

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

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

Abstract

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

Keywords

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

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Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

Philosophical Affinities

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

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

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

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

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

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

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

The “Strawman” Concept

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

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

Alienation and Hostility towards Society

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He goes on to explain:

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

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

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

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

(Menard, *With Lawful Excuse*, 2011)

The Archons

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

The Theme of Intoxication

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

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

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

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

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

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

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

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

Spiritual Dimensions of FOL Belief and Practice

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

That being said, a study of Freemen literature, accessible in the form of graphic novels, videos, blogs, webinars and Facebook posts on the internet, will reveal that vibrant strains of spirituality permeate their thought world. A striking example appears in the online 2011 graphic novel, *With Lawful Excuse*, by Robert A. Menard, one of Canada's original and leading Freemen-on-the-land. In response to the rhetorical question, "Who are you Really?" Menard tells his readers:

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Freemen often fall back on religious arguments or metaphors when making a stand against government regulations. Sometimes these are tongue-in-cheek: "You are all sinners....you have a social insurance number [S.I.N.] do you know what that

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

means? ...the fact is your SIN means you are all government agents....That is your Original Sin. You are born into abundance into freedom and you gave it all up (Menard, *3 Ways to Break the Law*). In a more sincere and passionate vein, Freemen parents claim in a *youtube* video, “We have been granted irrevocable superior guardianship rights over our children by the creator of the universe.” (*Refusing to register a birth*).

- Other Freemen derive their inspiration from New Age or esoteric sources. The woman who writes her name as “Mary-Elizabeth: Croft” is the leading “Freewoman” in Canada, and was galvanized into resolving her debts after reading *Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects* (Néel and Yongden, 1967). She then wrote her highly influential Freeman book, "How I Clobbered Every Bureaucratic Cash Confiscatory Agency Known to Man" in which she quotes Werner Erhart, Tolle Eckhart, Chogyon Trungpa Rinpoche and Marianne Williamson. It is perhaps significant that the subtitle to her 2012 book (“a Spiritual Economics Book on \$\$\$ and Remembering Who You Are”) seems to points to the experience of Gnosis.
- Religious studies scholars have analyzed the “irrational” magical, ritualistic behaviour in the courts, as practised by the Justus Freemen (Wessinger 2000); the Moorish Science Temple (Dew 2016); and the United Nuwaubian Nation (Palmer 2010). Associate Chief Justice Rooke in *Meads v. Meads* (2012) describes in-court OPCA activities as a “drama that is more akin to a magic spell ritual than an actual legal proceeding.” Netolitzky goes further when he asserts. “this investigation shows that some OPCA activities are not 'akin' to a magical ritual — they *are* a magical ritual” – and then proceeds to demonstrate how Otherlaw “matches known and studied categories of ritual behaviour: sympathetic magic, cargo cult mimicry, and possession and exorcism” (Netoltzky 2018d).

The eclectic nature of FOL spirituality and myth-making would suggest that FOL beliefs have seeped into – or been contaminated by - the “cultic milieu” - a term coined by the British sociologist, Colin Campbell, to refer to a society's deviant belief systems and practices: “the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure” (Campbell 1972:122). The “cultic milieu” is the space where deviant science (or deviant politics) meets deviant religion. Netolitzky (2018d) has already demonstrated that Pseudolaw is embedded within a larger constellation of beliefs, and Michael Barkun (2013) places the Sovereign Citizens' “culture of conspiracy” within the larger information structure of the *cultic milieu*.

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

Freeman Gnosticism, Popular Culture and the Cultic Milieu.

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

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

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

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

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

Many other examples might be found:

<http://www.stopthecrime.net/the-matrix-and-the-us-constitution-sm-bk-format.pdf>;

<https://www.scribd.com/document/38646293/Becoming-Free-of-the-Canada-Income-Tax-Act>

<https://giftotruth.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/redemption-manual-4-5-edition.pdf>

<http://musicians4freedom.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Thomas-Anderson-Classified-Book-One-R-Anderson-Thomas.pdf>

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

<https://www.scribd.com/document/96234193/HOW-I-CLOBBERED-EVERY-BUREAUCRATIC-CASH-CONFISCATORY-AGENCY-KNOWN-TO-MAN-a-Spiritual-Economics-Book-on-and-Remembering-Who-You-Are-by-Mary-El> -

<http://index-of.co.uk/Hacking-Coleccion/196%20-%2013things%20%5B-PUNISHER-%5D.pdf>

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

Pseudomorphosis: If a different crystalline substance happens to fit the hollow left in a geological layer by crystals that have disintegrated, it is forced by the mold to take on a crystal form not its own and without chemical analysis will mislead the observer into talking it for a crystal of the same kind. (Jonas 1967: 36-37)

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

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

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

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

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

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