration for their own spiritual journeys. For obvious privacy reasons, I do not require anyone to disclose their religious identity, but after a couple of weeks the atmosphere in class is often such that students feel comfortable doing so. Much of the (textbook) literature in our field focuses on the doctrines, practices, organizations, and histories of various new religions but have relatively little to say about how it feels to be a member. It has therefore been of great benefit to the class when students share their personal experiences of growing up in a new religion, or tell about their current involvement in alternative spirituality. One year, a student supplied his presentation group with ISKCON dresses and musical instruments, and the group demonstrated the Maha Mantra in class. Another student helped fellow students arrange an interview with her father who ministered to the Unificationist congregation in the nearby city of Amstelveen, just south of Amsterdam. In my experience, the course usually does not inflict a crisis of faith on students with a personal commitment to the new religions discussed in class. They seem to be used to outsiders critically scrutinizing their beliefs and are mainly pleased to see that their religions in this course are treated in an equally serious manner as the world religions that usually get all the attention.

In addition to the course sessions on individual new religions/alternative spiritualities, another three to four sessions are used to introduce relevant theories. These sessions provide students with an analytical vocabulary for analyzing the beliefs, practices, organizational features, and legitimization strategies of the new religions of the course. In addition, they serve to demonstrate that examining new religions may shed light on the phenomenon of religion in general – for the dynamics of leadership, the structure of traditions, and the strategies for persuasion and legitimization turn out to work about the same in old religions as in new ones. For example, the hagiography around Scientology’s leader-founder L. Ron Hubbard was constructed in steps, with Hubbard and his followers gradually making bolder and more meta-empirical claims about Hubbard’s achievements and status (Christendom 2005). Students do not find this particularly remarkable, but it is an eye-opener to many that Jesus’s special life story was developed in a similar, gradually expansive way over the course of the four Gospels.

Finally, two sessions of the course are devoted to special meetings: an excursion to the Scientology Church in Amsterdam, and an evening symposium which usually has a combination of academic and ‘insider’ speakers. I include these special sessions in the course because I find it important that students not only *read* about new religions, but also engage with flesh-and-blood practitioners – and I prefer to visit Scientology because this is a new religion that many students already have a meaning about (or prejudice against). Students always have a lot of questions to ask at the Church, and we have interesting discussions in the train back home to Leiden. On a personal level, the visit to Scientology probably confirms the views of many students that Scientology is ‘too weird’ for them. Of much more importance for the objectives of the course, however, students also realize that Scientologists on the ground are perfectly normal people who have ordinary life goals, such as having a meaningful job, improving their own mental health, and doing good for the community, and who honestly find that membership of Scientology brings fulfilment to their life. During the evening symposia, we have been visited by witches, druids, and young Mormon missionaries. For the symposia, I also like to invite students working on new religions to speak about their BA, MA, or PhD theses. Topics for the symposium have included witchcraft in the Netherlands (visited by local television), divination practices in new religions (featuring a druid and former student of mine presenting an oracular coin set of her own making), and conspiracy culture and alternative religion. The evening symposium is open to the public, and we always go for a beer (or two) afterwards.

3. Assessment in the New Religions Course

Assessment in the course consists of two assignments: group work during the semester and a take-home assignment at the end. To be able to divide the students into work groups right away, I briefly introduce the ten new religions/alternative spiritualities in the course already in the first session and ask the students to state which two cases they would prefer to work on. Based on the student preferences, I divide the class into ten groups of four to six students. The students in a given group examine ‘their’ case in more depth based on extra readings. Functioning as the class’s ‘experts’ on their respective case, the groups are charged with producing two products for the benefit of all. One half of the group produces a ‘handout’ of about five pages on their new religion, using a shared format or ‘analytical model’ (see Appendix B). This analytical model is a list of analytical questions, such as ‘Which ideas does the religion have about deities?’, divided into six sections: Person-Space-Time Coordinates, Beliefs, Rituals, Ethics, Legitimization Strategies, and Social Organization. With the handouts, the class together produces structured notes that make it easier to maintain overview and to compare the various cases in the final assignment (see below). The other half of the group prepares a short presentation on an aspect of the new religion/alternative spirituality that the group finds particularly interesting. With the extra literature that I prescribe or suggest, I help the groups take up relevant issues. A week before the handout and presentation are due, I meet with each group to ensure that everything is on track. The didactical idea behind the group work is to give students co-responsibility for the learning process of the class, and I try to extend this beyond the two group products. For example, when discussing the theme of magic, I actively involve the class’s ‘experts’ on Wicca, Satanism, and *The Secret*. Interested readers may find the instructions for the group

work in the last section of the syllabus, given in Appendix A. Each sub-group (handout group or presentation group) receives a collective mark that contributes 30% to the final mark in the course.

The final exam in the course takes the form of a take-home assignment in which students are required to select at least four of the ten new religions/alternative spiritualities from the course and compare them. The instructions for the assignment are handed out and discussed in the last session of the class, and I encourage students to further discuss the instructions with the other members of their work groups before starting to write. Every year the wording of the take-home assignment differs, but the idea is the same: based on distinctions drawn in the theoretical literature, students are required to perform a structural comparison of the selected cases with the double aim of discerning patterns in the empirical material and testing the theory. The assignment in 2023 – given in Appendix C – for example, took its point of departure in Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge's (1979) hypothesis that differences in degree of social organization (formal and strict 'cult movements' vs. loosely organized 'client cults' and 'audience cults') correlate with differences in promised rewards (general compensators/otherworldly rewards vs. specific compensators/worldly rewards). The task for the students was to test whether this hypothesized correlation held up for our cases. In addition, students were encouraged to investigate whether other theoretical distinctions discussed in class, such as Roy Wallis' (1984) distinction between world-rejecting and world-affirmation new religions and Catherine Wessinger's (2012) distinction between leaders with strong charismatic claims (prophets, messiahs, avatars) and leaders with weaker charismatic claims (shamans, healers, diviners) could be observed to correlate with the Stark and Bainbridge model. Students who selected a representative sample of the course's cases, are able to demonstrate that (a) most cases fit the Stark and Bainbridge pattern (with theosophy as the outliers that promises much but lacks organizational strictness and ritual intensity), and that (b) the theoretical distinctions from Stark and Bainbridge, Wallis, and Wessinger map onto each other only to some extent and that the combination of these theoretical approaches may help identify remarkable cases, such as Scientology, which belongs to the 'strictly organized/promises much' end of the Stark and Bainbridge spectrum, while at the time being world-affirming like the loosely organized movements. Students find the assignment relatively demanding and time-consuming, but also rewarding. I like it because it tests both the students' *overview* of the curriculum (e.g., can they select representative cases and identify the useful theoretical concepts?; do they have the necessary knowledge of the chosen cases?), and their *capacity to theorize* (e.g., can they compare?; can they reflect on the implications of their findings for the theories used?). I encourage students to be bold, and every year there are some who suggest the introduction of new categories and distinctions that may improve or replace the theories worked with in class. The mark for the take-home-assignment contributes 70% to the overall mark.

