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# *Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies*

## *Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies*

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

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## Introduction

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### **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 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Rather, like religious studies more generally, individual scholars have made use of new approaches to internet research, new interest in so-called 'conspirituality,' theorizing about the material dimension of religion, cognitive-evolutionary approaches and the like. However, there has been no Copernican revolution in the field as a whole (though some might disagree). Researchers

continue to conduct demographic studies, continue to analyze social conflict, and conversion remains a major research topic.

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

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

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

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

In addition to the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* and *Nova Religio*, three new NRM journals have appeared in this century: The *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review*, The *Journal of CESNUR* and the *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*. This latter periodical is the official journal of the International Society for the Study of New Religions (ISSNR), the first professional membership organization in the NRM field. Certain subfields have already 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 1, Issue 2**

Our lead article, Lewis and Wei's "Naming New Religions," is a discussion on and how this has become a sometimes-contested issue between governmental bodies and NRM scholars, especially in China. They give background information on the study of NRMs, historical context for China's distrust of emergent religions and analyze the problems with the proposed translation of the Chinese term, *Xie Jiao*: 'evil cults.' The authors propose a new term as finding a middle ground, delineating a harmful religious group from the umbrella term, NRM.

Staying within China, "The Taiping Rebellion Perceived as a New Religious Movement" takes us through a detailed history of the origins of the rebellion, commonly known as the Heavenly Kingdom Movement. Gábor Dániel Nagy takes us back to the height of the Opium wars, when Protestantism had just arrived in China and through the impetus of a man who believed himself to be the second son of God and Jesus' younger brother, the Taiping movement spread across much of China, offering salvation through the worship of God, absolution of sin through baptism and the restitution of China's rightful spiritual king. Diving deep into the deadliest civil war in human history, Nagy looks at the Taiping through the lens of an NRM and then through the lens of a social movement, citing contemporary perceptions, including Karl Marx.

Most Western religious scholars will have had their first taste of ancient religion while learning Greek Mythology at a young age. In "The reconstruction of ancient Greek religion: Practicing Hellenic religious tradition in contemporary Greek society" Alexandros Sakellariou takes us to modern-day Greece, a complex society, after the recent financial and political turmoil. He gives a fascinating tour across Orthodox Christianity, reconstructionism, ancient traditions, national pride and the rising percentage of Atheists. Figures of 99% Greek Orthodoxy from the 1990s have been shattered by younger generations searching for tradition, migration, refugees and greater visibility of established religions. The 1990s is also when Greece experienced a resurgence of Hellenic religious groups and practices. He investigates what type of contemporary person self-identifies as a follower of ancient Greek religion.

In our final article, "Revealing Patterns: Darek C. Barefoot, Satanic Images in Jehovah's Witnesses Publications, and Biblical Typologies" Stefano Bigliardi analyzes the writings of a 'disfellowshipped' Jehovah's Witness, Darek C. Barefoot, after his critical examination of Satanic images within the organization's literature. His numerous articles, blog posts and YouTube videos, resulted in widespread international polemic within and outside of the church. Bigliardi takes a particularly interesting focus on the JW in Italy and meetings with the Italian Senate over the controversy. It is here he discovers a lack of significant scholarly research on ex-members worldwide, which could see more investigation in the future.

# Naming New Religions

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## Abstract

There is ongoing contention in the naming of new religions, especially between governmental bodies and scholars in New Religious Movements (NRMs). One such contention is in China, with the common use of the term *Xie Jiao* and the appropriate English translation. Here we look at the historical context of the mistrust of emergent religions in China, discuss the reasons for the disagreement in the suggested ‘evil cults’ term, and propose a new term without theological connotations while also delineating a benign emergent religion from a harmful one.

## Keywords:

Anti-cult movement, Cultic Studies, emergent religions, xie jiao, New Age Movement, NRM, shin shukyo

As with every complex civilization, China has seen its share of emergent religions. The numerous rebellions that for centuries have characterized Chinese history were often led by religious societies. For these millennialist groups, the ultimate ideal was frequently represented as a restoration of an ancient golden age in which virtuous sage-kings reigned.

The first large-scale rebellion of this sort on record was led by a Taoist group, the *Taiping Tao* or Way of Highest Peace – better known as the Yellow Turbans – who rebelled against the Han dynasty in the second century.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, although there was in fact “no self-conscious ‘White Lotus tradition’ outside the paranoid imagination of the Chinese imperial state,”<sup>2</sup> “White Lotus Tradition” nevertheless remains a useful designation for the folk Buddhist tradition out of which numerous politically-charged millenarian movements emerged during the Ming Dynasty and down to the present.

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<sup>1</sup>Michaud, Paul. 1958. “The Yellow Turbans.” *Monumenta Serica* 17, no. 1, 47-127; Chen, Chi-yun. 1988. “Who Were The Yellow Turbans? A Revisionist View.” *Cina* 21, 57-68.

<sup>2</sup>Ownby, David. 1999. “Chinese Millenarian Traditions: The Formative Age.” *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 5, 1514. Ownby here refers to Barend J. ter Haar’s important study, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* (1998).

Two relatively recent rebellions in which religion played a role were the Taiping Rebellion<sup>3</sup> in the mid-nineteenth century and the Boxer Rebellion<sup>4</sup> in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. The former was a large-scale rebellion led by Hong Xiuquan, who claimed to be the brother of Jesus, and who taught a Sinicized version of Christianity that combined Protestant Christianity with Chinese folk religion. The latter was a proto-nationalist, anti-Christian, anti-Western rebellion that received its name because many of its members were practitioners of Chinese martial arts.<sup>5</sup>

This history explains, in part, why contemporary Chinese authorities insist on controlling religious bodies within the country's borders. It also helps to explain why the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been so quick to respond to perceived threats from religious bodies.

The traditional Chinese term for new religious movements, *Xie Jiao*, has no exact equivalent in Western languages. Chinese authorities have encouraged English speakers to translate *Xie Jiao* as "evil cults," but this translation is flawed, and for several different reasons. In the first place *Xie Jiao* literally means something like "heretical teachings," which harkens back to prior Imperial periods when all new religions were viewed as potential political threats. Additionally, "heresy" is a value judgement rather than a scientifically-neutral term, implying that there is some religious (as opposed to sociological) standard against which to distinguish between orthodoxy and heresy.

From a scientific standpoint, "evil cults" is even worse. Once again, "evil" is a theological term, which evaluates particular groups as "bad." "Cult," on the other hand, has been adopted from a blending of Western anticult discourse with Christian heresiological polemics,<sup>6</sup> which thus similarly carries with it connotations of moral censure. While authorities might wish to retain *Xie Jiao* precisely because of these connotations, it is just as obvious that any researcher interested in doing science rather than in propagating negative PR must reject such terms as unscientific.

In fact, some leaders of the Chinese Anti-*Xie-Jiao* Association "gradually came to realize that the notion of 'cult' they had tried to borrow from American and European anti-cultists was widely criticized by Western academia, and adopting it as a definition of *xie jiao* would not defuse international criticism of what many see as the Chinese repression of religious liberty."<sup>7</sup> This perception eventually prompted the Anti-*Xie-Jiao* Association to invite a group of mainstream Western scholars to China for dialog in 2017. However, no "meeting of minds" (no agreement) emerged from these conferences - if anything, just the opposite.

Law enforcement officials are actually less interested in these terminological disputes than they are in focusing their resources on socially disruptive groups. In response to this interest, there has been some effort to utilize the anti-cult movement's designation "destructive cult," an expression which implies that not all groups are "destructive"; Like certain tumors, there

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<sup>3</sup>Reilly, Thomas H. 2011. *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and the Blasphemy of Empire*. University of Washington Press.

<sup>4</sup>Silbey, David J. 2012. *The Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China: A History*. Hill and Wang.

<sup>5</sup>Julia Ching, 2001. "The Falun Gong: Religious and political implications." *American Asian Review* 19:4, 1-18.

<sup>6</sup>Goossaert, Vincent, and David A. Palmer. 2011. *The religious question in modern China*. University of Chicago Press, 339.

<sup>7</sup>Introvigne, Massimo. 2018. "*Xie Jiao* as 'Criminal Religious Movements': A New Look at Cult Controversies in China and Around the World." *The Journal of CESNUR* 2, no. 1, 14-15.

can be “benign” cults. Not a little ironically, destructive cults are sometimes defined as groups that use “brainwashing,”<sup>8</sup> a term that was originally coined by U.S. Intelligence agencies during the cold war to describe what Chinese communists did.<sup>9</sup> Instead of criminalizing less tangible activities such as “spreading superstitions” and “brainwashing,” law enforcement authorities should focus on more general, tangible crimes such as homicide, rape, child abuse and beating people to death in Macdonald’s restaurants.

It should also be noted that the term “cult” occupies a place in the sociology of religion as a designation for a particular category of religious organization.<sup>10</sup> While, unlike a church or a denomination, a “sect” is a morally and theologically strict group which thus sets itself apart from the larger society.<sup>11</sup> A “cult,” on the other hand, is a more diffuse kind of group, gathered around a charismatic leader.<sup>12</sup> This sense of the term “cult” was not originally intended to be pejorative.

In the mid-twentieth century, the denomination-sect-cult typology was the standard point of reference in American sociology of religion. One gets a clear sense of this from a reading of such works as Rodney Stark’s *The Rise of Christianity*.<sup>13</sup> However, new subcategories quickly proliferated, such as “Established Sect,” which was proposed by Milton Yinger to describe the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>14</sup> In a classic article originally published in 1972, Colin Campbell also described a “cultic milieu,” as a subculture out of which cults (in the sociological sense) emerged and into which cults were re-absorbed.<sup>15</sup> Focusing on the structure of the “cultic milieu,” by 1979 William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark furthermore constructed a threefold sub-categorization, consisting of audience cults, client cults and cult movements.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, it should be pointed out that the term “cult” can refer to the ritual or set of rituals associated with a particular saint or divinity, as in the cult of the Virgin Mary. This usage is rooted in Cicero’s definition of religion as the “cultivation of the gods.”<sup>17</sup> Thus the term “cultic” or “cultus” refers to the ritual aspect of worship. As if to confuse things even more, anti-cultists have adopted the designation “cultic studies” to refer to their critical approach to alternative religions.