4. Concluding remarks

Over the last ten years, the New Religions course in Leiden has attracted an increasing number of students – who characterize the course as interesting and challenging and in particular like the Scientology excursion. Feeling satisfied with content and structure, I have not tinkered much with the course over the last ten years, and really made only one

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substantial change: in response to the growing student numbers, I chose to discontinue the student presentations in 2024. All students in a given group now contribute to the handout. However, since I do not consider this a didactical improvement, I have chosen to discuss the 2023 version of the course in this article.

In the years to come, I foresee that at least one other change will be necessary: I will need a newer textbook. The *Cambridge Companion* (Hammer & Rothstein 2012) is now thirteen years old, and for a course like this, one needs overview articles that cover also the most recent developments. The two main competitors to the *Companion – Controversial New Religions* (Lewis & Petersen 2014) and *Cults and New Religions* (Cowan & Bromley 2015) – are almost equally dated, and both second editions of older books. It would seem that our field needs an updated textbook. I would prefer a second edition of the *Cambridge Companion*, or a new book that in the same spirit integrates sociological and comparative approaches to new religions. Contributions from Asian scholars on new religions and alternative spirituality outside the West would be a most welcome addition to such a future volume.

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Appendix A: Syllabus New Religions 2023

Note: This appendix gives a slightly abridged version of the original course syllabus. I have here left out a formal description of the course's content, learning objectives, and assessment method (as these matters have been discussed sufficiently in the main article), as well as a list with further recommended readings (left out for sake of space). The original syllabus can be viewed here: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4299385>.

I. Course Overview

1. February 6 Introduction to the course
2. February 13 Analytical concepts for the study of new religions + Charismatic leaders
3. February 20 Charismatic leaders (cnt.) + Types of new religions
February 27 No class (to give first groups more time to prepare)
- 4-5. March 6 Scientology + Evening excursion to the Scientology Church, Amsterdam
6. March 13 Unification Church + International Raëlian Movement
7. March 20 Conversion + Santo Daime
March 27 No class (exam week)
8. April 3 Satanism and magic
April 10 No class | Easter
9. April 17 Neo-paganism
10. April 24 New Age Spirituality + *The Secret*
11. April 24 11th Leiden Symposium on New Religiosity
QAnon and Alien Gods Plausibility Construction in the Cultic Milieu
12. May 1 Theosophy + Angel therapy movement
13. May 8 Jediism + Exam + Evaluation

June 12 Deadline take-home exam
June 26 Deadline re-exam

II. Detailed Syllabus

Session 1 | 6 February 2023 | Introduction to the Course

PROGRAMME

A. Introduction to the Course (Content)

- * Overview of the new religions we will encounter in the course (and brief mention of some additional new religions).
- * History of research on new religions.
- * Infrastructure of the study of new religions (key journals, key researchers, key questions).

B. Introduction to the Course (Form)

- * Introduction to the work forms and learning objectives of the course.
- * Examination in the course (group work and take-home exam; rules for the resit).
- * How to study effectively for this course.
- * Preparation for the group work

READINGS

A. Required Readings [9 pages]

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- * Hammer, Olav & Mikael Rothstein (2012a), "Introduction to New Religious Movements", in Olav Hammer & Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-9 [9].

Session 2 | 13 February 2023 | Studying New Religions from a Comparative Perspective: Analytical Concepts in the Study of Religion + Charismatic Leaders

PROGRAMME

A. Analytical Concepts in the Study of New Religions

- * 'The Model': Analytical concepts in the study of new religions.
- * What new religions are made of: myths, rituals, ethics, and theology.
- * The rhetoric of new religions: how new religions aim to persuade.
- * Tolkien Spirituality as example.

B. Charismatic Leaders

- * Charismatic leaders in new religions: legitimisation in new religions (Lewis/Weber); typology of charismatic leaders (Wessinger); hagiography construction: interaction between leaders and followers leads to the formulation of increasingly strong claims; critical distance: how to tell the difference between hagiography and biography.

READINGS

A. Required Readings [23 pages]

- * Lewis, James R. (2003), "Legitimation", excerpt from "Introduction", in *Legitimizing New Religions*, New Brunswick, New Jersey & London: Rutgers University Press, 10-16 [6].
- * Wessinger, Catherine (2012), "Charismatic Leaders in New Religions", in Olav Hammer & Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 80-96 [17].

Session 3 | 20 February 2023 | Studying New Religions from a Sociological Perspective: Types of New Religions

A. Charismatic Leaders (cnt.) [45]

- * Charisma and charismatic leaders in the new religions of the course (group discussion)

B. Studying New Religions from the Perspective of the Sociology of Religion I: Types of New Religions [45]

- * Types of new religious movements: cults and sects; cult movements, client cults, and audience cults; the cultic milieu; world-rejecting and world-affirming movements [Stark & Bainbridge; Bromley].
- * Rewards promised by new religious movements: this-worldly and otherworld spiritual rewards ('compensators') [Stark & Bainbridge].

READINGS

A. Required Readings [31 pages]

- * Bromley, David G. (2012), "The Sociology of New Religious Movements", in Olav Hammer & Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 13-28 [16].
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PREPARATION FOR EACH GROUP

Each group reads the required readings on their respective religious movement, meets up, and prepares answer to the following questions about their own movement:

1. Does/did your movement have a charismatic leader? If it does/did, which kind of charismatic leader is/was it (i.e. prophet, messiah, shaman – or something in between or something else entirely)?
2. Are charismatic gifts (such as the ability to communicate with the divine or to heal) restricted or shared in your movement?

You don't need to prepare a presentation, but you must be prepared to discuss your answers in class. You may choose a spokesperson to speak for your group.

27 February 2023 | No Class | To give the first groups more time to prepare

Sessions 4+5 | 6 March 2023 | New Religions with Ultimate Goals A: Scientology + Evening Excursion to Scientology Church in Amsterdam

PROGRAMME

A. Church of Scientology: Group 1 [Presentation 15 + Discussion/Teacher-Follow-Up/Preparation for Excursion 75]

- * The most striking features of the movement (use core and additional literature; exemplify with primary sources).
- * What we can learn in this course from studying the movement (connect to theoretical literature).

B. Evening Excursion to the Scientology Church, Amsterdam

- * Address: Wibautstraat 112, 1091 GP Amsterdam.

READINGS

A. Required Readings [58 pages]

- * Lewis, James (2012), "Scientology: Up Stat, Down Stat", in Olav Hammer & Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 133-149 [17].
- * pp. 121-123 on Scientology in Rothstein, Mikael & Olav Hammer (2012), "Canonical and Extracanonial Texts in New Religions", in Olav Hammer & Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 113-129 [2].
- * Christensen, Dorthe Refslund (2005), "Inventing L. Ron Hubbard", in James R. Lewis & Jesper Aagaard Petersen (eds.), *Controversial New Religions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 227-258 [32].
- * Church of Scientology (2012), "What is Scientology" and "The States of Existence", in *Philosopher & Founder: Rediscovery of the Human Soul*, in the *L. Ron Hubbard Series*, Glostrup, Denmark: New Era Publications International, 65-67, 119-123 [6; primary source].
- * Church of Scientology (n/y) [1954], "The Creed of the Church of Scientology", <https://www.scientology.org/what-is-scientology/the-scientology-creeds-and-codes/the-creed-of-the-church.html> [1; web; primary source].

B. Required Extra Readings for the Scientology Group

- * Cowan, Douglas E. & David G. Bromley (2008), "The Church of Scientology: The Question of Religion", in *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 24-47.

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Session 6 | 13 March 2023 | New Religions with Ultimate Goals B: The Unification Church and The International Raëlian Movement

PROGRAMME

A. The Unification Church: Group 2 [Presentation 15 + Discussion/Teacher-Follow-Up 30]

- * The most striking features of the movement (use core and additional literature; exemplify with primary sources).
- * What we can learn in this course from studying the movement (connect to theoretical literature).

B. The International Raëlian Movement: Group 3 [Presentation 15 + Discussion/Teacher-Follow-Up 20]

- * The most striking features of the movement (use core and additional literature).
- * What we can learn in this course from studying the movement (connect to theoretical literature).

C. Ultimate Goals of New Religions: Summary [10]

READINGS

A. Required Readings [44 pages]

- * Cowan, Douglas E. & David G. Bromley (2015), "The Unification Church/The Family Federation: The Brainwashing/Deprogramming Controversy", in *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History*, second edition, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 78-98 [21].
- * The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (2005 [1996]), "The Purpose of Creation", chapter 1, section 3 of *Exposition of the Divine Principle*, New York, in Dereck Daschke & W. Michael Ashcraft (eds.), *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader*, New York & London: New York University Press, 144-148, 161-162 [5; primary source].
- * Palmer, Susan J. & Bryan Sentes (2012), "The International Raëlian Movement", in Olav Hammer & Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 167-183 [17].

B. Required Extra Readings for the Unification Church Group

- * Spurgin, Hugh and Nora Spurgin (2005 [1983]), "Blessed Marriage in the Unification Church: Sacramental Ideals and Their Application to Daily Marital Life", in Dereck Daschke & W. Michael Ashcraft (eds.; 2005), *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader*, New York & London: New York University Press, 148-156 [primary source].
- * Mickler, Michael L. (2013), "The Post-Sun Myung Moon Unification Church", in Eileen Barker (ed.), *Revisionism and Diversification in New Religious Movements*, Farnham, England & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 47-63.

C. Required Extra Readings for the IRM Group

- * Gallagher, Eugene V. (2010), "Extraterrestrial Exegesis: The Raëlian Movement as a Biblical Religion", *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emerging Religions* 14(2), 14-33.

Session 7 | 20 March 2023 | Conversion to New Religions | Santo Daime

PROGRAMME

A. Studying New Religions from the Perspective of the Sociology of Religion II: Conversion [30]

- * Who joins religious movements and why? [Dawson].
- * Research history on the issue of conversion: from the Pauline paradigm to the social network paradigm and beyond [Dawson].

B. From the Source of Christ [20]

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- * Testing the conversion theory on a Dutch, angel-focused healing movement: From the Source of Christ (*Uit de bron van Christus*).

C. Santo Daime: Group 4 [Presentation 15 + Discussion/Teacher-Follow-Up 25]

- * The most striking features of the movement (use core and additional literature; exemplify with primary sources).
- * What we can learn in this course from studying the movement (connect to theoretical literature).