Back in the late 1990s when the first author of the present paper was residing in California, Michael Langone approached him with this newly-minted neologism, requesting feedback. At

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<sup>8</sup>Giambalvo, Carol, Michael Kropveld and Michael Langone. 2013, “Changes in North American Cult Awareness Organizations.” *Revisionism and Diversification in New Religious Movements*, ed. Eileen Barker. Surry, UK: Ashgate, 229.

<sup>9</sup>Anthony, Dick, and Thomas Robbins. 2004. “Conversion and ‘brainwashing’ in new religious movements.” *The Oxford handbook of new religious movements*, 317-332.

<sup>10</sup>Weber, Max. 1906. “Kirchen und Sekten.” *Frankfurter Zeitung*, April 13 and April 15.

<sup>11</sup>Troeltsch, Ernst. 1912. *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*. Tübingen: J.G.B. Mohr.

<sup>12</sup>Becker, Howard. 1932. *Systematic Sociology*. New York: Wiley.

<sup>13</sup>Stark, Rodney. 1996. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>14</sup>Yinger, J. Milton. 1970. *The Scientific Study of Religion*. New York: Collier Macmillan.

<sup>15</sup>Campbell, Colin. 1972. “The cult, the cultic milieu and secularization.” *Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5, 119–136.

<sup>16</sup>Stark, Rodney, and William Sims Bainbridge. 1979. “Of churches, sects, and cults: Preliminary concepts for a theory of religious movements.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 117-131.

<sup>17</sup>Cicero. *De Natura Deorum*. 1933. Transl. H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library.

the time, Lewis pointed out to him that, in religious studies, “cultic” referred to the ritual aspect of a religious practice, so that, to avoid confusion, he would be better advised to adopt an alternate label. However, in 2003, as the American Family Foundation debated an organizational name change, the new board of directors decided to retain “cult” in their new name as a way of reflecting some continuity with the past.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Lewis’s advice was ignored.

Given these convoluted appropriations and misappropriations of the term “cult,” it is little wonder that this field of study has dropped “cult” altogether and has instead adopted the self-designation “new religious movements” (NRMs). As a field of scholarly endeavor, NRM studies emerged in Japan in the wake of the explosion of religious innovation following the Second World War. Even the name “new religions” is a direct translation of the expression *shin shukyo* that Japanese sociologists coined to refer to this phenomenon.<sup>19</sup>

But where, one might ask, did “movements” come from? It appears that many of the early scholars to turn their attention to new religions were sociologists from the field of social movements. Thus, adding the term “movements” seemed to transform this phenomenon into a topic amenable to their particular approach. A similar transformation took place with regard to the “New Age,” which became the “New Age Movement.”

Although the emergence of new religious groups has been an ongoing process in Western countries (not to mention in the world as a whole) for millennia, the study of such groups and movements was the province of several preexisting academic specializations in the West until the seventies. Thus, to cite a few examples, the Pentecostal movement (which did not begin until the early twentieth century) was studied as part of church history, and phenomena like cargo cults were researched by anthropologists.

However, when a wave of nontraditional religiosity exploded out of the declining counterculture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, academics perceived it (correctly or incorrectly) as representing a different phenomenon from prior cycles of religious innovation. Not only did most of these new religions represent radical theological departures from the traditionally dominant Christian tradition, but—in contrast to movements like Pentecostalism—they also tended to recruit their adherents from the offspring of the middle class. Such characteristics caused these emergent religions to be regarded as categorical departures from the past, and they initially attracted scholars from a wide variety of disciplines. It was at this juncture that NRMs began to develop as a distinct field of scholarship in Western countries. And it should be noted that this development took place shortly *before* the cult controversy had begun to heat up. Two academic compilations representative of this era are Glock and Bellah’s *The New Religious Consciousness* and Needleman’s *Understanding the New Religions*.<sup>20</sup> As reflected in many of the articles in the first collection, the overall focus at the time was to attempt to assess the broader social significance of the newest wave of NRMs.

This academic landscape changed over the course of the seventies. By the latter part of the decade, it had become clear that new religions were *not* indicative of a broader social transformation—or at least not the kind of transformation observers had anticipated. Also,

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<sup>18</sup>Giambalvo et al. “Changes,” 239.

<sup>19</sup>Lewis, James R., and Inga B. Tollefsen, eds. 2016. *The Oxford handbook of new religious movements*. Vol. 2. Oxford University Press, 1.

<sup>20</sup>Glock, Charles Y., and Robert N. Bellah, eds. 1976. *The new religious consciousness*. University of California Press; Needleman, Jacob. 1978. *Understanding the new religions*. Seabury.

during the seventies, issues raised by the cult controversy gradually came to dominate the field. Because social conflict is a bread-and-butter issue for sociology, more and more sociologists were drawn to the study of new religions. By the time of the Jonestown tragedy in 1978, NRMs was a recognized specialization within the sociology of religion.

It took much longer for new religions to achieve recognition as a legitimate specialization within religious studies (in contrast to sociology of religion). This was partially the result of the expansion of religious studies and its own quest for legitimacy within a mostly secular university system. During the early 1970s—precisely the same time period when new religions were becoming a public issue—religious studies was busy establishing itself as an academic discipline. As members of a discipline sometimes perceived as marginal, most religion scholars were reluctant to further marginalize themselves by giving serious attention to what at the time seemed a transitory social phenomenon, and as a consequence left the study of new religions to sociologists.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, it was not until a series of major tragedies that took place in the 1990s—specifically, the Branch Davidian debacle, the Solar Temple suicide/ murders, the AUM Shinrikyo gas attack, and the Heaven’s Gate suicides—that the field of NRMs was truly embraced by the religious studies establishment.

It should also be acknowledged that the designation “New Religious Movements” is not without its problems either. Most emergent religions are contemporary expressions of much older religious traditions. Thus, for example, Soka Gakkai, Japan’s largest new religion, traces its roots to the thirteenth century. And there are parallel issues with other movements. Despite these issues, internationally the great majority of scholars seem to have reached a consensus that our field of study should be referred to as New Religious Movements. That consensus is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

To further confuse this issue – and as many observers within China are not aware – the body of researchers who study new religions outside of China can be subdivided into two broad categories, namely anti-cultists and everyone else. The “cult critics,” as anti-cultists prefer to self-designate, are interested in new religions as social problems and tend to highlight issues of social influence. As a consequence, their studies of NRMs tend to portray involvement in such groups as indicative of pathology. In contrast, studies by mainstream scholars of new religious movements tend to reflect a broader interest in the social significance of such movements.

Especially in Western countries, one can distinguish between at least two distinct sub-categories of NRM counter-movements. In line with historically-earlier groups denouncing religious deviance, one finds critics whose primary objection to religious innovation is theological. In North America and Europe, one especially finds organizations of Evangelical Protestants who censure “cults” on the basis of their perceived doctrinal divergence from a particular tradition of biblical orthodoxy. For analytic clarity, such groups of contemporary critics are referred to the “counter-cult movement” to distinguish them from the secular anti-cult movement.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, the frequently one-sidedly negative portrayal of emergent new religions –

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<sup>21</sup>Lewis, James R. 2003. *Legitimizing New Religions*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

<sup>22</sup>Cowan, Douglas E. 2003. *Bearing False Witness? An Introduction to the Christian Countercult*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

combined with anti-cult efforts to legally destroy such groups – has evoked a counter-counter response from a consensus of mainstream sociologists of religion, who are critical of the perceived extremes of the anti-cult movement.<sup>23</sup> They have also been especially dismissive of the unscientific theories of coercive persuasion put forward by anti-cultists. Although these same academicians have also been quite critical of the anti-social traits of certain new religions, the anti-cult movement has misleadingly labeled such scholars as “cult apologists.”

“Cultic studies” – which, as mentioned earlier, is the designation anti-cult approaches to new religions has come to be called – emerged as the “academic wing” of the secular anti-cult movement, which viewed itself as a kind of religious consumer advocate group. In North America, this movement came into being not long after a rash of new religions arose out of the ashes of the counterculture of the 1960s. Parents of converts, unable to comprehend the religious choices of their adult children and frustrated by authorities’ refusal to address the issue, began banding together in organizations such as Free the Children of God (FREECOG) and, later, the Citizens’ Freedom Foundation (which became the Cult Awareness Network). Initially, their purpose was to share information and agitate for government intervention, but later they became support networks for deprogrammers – individuals who forcibly abducted individuals from non-traditional religions, and then attempted to convince her or him to defect.

In North America, the Cult Awareness Network (CAN), the largest anti-cult organization in the Americas, was sued out of existence in 1996 by a legal team supported by the Church of Scientology.<sup>24</sup> CAN’s legal problem arose out of their role as a referral service for deprogramming (which involved the illegal practice of kidnapping). Since that time, 1970s-style anti-cult activity has been significantly reduced, though research on new religions continued under the umbrella of the ICSA – the International Cultic Studies Association, originally founded in the United States as the American Family Foundation.

Concluding Remarks: Whatever one might think about the expression “New Religious Movements,” the fact is that it has established itself as the preferred term for emergent spiritual groups, in the academic arenas that matter most. No amount of criticism will dislodge “New Religious Movements” from its pride of place, despite the omnipresence of “cults” in popular discourse.

As for *Xie Jiao*, perhaps the best solution is to purpose a new English equivalent that can satisfy the Chinese concern for harm without the theological connotations. “Deleterious Cultic Groups” can convey the harm to either person or community and provides a widely understood term for a religious sect. An emergent harmful religious movement is also a new religious movement, and on first impression it seemed like bad science to segregate one class of NRMs from the larger field of NRMs simply because they were deleterious organizations. However, upon further reflection, we can see that it recommends itself as a suitable translation of *Xie Jiao*. It gives law enforcement authorities a clear point of focus in a way that “evil cults” never will. Thus, authorities need not puzzle over whether a religion is spreading “superstitious” teachings or simply propagating traditional religious teachings, but rather they can focus on a group’s harmful or unlawful behavior.

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<sup>23</sup>Lewis, James R. 2005. *Cults: A Reference Handbook*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 9.

<sup>24</sup>Lewis, *Cults*, 219-220.