READINGS [61]

A. Required Readings

- * Dawson, Lorne L. (2008), Ch. 4: "Who Joins New Religious Movements and Why?", in *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*, 2. ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 71-94, 206-207 [25].
- * Enroth, Ronald (1984), "Brainwashing", in David G. Benner (ed.), *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 141-142 [; primary source].
- * Jansma, Lammert Gosse (2006), "Conversion to a Prophetic Healing Movement", in Jan N. Bremmer, Wout van Bekkum & Arie Molendijk (eds.), *Paradigms, Poetics and Political Conversion*, Leuven: Peeters, 165-181 [17].
- * Dawson, Andrew (2011), "Spirit, Self and Society in the Brazilian New Religion of Santo Daime", in Andrews Dawson (ed.), *Summoning the Spirits: Possession and Invocation in Contemporary Religion*, London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 143-161 [17].
- * Harvey, Graham (2012), "Ayahuasca Psychonauts and Santo Daime", in "Rituals in new religions", in Olav Hammer & Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 105-109 [4].

B. Required Extra Readings for the Santo Daime Group

- * Introvigne, Massimo, Wouter J. Hanegraaff & Holly Folk (2020), "The Santo Daime Church in the Netherlands: Why the ECHR Should Consider the Case", *The Journal of CESNUR* 4(2), CLVII-CLXII.
- * Watt, Gillian (2016), "Santo Daime in the Diaspora", in Bettina Schmidt & Steven Engler (eds.), *Handbook of Contemporary Religions in Brazil*, the series *Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion* 13, Leiden: Brill, 333-345.

March 27 | No class [Exam week]

Session 8 | 3 April 2023 | Satanism and magic

PROGRAMME

A. Satanism: Group 5 [Presentation 15 + Discussion/Teacher-Follow-Up 30]

- * Comparison of the Church of Satan and the Temple of Set (use the Analytical Model).

B. What is magic and how does it work? [45]

- * What defines magic? Is magic something different from religion, or a part/kind of religion?
- * How does magic work according to magicians?

READINGS

A. Required Readings [35 pages]

- * Petersen, Jesper Aagaard & Asbjørn Dyrendal (2012), "Satanism", in Olav Hammer & Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 215-230 [16].

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- * LaVey, Anton Szandor (1969), excerpts from *The Satanic Bible*, New York: Avon Books, 25, 30-35, 110-113 [10; primary source].
- * Magliocco, Sabina (2004), "Defining Magic" and "Magic as an Organizational Principle: The Interconnected Universe", in *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 101-104 [4].
- * Crowley, Aleister [The Master Therion] (1990 [1929]), excerpts from the introduction to *Magick in Theory and Practice*, New York: Magickal Child Publishing, xi-xii [3; primary source].
- * Frazer, Sir James George (1994), Ch. 3: "Magic and Religion; §1", in *The Golden Bough: A New Abridgement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 26-28 [2].

B. Required Extra Readings for the Satanism Group

- * Dyrendal, Asbjørn (2009), "Darkness Within: Satanism as a Self-Religion", in Jesper Aagaard Petersen (ed.), *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology*, Farnham & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 59-73.
- * Schipper, Bernd U. (2010), "From Milton to Modern Satanism: The History of the Devil and the Dynamics between Religion and Literature", *Journal of Religion in Europe* 3, 103-124.

April 10 | No class [Easter]

Session 9 | 17 April 2023 | Neo-Paganism

PROGRAMME

A. Neo-Paganism: Group 6a [Presentation 10 + Discussion/Teacher-Follow-Up 15]

- * The history of Wicca in broad strokes (use Pearson and Magliocco in CC).
- * Theology in Wicca: Wiccan ideas about the divine (use Vivianne Crowley).

B. Working Magic in Neo-Paganism: Group 6b [Presentation 10 + Discussion/Teacher-Follow-Up 15]

- * The Structure of a Wiccan Circle Casting Ritual (Cheal & Leverick; use extra reading by Magliocco).

C. Neo-Paganism in the Netherlands: Group 6c [Presentation 10 + Discussion/Teacher-Follow-Up 15]

- * Types of Neo-paganism in the Netherlands (use the Internet to find groups).
- * History and organization of Wicca in the Netherlands (use primary material).

READINGS

A. Required Readings [31 pages]

- * Magliocco, Sabine (2012), "Neopaganism", in Olav Hammer & Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 150-166 [17].
- * Cheal, David & Jane Leverick (1999), "Working Magic in Neo-Paganism", *Journal of Ritual Studies* 13(1), 7-19 [12].
- * The Council of American Witches (2005 [1974]), "The Principles of Wiccan Belief", in Dereck Daschke & W. Michael Ashcraft (eds.), *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader*, New York & London: New York University Press, 102-104 [2; primary source].

B. Required Extra Readings for the Neo-Paganism Group

- * Pearson, Joanne E. (2006), "Neopaganism", in Wouter Hanegraaff (ed.), *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, Leiden & Boston: Brill, 828-834 [Groups 6abc].
- * Crowley, Vivianne (1989), "Introduction", in *Wicca: The Old Religion in the New Age*, London & San Francisco: The Aquarian Press, 9-19 [Group 6a; primary source].

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- * Magliocco, Sabina (2004) Ch. 4: "Ritual: Between the Worlds", in *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 122-151 [Group 6b].
- * Minkjan, Hanneke (2016), "Magic and Divination Practices in Contemporary Paganism: Changing Life Circumstances through the Web of Wyrd", in Jean-Guy Goulet & Liam Murphy (eds.), *Religious Diversity Today: Experiencing Religion in the Contemporary World, Volume I: Suffering and Misfortune*, Santa Barbara: Praeger, 181-203 [Group 6c].

Session 10 | 24 April 2023 | New Age Spirituality + *The Secret*

PROGRAMME

A. New Age Through the Lens of Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* Group 7 [Presentation 15 + Discussion/Teacher-Follow-Up 40]

- * Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret*: A New Age bestseller.
- * Anthropology, theology, and soteriology in New Age spirituality and in *The Secret*.
- * Typical beliefs and legitimisation strategies in New Age spirituality and in *The Secret* [Chryssides].
- * Typical rituals in New Age spirituality: healing, channeling, divination, exemplified with *The Secret* [Hammer].
- * Is *The Secret* a form of magic? (Comparison with magic in Satanism and Neo-Paganism).

B. Social Organisation of New Age Spirituality [20]

- * The notion of 'the cultic milieu'.