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# The Taiping Rebellion Perceived as a New Religious Movement

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## **Abstract**

An historical account of the so-called Taiping Rebellion starting with the history of the leader, Hong Xiuquan, and his fever-induced visions of being the second son of God and the brother of Jesus. Joining with Protestant missionaries and using the printing press to spread his version of salvation by overthrowing the ruling Qing dynasty, the movement spread across much of China's territory. This paper examines the details of the socio-economic circumstances during the tumultuous time of the Opium wars, Britain's dominance over China's trading ports and how the unrest created fertile ground for a new dynamic Chinese religion based on God worship and salvation through baptism, morality and killing demons. The movement led to significant changes in China, including planting the seed of Communist ideals, but at a great cost of life. To this day, the Taiping Rebellion is referred to by historians as a revolution, a New Religious Movement and a civil war.

## **Keywords:**

Heavenly Kingdom Movement, Hong Xiuquan, Liang Fa, Opium wars, Protestant Christian Missionary, Qing Dynasty, Shangdi, Taiping movement, Taiping Rebellion, William Milne

## **Background of the Taiping Rebellion**

In China, the Taiping war is commonly referred to as the Heavenly Kingdom Movement, as a result of the notion that the Taiping adopted a doctrine that was both communist and nationalist, and the Taiping represented a common ideology that was based on either procommunist or nationalism values (Boer, 2016). Xu and Young (2018) are among the scholars who refer to the rebellion as the Taiping Revolution Movement on the argument that it worked to accomplish a complete change in the country's social, political, and religious systems, instead of working towards the overthrowing of one autonomous dynasty with another. On the other hand, many Western historians universally refer to the conflict as the Taiping Revolution. Nevertheless, recently, other historians have argued that the term is biased since it means that the Qing government was legitimate and it was fighting against an

illegitimate government, Taiping rebels (Doi, 2014). Conversely, the authors argue that the conflict should be referred to a civil war.

Much is not known on how the Taiping referred to the war, however, the Taiping usually referred to the Qing as a whole and the Manchus specifically as some variant nature of monsters or demons, representing the leader, Hong Xiuquan's claim that they were fighting a holy, heavenly sent and accepted war to drive away demons and build a new paradise on Earth (Kilcourse, 2016). The Qing usually referred the Taiping as Yue Bandits, a reference that was made in their original sources in Guangdong southern province. More conversationally, the Chinese people referred to the Taiping as some variant of Long-Hairs due to their improvised culture of not shaving their foreheads. Further, they usually braided their hair into a queue as Qing servants were expected to do, paving the way for the longevity of their hair (Deng, 2014). In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, depending on their ideology, Western observers, referred to the Taiping as rebels, or insurgents, or revolutionaries.

The Taiping rebellion, which was later renamed to Heavenly Dynasty or Heavenly Kingdom was a revolt against China's Qing dynasty that was fought with religious conviction specifically over economic conditions. Formed in 1850, the Taiping Rebellion lasted until 1864 marking the end of its fourteen years reign. According to Jian-min (2012), the Taiping forces were led as a cult-oriented formation referred to as a God Worshiping society by Hong Xiuquan, a self-proclaimed prophet of God and second son of Jesus. Under Hong's leadership, the city of Nanjing was seized for a decade before the movement began disintegrating and later failing, leading to the death of an estimated twenty million people and the destruction of millions of properties (Xu & Young, 2018).

For over a decade, the Taiping armies occupied and fought in many parts of the lower and mid-Yangtze valley, eventually developing into complete civil war. Wills (2012) indicates that it was the largest rebellion in the country after the 1644 Qing conquest, incorporating every Chinese province except Gansu. Further, it is globally ranked as the bloodiest war not only as a civil war but also in human history and the largest and most dangerous conflict of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Apart from massive deaths, the war led to the fleeing of more than thirty million people in all conquered regions; all who later settled in foreign settlements and other parts of the country (Chappell, 2018).

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Qing dynasty in China went through many economic disasters and defeats, and natural disasters such as the humiliating defeat by Great Britain in 1842. Farmers were hugely overtaxed, peasants were deserting their farms since they had nothing to plant, and rents were high. The problems in question were further worsened by the impending trade imbalance that came due to that large-scale illegal import of opium, which the government had failed to stop. Banditry became more common as were self-defense units and secret societies, both of which widely spread small-scale warfare.

At the same time, the population of China was increasing each day, doubling between 1766 and 1833, whereas the amount of cultivated land and the technology used in food production remained the same. The government had equally become corrupt and weak on the southern regions where many local clans settled. Meanwhile, Christian missionaries were slowly taking charge and manning most of the religious activities in the southern regions as they won more followers. Hong, a Hakka from a poor Guangdong family, ignited the

emergency of the Taiping Rebellion after failing exams and having realized that he saw no promising future career (Deng, 2014). In his course on religious leadership, he took up several materials from a Protestant Christian Missionary and claimed that he knew what the solution for the country's problem was in 1843. As such, he named the current government 'devilish' and vowed to fight against it to restore Jesus' promise to his people.

Soon after Hong began preaching in 1844, the God Worshipping Society was formed and Hong gained many followers on his fusion of Confucianism, indigenous millenarianism, and Daoism, which he presented as a restoration to the past Chinese faith. Moreover, Kaiser (2017) opines that the Taiping faith was then growing as a new Chinese religion, termed Taiping Christianity. Notably, the movement initially grew and developed by suppressing bandit and pirate groups in southern China throughout the 1840s, but then suppression by Qing's government made conflict transform into guerilla warfare and ultimately a widespread civil war. Finally, a God Worshipping duo later emerged, arguing to possess the ability of speaking as associates of the Celestial Family, Jesus in case of Xiao and The Father in the case of Yang (Kilcourse, 2016).