C. Historical Roots of New Age Spirituality I: New Thought and Spiritualism [15]

READINGS

A. Required Readings [46 pages]

- * Chryssides, George (2012), "The New Age", in Olav Hammer & Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 247-262 [16].
 - * Hammer, Olav (2015), "New Age", in Christopher H. Partridge (ed.), *The Occult World*, London: Routledge, 372-381 [10].
 - * Byrne, Rhonda (2006), *The Secret*, London: Simon & Schuster, 3-11, 25, 45-57, 68-69, 93, 111, 123, 139, 153, 175 [≈20; primary source].
- [Optional extra reading: Rapport, Jeremy (2015), "New Thought Traditions", in Christopher H. Partridge (ed.), *The Occult World*, London: Routledge, 207-219].

B. Additional Required Readings for the *Secret* group

- * Palmisano, Stefania & Nicola Pannofino (2016), "Sacred Creativity in the Spirituality of *The Secret*", *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 7(1), 3-21.
- * Rapport, Jeremy (2015), "New Thought Traditions", in Christopher H. Partridge (ed.), *The Occult World*, London: Routledge, 207-219.

Session 11 | 24 April 2023 | 11th Leiden Symposium on New Religiosity

PRACTICAL DETAILS

Venue: Lipsius

Time: 7.30-10.00 p.m.

SPEAKERS

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Marijn Bethlehem, MA: QAnon and failed prophecy

Luuk Odekerken, MA: Ancient deities, modern conspiracies: Strategies of persuasion in Zecharia Sitchin's Anunnaki theory

Session 12 | 1 May 2023 | New Age Cases: Theosophy and the Angel Therapy Movement

PROGRAMME

A. Historical Roots of New Age Spirituality II: Theosophy: Group 8 [Presentation 15 + Discussion/Teacher-Follow-Up 35]

- * The main beliefs of the early Theosophical Society, from Blavatsky to Leadbeater.
- * Theosophy today and the link with New Age spirituality.

B. The Angel Therapy Movement: Group 9 [Presentation 15 + Discussion/Teacher-Follow-Up 25]

- * The most striking features of the movement (use core and additional literature).
- * What we can learn in this course from studying the movement? (e.g., what does it tell about the relation between New Age spirituality and Christianity?).

READINGS

A. Required Readings [27 pages]

- * Hammer, Olav (2015b), "Theosophy", in Christopher H. Partridge (ed.), *The Occult World*, London: Routledge, 250-259 [10].
 - * Virtue, Doreen (2005), "Introduction", Ch. 7: "Angels, Afterlife, and Healing from Grief", and "Angel Affirmations", in *Healing With The Angels*, London: Hay House, 1-6, 91-100, 189-190 [17; primary source].
- [Optional extra reading: Hammer, Olav (2015c), "The Theosophical Current in the Twentieth Century", in Christopher H. Partridge (ed.), *The Occult World*, London: Routledge, 348-360].

B. Extra Required Readings for the Theosophy Group

- * Santucci, George D. (2012), "Theosophy", in Olav Hammer & Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 231-246.
- * Hammer, Olav (2013), "Theosophical Elements in New Age Religion", in Olav Hammer & Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, Leiden & Boston: Brill, 237-258.
- * Lubelsky, Isaac (2012), Ch. 4 "The Theosophical Doctrine", in *Celestial India: Madame Blavatsky and the Birth of Indian Nationalism*, Sheffield & Bristol: Equinox, 118-146.

C. Extra Required Readings for the Angel Therapy Movement Group

- * Gardella, Peter (2007), excerpts from Ch. 4: "Angels, Therapists, and Exorcists", in *American Angels: Useful Spirits in the Material World*, Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 93-102, 110-131, 254-256.
- * Davidsen, Markus Altena & Bastiaan van Rijn (2020), "Studying Religions as Narrative Cultures: Angel Experience Narratives in the Netherlands and Some Ideas for a Narrative Research Programme for the Study of Religion", in Dirk Johannsen, Anja Kirsch, and Jens Kreinath (eds.), *Narrative Cultures and the Aesthetics of Religion: Storytelling—Imagination—Reception*, in the series *Supplements to Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, Leiden: Brill, 91-122.

Session 13 | 8 May 2023 | Jediism + Exam + Evaluation

PROGRAMME

A. Jediism: A Case of Fiction-based Religion: Group 10 [Presentation 15 + Discussion/Teacher-Follow-Up 30]

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* The most striking features of the movement (use core and additional literature).

* What we can learn in this course from studying the movement.

B. Evaluation of the Course [20]

C. Exam [25]

* Handing out exam.

READINGS

A. Required Readings [1 page]

* Davidsen, Markus (2011), "Jediism: A Convergence of *Star Wars* Fan Culture and Salad Bar Spirituality", *De Filosoof* 51, 24 [Brightspace; 1].

B. Required Extra Reading for the Jediism Group

* Cusack, Carole M. (2016), "Invention in "New New" Religions", in James R. Lewis & Inga B. Tøllefsen (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, vol. 2. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 237-247.

* Davidsen, Markus Altena (2017), "The Jedi Community: History and Folklore of a Fiction-based Religion", in the special issue 'The Folk Awakens: *Star Wars* and Folkloristics', edited by John E. Price, *New Directions in Folklore* 15(1/2), 7-49.

12 June 2023 | Deadline for handing in take-home exam

26 June 2023 | Deadline for re-exam

Total 336 pages + c. 40 pages additional literature

III. Overview over the Group Work

Group	Max # Students	Meeting (suggestion)	Presentation	Topic
1	6 (3+3)	Mo 27 February, 15.15	6 March	Scientology [15]
2	6 (3+3)	Mo 6 March, 13.30	13 March	The Unification Church (Moonies) [15]
3	6 (3+3)	Mo 6 March, 14.15	13 March	International Raëlian movement [15]
4	6 (3+3)	Mo 13 March, 14.15	20 March	Santo Daime [15]
5	6 (3+3)	Mo 26 March, 14.15	3 April	Satanism [15]
6	9 (3+2+2+2)	Tu 11 April, 15.15	17 April	Neopaganism/Wicca [3x10]
7	6 (3+3)	Mo 17 April, 14.15	24 April	<i>The Secret</i> [15]
8	6 (3+3)	Fr 21 April, 12.30	1 May	Theosophical Society [15]
9	6 (3+3)	Fr 21 April, 13.15	1 May	Angel therapy movement [15]
10	6 (3+3)	Mo 1 May, 14.15	8 May	Jediism [15]

Practical Information About the Group Work

- Each group consists of maximally 6 students (with the exception of group 6).
- Each group is given additional readings (see syllabus).