In the early years, the Taiping Rebellion began in Guangxi when local governmental officials launched a serious campaign against religious persecution for the God Worshipping Society. Lee (2012) notes that in early 1851, as a result of a battle in the late 1850, tens of thousands of a strong rebel army initiated by Wei Changhui and Feng Yunshan attacked Qing forces based in Jintian. In the mission, the Taiping forces were successful in repulsing a tried imperial reprisal against the Jintian uprising. In early 1851, Hong declared himself as the Heavenly King who led the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (Killcourse, 2020), which led to the emergence of the term Taipings, commonly used in the English form when referring to Hong's kingdom. The Taiping set to invade the north in late 1851 as a measure of escaping Qing forces from closing in on them. The army passed through Hunan through the river Xiang, occupying Changsha and capturing Wuchang later that year after reaching the river Yangtze. At this time, the Taiping army decided to move east and conquer all the regions bordering Yangtze river.

By the dawn of 1852, the Taiping Kingdom considered themselves the leaders of China as they commanded in all the southern provinces and many of the northern and eastern regions. As a result, the leader began reaching out to the Triad organization, which owned many cells in southern provinces and within government troops. Research done by Lee (2012) establishes that the Taiping kingdom continued reigning in China; however, the leaders had no systemic leadership plans, hence were later easily defeated upon realization that the major aim of the movement was not clear within the movement or the Chinese people in general.

### **Hong Xiuquan**

Hong Xiuquan was born in 1814 in Guanlubu, Guangdong. Hong began the formation of the Taiping Rebellion after multiple failings in his civil service exams. As a result, he went back home and complained of sickness in 1837. In a feverish state while in his bed, Hong began hallucinating a journey to a heavenly kingdom to the east where his kinsmen revealed that demons were extensively destroying humankind (Chappell, 2018). The authors insist that wielding a distinct sword, Hong, with the aid of his brother, fought the king of hell and his demons. As a result of the battle, Hong remained in heaven and married a wife whom he later

had children with. At last, Hong came back to Earth where he received his self-proclaimed title “Heavenly King, Lord of the Kingly Way.” However, from his family’s perspective, Hong stayed in bed for four days, hard stricken by feverish dreams that were followed by long and loud yells about demons, arguing to be the Emperor of China, praising and singing in an unknown language, and at times leaping out of bed and prepared for war. When he finally awoke, Hong told his family of his experience and wrote down many poems and congés he had composed whilst in ‘heaven.’ As such, all the people within his home believed that Hong had gone insane as his beliefs and stories had never been heard of before.

Over time, Hong forgot everything about his heavenly experience and decided to pursue civil service exams again. Around the time of his hallucinations, while he was attending to his exams in the city of Canton, Hong was taught Christian literature through many notes in a book collection. Although Hong kept the notes, he never read them as he believed they were unrealistic and that he understood better about God and the Kingdom of Heaven than the teachings contained in the readings. In 1943, Li Jingfang, one of his relatives, borrowed the notes, Liang Fa’s *Good Words for Exhorting the Age* and tried convincing Hong to read it (Smalarz, 2019). The readings depicted an apocalyptic China that reminded readers about recent events. Gao (2016) argues that the violent First Opium War that was aimed at defeating Great Britain, fought from 1839 to 1842 that ended with the Treaty of Nanjing, led to the damage of imperial prestige and later gave the British many beneficial advantages. Additionally, the treaty had side effects of paving way for an influx of many Christian missionaries into China.

In Liang Fa’s tract, Hong encounter Jesus’ words, a move that changed Hong’s view of Confucian values and Chinese society. Hong became convinced beyond reasonable doubt that the father who appeared in his fever dream years earlier was the God of Christianity. On the other hand, he understood the older brother to be Jesus whereas the Kind of Hell was the snake in the Garden of Eden. As a result, Hong was fully convinced that he was the younger son of God after Jesus Christ. Later on, after a long consultation between himself and his God, Hong revealed this message to members of his family, relatives, and neighbors, and the message spread to the whole community and later to the whole country. Hong organized a demonstration with a group of his followers, which was specifically designed to popularize him and his thoughts on Christianity. In the demonstration, he sold writing ink and brushes to facilitate their travels to different parts of the country. All through the journeys, Hong authored his own tract, popularly referred to as *Exhortations to Worship the One True God*, which was aimed at helping him win more converts.

After a while, Hong went back to his home to support his family economically and to acquire more funds to help him work further on his tracts. However, in that course, his disciples and followers still travelled on a mission to vigorously spread Hong’s ideas and thoughts about the new kingdom. This later led to the formation of a group referred to *Bai Shangji Hui*, which equally meant, the God Worshipping Society (Smalarz, 2019). Many of the people who were involved in Hong’s thoughts and beliefs were the Hakka, who had initially fled the Mongols way back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The community had become a territory that was separate from the regular Chinese people and society in general. In other words, the Hakka people were basically destitute laborers who ran away from China to avoid continued oppression. Hong had

only presented himself as a better version of the Qing dynasty, only that he was protected by his thought and narration of the future and its brightness. Hence, the Hakka people believed in him as they felt that he had been sent by God to help them get out of poverty and overthrow the dictatorship government that had oppressed them for many years. The Hakka people travelled far and wide equipped with every teaching they had received from their new Christian leader with heavenly thoughts and the aspiration to 'kill all devils' in Chinese society. Whereas they received audience in some places, they were not given any attention in the northern provinces of China.