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- Each group is divided into sub-groups with different tasks. One sub-group is responsible for making a handout (c. 3 pages), including an analysis of their new religion using the Analytical Model. The other sub-group is responsible for preparing a short oral presentation on the most important characteristics of their new religion. (Exception: the neo-pagan group includes three presentation sub-groups). The sub-groups work closely together.
- Groups meet with the instructor roughly one week prior to the session in which the presentation and handout are due. Important: before this meeting, all group members should have carefully read both the standard literature and the required extra literature on their new religion. Also, prior to the meeting the sub-group responsible for the handout sends a draft handout to the instructor; the sub-group(s) responsible for the presentation sends an email outlining their plans for the presentation.
- In class, the groups give a presentation and hand out their handout to the other students. Presentation groups receive brief oral feedback in class (also for the benefit of the other students). After class, each subgroup receives a mark and written feedback on their presentation or handout. Each subgroup receives a collective mark.
- Good marks will be given for presentations that: (a) are well-structured and kept within the time limit; (b) are delivered in an engaging style; (c) are evidently the result of co-operation within the presentation sub-group (i.e. are coherent, not redundant) and with the handout sub-group; (d) have a clear focus and add information to what the other students have read in the core curriculum; (e) make use of the technical terminology from the Analytical Model; (f) give a deep analysis of the movement in question rather than just a bunch of facts; and (g) treat the movement in a neutral and critical way that avoids both debunking and taking movement claims at face value.
- Good marks will be given for handouts that (a) are evidently the result of co-operation within the handout sub-group (i.e. are coherent, not redundant) and with the presentation sub-group; (b) concisely answer the standard questions in the Analytical Model and draw on all the necessary sources to do so (shared readings, group readings, additional sources where necessary); (c) offer information that goes beyond what the other students have read in the core curriculum; (d) treat the movement in a neutral and critical way that avoids both debunking and taking movement claims at face value; and (e) use a proper referencing style and formal bibliography. Aim for about 1500 words; never use more than 2000.
- NB: The mark for the group work counts 20 % towards the final mark for the course.
- There stands 16 hours work for the group work, so expect to work hard and begin early.

Appendix B: Model for Analysing (New) Religions

I) PST-coordinates

What are the religion's 'coordinates' for persons, space, and time?

- Which **persons** are adherents of the religion? How many adherents are there? Who leads the religion? Who founded it?
- Which **space** does the religion occupy? Where did the religion originate? Has migration of people or ideas later transported the religion to other parts of the world?
- Where are we in **time**? When did the religion originate? What are the most important things that have happened in the religion's history?

II) Beliefs

What does the religion teach about the nature of humans, gods, and the world?

- **Cosmology** (Gr. 'study of the world'). Which 'worlds' does the religion count on the existence of? What is the nature of those worlds?
- **Theology** (Gr. 'study of god'). Which ideas does the religion have about deities, including intermediary beings (such as angels and saints)? Is the religion monotheistic or polytheistic? Are there both good and evil gods? What are the gods like and what do they want?
- **Anthropology** (Gr. 'study of man'). What does the religion teach about human beings? Are human beings in some way divine or non-material (e.g., by possessing a soul)?
- **Protology** (Gr. 'study of the first things').
 - **Cosmogony** (Gr. 'world birth'). How was the world created according to the religion? Did a Fall or some kind of evolution subsequently change things for the worse or for the better?
 - **Theogony** (Gr. 'birth of god'). How did the god(s) come into being?
 - **Anthropogony** (Gr. 'birth of humans'). How did humans come into being?
- **Eschatology** (Gr. 'study of the last things').
 - **General eschatology**. What does the religion teach about the end of the world? What happens after?
 - **Personal eschatology**. What does the religion teach about 'individual eschatology', i.e. about what happens to humans after death?
 - **Soteriology** (Gr. 'study of salvation'). Is the religion a 'religion of blessings' that promises its adherents health and wealth in this life (= this-worldly rewards), or is it a 'salvation religion' that promises salvation after death (= other-worldly rewards)?
- **Texts**. Are the religion's beliefs codified in sacred texts? What kind of texts?

III) Rituals

Which rituals does the religion have?

- **Calendrical rituals**. Are some rituals repeated yearly? Are these feasts tied to the change of seasons or to historical events?
- **Transition rituals**. Are there rituals marking great transitions in life (birth, puberty, marriage, death)? Does the religion have rituals for initiation?
- **Exchange with supernatural powers**. How is ritual contact made between This World (TW) and The Other World (TOW)? (E.g., in prayer, sacrifice, communion, divination, worship,

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possession, spirit travel, etc.) What motivates this interaction, i.e. what do people hope to obtain?

IV) Ethics

What does the religion teach about moral behaviour?

- **The good life.** What kind of life does the religion prescribe for its adherents? Are certain things forbidden or mandatory, for instance regarding food or sex? What is the religion's impact on the everyday life of its adherents?
- **Religious virtuosi.** Is there a religious ideal that only certain religious virtuosi (e.g., monks) are expected to realise but that doesn't apply for lay people? What does that ideal entail?
- **Stance on 'the world'.** Can the religion be qualified as world-affirming, world-accommodating, or world-rejecting (cf. Wallis)?

V) Legitimation Strategies

How does religion defend the truth of its teachings (cf. Lewis)?