In his early teachings, Hong preached about forms of communism that stressed sharing property, entangled with religious ideas, norms, and laws based on the Bible's Ten Commandments. He later gave teachings of the promise of free land, a move that brought in thousands of followers who were extremely ready to support him. In 1847, Hong decided to do more of what Jesus did in while on earth by going to Thistle Mountain where he claimed to have joined local God Worshipers and conspire against undesirable and false religious traditions that were common in the area and also in the whole of China (Kaiser, 2017). The local God worshipers were so many that they caught the attention of local government authorities who were determined to end Hong's teachings by arresting some of the movement's top leaders.

In his teachings, Hong had many religious visions that were not confined to him alone but to his followers, as well. In 1848, Hong accepted as authentic a Thistle Mountain charcoal burner referred to as Yang Xiuqing, who was said to channel God, and a peasant referred to as Xiao Chaogui, who claimed that he channeled Jesus Christ. Claims abounded of angelic interventions from heaven to save and oversee the wellbeing of local village followers. Many of the worshippers claimed to visit heaven physically whenever they were in prayer sessions. Hong realized that his movement was expounding and decided to take it a notch higher.

By 1848, Hong was already enjoying the fruits of his labor as the God Worshiping society had become more popular and had expanded into four major Chinese regions, which Hong treated as strategic areas in his upcoming war against demons; the demons he later called the Qing Dynasty itself. Hong's total control over his disciples' spiritual, social, and economic lives tightened. Referring to himself as the Taiping King, Hong firmly announced the separation of men and women, and declared beating for any follower who defied them (Doi, 2014). In 1850, claiming that God and Jesus had urged Hong to fight for Heaven, Hong began arming his disciples (Wills, 2012). Soon, his team was purchasing gunpowder in large amounts and becoming organized in militia rankings.

Nevertheless, after his Kingdom failed, Hong decided to join Roberts, who was a firm believer and preacher. Upon approaching him, Roberts never believed that Hong had been saved or was a changed person (Kaiser, 2017). As a result, Roberts was not fast in baptizing Hong. It is not clear whether Hong was spiritually ready to change his ways and become a Christian since Roberts had not realized a changing course in him. At last, he was never baptized, therefore could not earn a living as every native preacher had to be baptized and ordained before being allowed to serve in the mission. After undergoing different struggles, Hong finally settled in Nanjing (Doi, 2014). Hunger struck the region in 1864 and many people were left starved, Hong being among them. He was later forced to feed on manner and bitter

weeds, which is said to have resulted in his death. Nevertheless, other researchers argue that Hong died due to poisoning. His body was buried and later exhumed twice before being cremated under the order of Zeng Guofan, as a form of verifying his death and ensuring that he had no resting place as punishment for the uprising (Wills, 2012).

### **Christian Influences, and Liang Fa's Good Words**

Liang Fa was one of the personalities that first championed for the intrusion of Christianity in China. His involvement in Christianity began when many Chinese employees were ordered to be servants of a British visitor, who would later give them the teaching of God's existence and the kingdom of Heaven (Gao, 2016). The implication was that the new converts' professions of faith was agitated by self-interest. Moreover, the critics are willfully blind to the truth or ignorant of the actual facts. As such, missionary Morison baptized many people, many of whom were his employees. Due to the latter, the baptized enjoyed the fruits of regular Christian instruction in a specific language, and were in regular contact and communication with a prominent Christian missionary. However, during that time, the Chinese government was so strict to the extent that the few who chose to be baptized did so at their own risk which could have led to death, and were only received back to the community after careful teachings and a long probation. Furthermore, not only did they risk their own lives under the ban of governmental local authorities by their acceptance of Christianity, but they were equally ostracized by friends and relatives.

Platt (2012) notes that Liang Fa was not one of Robert Morison's household staff members. Instead, he worked as a block cutter in a printing company beside foreign industries in Canton city, and was involved through Morrison's language assistant Cai Luxing to engrave the blocks that were usually used for printing the missionary's Chinese New Testament. However, following his conversion to Christianity, he was baptized by William Milne, a move that made Liang to write many tracts that expounded on his comprehension of Christianity to his community members (McNeur, 2014). However, for the clear comprehension of Liang's good words and his contribution to the Chinese Christian world, there are a few issues to understand. First, how Liang got into contact with Christianity; secondly, why he wrote many tracts for the Chinese Christian family; thirdly, what transformed him into being one of the early and most vocal Chinese Christians (Kilcourse, 2014).

To begin with, Liang was born in 1789 in his rural village, Gulao, Sanzhou City, which is not far away from Canton, currently referred to Guangzhou City. Since he came from a poor family, his parents could hardly afford educating him since even fending for food was a problem (Yangwen, 2020). As such, as Liang grew, he was made to work for the family farm as a form of fending for himself and his family's needs. Nevertheless, at age 11, his family considered it better to educate him, and enrolled him in the village schools where he received formal education for four solid years, especially in the memorization of the *Sanzijing* (McNeur, 2014). Even though his schooling was relatively short, the experience he acquired was enough to foster the development of individual study and the ability of writing, reading, and engaging peers in debate.