- **Charismatic appeals.** Does the leader (or the leaders) claim to speak with divine authority as prophet or even messiah and/or do(es) he/she/they claim to possess special gifts (such as the ability to divine or heal)? Do ordinary members claim to have any such charismatic powers?
- **Traditional appeals.** Does the religion claim to be ancient rather than new – to be an original religion restored, or even to be *the* 'primordial religion'? Does the new religion 'claim' authoritative figures from existing religions (e.g. Jesus, Buddha)?
- **Rational/scientific appeals.** Does the religion use scientific language, or even claim to be a science rather than a religion?

VI) Social organisation

How is the religion organised socially?

- **Type of movement.** Is it a cult movement, a client cult, or an audience cult (cf. Stark & Bainbridge)?
- **Leaders.** How is power distributed within the movement? Are leading positions in the movement open to everyone? Does the religion have a charismatic leader?
- **Founder.** Is the founder still alive or has his authority been delegated to a representative? Did the founder's death cause a crisis in the movement? Has the religion developed a **hagiography** (gr. 'writings about a saint') about the founder?
- **Organisation.** How is it funded? Does the religion engage itself in non-religious sectors of society (e.g. education, healthcare)?
- **Members.** What kind of persons join (gender, age, ethnicity, class, nationality)?
- **Legal recognition.** Is the religion legally recognised as a religion (where) or is it fighting for recognition?

VII) Things not covered

Appendix C: Instructions for the Exam

FORMAL ORGANISATION, PROMISED REWARDS, AND PATTERNS OF BELIEF AND PRACTICE IN NEW RELIGIONS AND ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITIES

Many scholars of new religions, including Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, have theorised a relation between the degree of formal organisation of new religions and the types of spiritual rewards they promise their adherents. According to Stark and Bainbridge, formally organised 'cult movements' that require much of their adherents also tend to promise much (in their terms 'general compensators'; we can also speak of other-worldly salvation), whereas less formally organised groups (in their terms 'client cults' and 'audience cults', and we may add 'grassroots cults') that require relatively less commitment from their adherents also tend to promise less (in their terms 'specific compensators'; we may also speak of blessings that materialise in this world). Does the evidence on the new religions and alternative spiritualities treated in this course support or challenge or nuance this proposition? And does the evidence from our course indicate that the degree of organisation and the type of promised rewards of new religions and alternative spiritualities correlate with certain beliefs and/or practices?

Write a paper that discusses the above questions. Make sure that your paper:

- (a) briefly introduces different ways in which new religions and alternative spiritualities can be organised;
- (b) thoroughly reflects on whether different forms of organisation of new religions/alternative spiritualities tend to go together with differences in spiritual rewards promised (as proposed by Stark & Bainbridge), and
- (c) thoroughly reflects on whether different forms of organisation and differences in spiritual rewards promised tend to go together with differences in other characteristics, such as beliefs, rituals, leadership, and attitudes towards the world.

In your own paper, you should not repeat the posed assignment word for word. Instead, introduce in your own way the research problem and any terminology from Stark & Bainbridge that you will need. Adapt their terminology if you need to. Throughout the assignment, you can make your argument stronger by integrating additional theory from the course, for example on charisma and charismatic leaders and/or on different attitudes towards the world that new religions may have. The paper does not need to cover all the new religions/alternative spiritualities discussed in the course, but you must discuss at least four new religions/alternative spiritualities.

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

Write the assignment based on the curriculum (= the shared curriculum, our class discussions, and the extra literature used for your own group assignment). The use of additional literature is not necessary but is permissible as long as it does not detract from a detailed engagement with the required readings. Good marks will be given for papers that are (a) well-structured and written in a clear language; (b) demonstrate overview of the curriculum as well as analytical depth; and (c) employ a critical, independent, and curious attitude. I advise you to form study groups and to talk

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the curriculum and the assignment over before you begin writing. You can use your work groups as study groups.

FORMAL REQUIREMENTS

1. Hand in the paper via Brightspace no later than **12 June 2023 at 11.59 p.m.** If the paper is handed in after this time, it will not be graded.
2. The document must have a title that includes your name and surname (not 'newreligions.docx' or 'exam.docx', but 'JaapKozijnsen_NewReligionsExam.docx').
3. The maximum length of the paper is **2,000** words. This total does *not* include the bibliography or footnotes that provide bibliographical information, but it does include footnotes that offer substantial information such as definitions of core terms (for this paper, you probably want to avoid explanatory footnotes altogether). Papers exceeding the word limit are not accepted.
4. The paper must have a proper layout, including
 - a. your name and student number, date, title of the course, and a word count (including footnotes; excluding bibliography);
 - b. page numbers; and
 - c. a bibliography, formatted like if you had written a paper or a thesis.
5. You may hand in the paper either in Dutch or in English. In any case, proper spelling, sentence construction, and academic style are required. Use paragraphs and headings to structure the argument. Dutch students are recommended to write in Dutch.

Pedagogical Reflection: Teaching New Religious Movements

Hugh B. Urban

Ohio State University

I first began teaching courses on new religious movements in 1999, shortly after the collective suicides undertaken by thirty-nine members of the Heaven's Gate movement in March 1997. While my graduate training was primarily in South Asian religions, I have always had a strong secondary interest in new religions; and the enigmatic deaths and complex beliefs of Heaven's Gate led me (and many others) to want to understand these groups and their role in contemporary society (Urban 2000; Zeller 2014; Chryssides 2016). Like the mass murder-suicides of the Peoples Temple community in 1978, Heaven's Gate represented something so tragic and confounding that it was really a kind of challenge to scholars of religion to try to make sense of such phenomena. As Jonathan Z Smith famously said of Peoples Temple, "as students of religion, we have become stubbornly committed to making the attempt (even if we fail) at achieving intelligibility" (1982, 104).

After thinking about the topic for twenty-five years now, I have come to believe that there are at least three reasons for the importance of teaching courses on new religious movements. The first is that new religions fundamentally challenge and expand our usual ways of thinking about what is and isn't "religion." Scholars in our field love to debate – endlessly and often futilely – the definition of "religion"; but new religious movements are particularly instructive because they push the very boundaries of what we normally think of as fitting into this category and therefore force us to rethink the most basic presuppositions of our own discipline. I first began to write about the Church of Scientology, for example, because I had been using it for years in my Introduction to Comparative Religion course as a kind of "test case" for thinking about what is and isn't religion (see Urban 2011). Examples like Scientology raise critical questions such as: What is the difference, if any, between a religion and a business? Is the category of "cult" at all useful, or is it so laden with negative connotations as to be functionally useless? And why do some countries such as the United States recognize Scientology as a tax-exempt "religion" while many others, such as France and Russia, do not (see Urban 2011, Urban 2015)? The example of Scientology has worked like a charm for (and several of my colleagues) as a way of introducing students to the basic question of what is "at stake" in the study of religion and why labels such as "religion," "cult," and "for-profit business" really matter.

The second reason I believe teaching new religions is important is that these groups often raise key legal questions that strike to the very heart of the ideas of religious freedom and the separation of church and state. Examples that I frequently return to in my teaching include plural marriage in Mormonism and the use of peyote in the Native American Church

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(see Urban 2015). Precisely because they frequently push the limits of what is considered legal in a given political and historical context, new religions are often an integral part of the legislative process itself. For example, the practice of plural marriage in Mormonism gave rise to the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act of 1882 and to the landmark *Reynolds v. United States* Supreme Court decision in 1879. Similarly, the use of peyote in the Native American Church led directly to the Supreme Court's *Smith v. Oregon* decision in 1990 and subsequently to the passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1993 (Urban 2015; see Smith and Snake 1998; Gordon 2002). In other words, new religions do not simply passively reflect the law but have often played an active role in *shaping* the law in the U.S. and in many other nations.

The third reason I believe teaching new religions is important is that they often raise critical questions about religious violence, freedom, privacy, and surveillance. Well before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, new religious movements such as Peoples Temple, Aum Shinrikyo, and the Branch Davidians had raised complex questions about groups that might be violent or self-destructive (see Tabor and Gallagher 1995; Wessinger 2000). How do we deal with such groups, respecting their rights to religious freedom, while also protecting public safety? How far should law enforcement and government agencies be allowed to go in their surveillance of such groups, and when does that begin to infringe upon basic rights to privacy? These questions have only become more fraught and complicated in the wake of 9/11, as we now have the FBI, NSA, and various other entities monitoring a wide range of religious groups, with ever more powerful tools of surveillance (see Urban 2011, Urban 2021).

My classes on new religions are usually structured in such a way as to highlight key issues and debates like these. The textbook that I wrote on the topic (*New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements*) grew out of my own teaching, and is structured (like my classes) around a series of religious groups and sets of key issues that they each raise. Thus I often begin with the Native American Church and the peyote debate, then move on to Mormonism and plural marriage, Spiritualism and women's rights, the Nation of Islam and debates over race, Rastafari and cannabis use, the Church of Scientology and tax exemption, ISKCON and the "brainwashing" debate, Peoples Temple and the "cult" question, the Branch Davidians and the role of law enforcement, and so on (Urban 2015). While I do not generally engage in theoretical questions directly with undergraduates in these classes, I try to introduce more theoretical and methodological issues indirectly in the course of our discussions. When trying to make sense of these groups, students generally arrive at a range of theological, sociological, psychological, anthropological, feminist, and other interpretations on their own without me having to hit them over the head with abstract theory.

In my experience, undergraduate students love talking about new religious movements. Most of them are familiar with controversial groups such as Scientology and Mormon offshoots such as FLDS; and most students find them "other" enough to be willing to engage in critical questions about their complex role in society. By the end of the course, most of the students have also gradually come to the conclusion that new religions are not really any stranger or more "cult-like" than "mainstream" religions. Inevitably, at least one student points out that there are plenty of sex abuse scandals, money problems, and other

controversial behaviors in mainstream institutions such as the Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention; and others note that the stories of the Bible probably seem as bizarre to non-Christians as does the sci-fi cosmology of Scientology or the golden plates of Mormonism. All of this is a classic example of making the familiar seem strange and the strange seem familiar, which, as Jonathan Z Smith suggests, is one of the primary goals of the academic study of religion (1982).

In my classes, we usually do numerous site visits to new religious communities in central Ohio, such as our local ISKCON center, various Spiritualist churches, the Church of Scientology and (a bit further afield) Prabhupada's Palace of Gold in West Virginia. Typically, by the end of the course, most students have arrived at a far more nuanced understanding not simply of new religions but of the complex, dynamic, and increasingly pluralistic landscape of religion in the U.S. more broadly. While the site visit can potentially bear some methodological problems of its own, I find that a carefully planned field trip – combined with thorough preparation and critical reflection afterward – is an important part of the “familiarization” and “defamiliarization” process that Smith describes. The site visit also forces us to encounter new religions in an active, participatory, and embodied way, which, I believe, is a key part of any sort of critical pedagogy. And, in turn, this sort of participatory and embodied pedagogy is a vital part of learning to become an active citizen in a complex, diverse, and religiously vibrant democratic society (Urban 2025; Borkataky-Varma and Levy-Brightman 2025).

My own understanding of religion has been profoundly challenged and broadened as a result of teaching such courses. At least four of my books have grown directly out of teaching courses on new religions (Urban 2011, 2015, 2016, 2021), while my methodological and theoretical approach to the academic study of religion has also been largely transformed in the process. The general approach that I have come to adopt in both my scholarship and my teaching is a delicate balance between what I call (adapting Paul Ricoeur's phrase) a hermeneutics of respect and a hermeneutics of suspicion (Urban 2011; Ricoeur 1977). I find that the study of new religions is most productive when we combine a basic attitude of empathy and open-mindedness with a willingness to ask critical questions about their role in society, particularly in relation to issues such as race, gender, politics, and law. While we may never fully achieve the goal of “intelligibility” in the study of new religions – particularly the more confounding ones such as Peoples Temple or Heaven's Gate – I agree with Smith that we are bound to remain “stubbornly committed to making the attempt” (1982, 104; see Urban 2020).

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