By 1804, Liang's parents could hardly support him and his siblings. As such, at the age of 15, he left his home and travelled to Canton via ship to look for a living. In Canton, Liang

found life difficult but he was lucky to be recruited by a Chinese writing brush maker, where he worked for some time. Nevertheless, he left the opportunity and joined a businessman who cut printing blocks (McNeur, 2014). There, he was bound for four years as an apprentice for one master, and later after completing his apprenticeship, Liang left for a bordering village where he was employed as a journeyman printer.

In 1810, he was called home for an emergency which was his mother's death. While at home for the funeral period, Liang realized that the area had not changed and there was still no visible business opportunity for him to venture in. Conversely, in Canton, commerce was growing at an alarming rate and there was always an employment opportunity for anyone who stayed. As a result, on completion of his mother's burial ceremony, which was dominated by lavish presents and burnt paper money gifts to the Buddhist priests, Liang went back to Canton. He then learned that businesspeople paid well-skilled individuals with printing knowhow. According to Boer (2016), Liang had already learned the skill of cutting and carving Chinese characters, especially on wooden blocks, an art that was commonly used in printing documents during that era. The skills provided him stable employment and completely changed the course of his life.

Historians establish that Morrison was sent to China as a missionary in 1807 following the formation of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1795. At this time, the country was the most populous and it represented one of the last main unreached regions for Protestant Christian Missions. Morrison, son of James and Hannah, was born in 1782 at Buller's Green, Morphet, England. He was brought up in a religious home and later offered to move to China to spread Christianity after under LMS (Boer, 2016). His mission first began by studying the Chinese language through a manuscript in the British Museum under the guidance of Rong Sande. However, his journey to China was not easy as he had to connect on a ship from the U.S due to the hostility between China and India. Arriving in Canton, Morrison married and settled as he began his work while still learning the Chinese language.

Since the Chinese had no bible at the time, Morrison had to think about the best methods of printing one. Nevertheless, the major challenge was that the Chinese government had extensively prohibited any religious activities in the region, especially for foreigners such as Morrison (Boer, 2016). As such, the whole process of printing the pages, block carving, and binding them had to be done secretly. Liang and his coworkers fully understood the dangers they were subjecting themselves to by helping Morrison to print the Bible, however, the workers were desperate for employment and had no excuse apart from taking the risk, especially since the pay was generous.

To Morrison, support from England was impressive, thus, he would do anything and everything to ensure that all the plans were implemented as expected. The scriptures were translated and printed by the help of the British and Foreign Bible Society (Yangwen, 2020). On the other hand, the LMS sent many reinforcements that were used to take care of all the necessary processes. Morrison was later joined by Milne, a Scot missionary of high linguistic ability (Boer, 2016). The two worked together with Milne touring various regions in China, which later led him to establish many large Chinese communities in various parts of the Malay Archipelago. Through all this time, the duo was working hand-in-hand with Liang and his partners.

Worth amplifying, long before becoming a Christian, although he acknowledged himself as a great sinner, Liang was skeptical and had limited knowledge on how to be saved. Inouye (2018) insists that Liang travelled every full and new moon to the Buddhist temple, where he prayed for protection from the gods. However, even though he worshipped the gods, both his soul and body cherished evil desires and thoughts, for instance, lying and cheating (Lai, 2019). Notably, his previous contact and communication with Morrison as well as the exposure to the New Testament through the blocks he carved had a great effect in his religious understanding, in that they provoked the aforementioned questions.

In his engagement with Morrison, Liang was only printing the New Testament. Even in his short stay at Canton, Milne had made enormous progress in the mastery of Chinese language to the extent that he was able to write a discourse on the life of Jesus Christ. Yangwen (2020) argues that after the style had been corrected by Morrison, Liang engraved the blocks, and the book, *Quishi zhe yanxing zhen shiji*, meaning *Treatise on the Life of Christ*, which was published in 1815 in Canton. Additionally, at this time, Liang had been moved by the gospel to some extent, though not fully.

A few weeks after relocating to Malacca, Liang felt disturbed and decided to seek aid from an anonymous Buddhist Monk. Inouye (2018) opines that the monk spontaneously sent Liang huge volumes of prayers and insisted that he repeatedly went through them. As per the monk, if Liang recited the prayers more than a thousand times, he would overthrow all the debts of his previous life. As a result, Liang sank into repeatedly reciting the prayers while alone. However, one evening, while spending time alone, it came into Liang's mind that he had been involved in many real sins and the sins could hardly be merely forgiven through reciting the prayers without conducting at least one virtuous act (Lai, 2019).

Liang became extremely anxious and skeptical concerning his spiritual state. As a move to find answers to his troubles, he attended regular indoor meetings for workers overseen by Milne, but his soul was still not interested. At times he evaluated the scriptures and heard them explained by a superior power in him, but he never understood their meaning fully. Weinstock (2019) alludes that meanwhile, Liang heard Milner preach about the doctrine of atonement through Christ, and inquired what was meant by Christ making punishment for sin. Milner answered that Christ was the son of God sent into the sinful world to die for the sins of mankind and save them from perishing. In other words, if a person believes in Christ, God will take them in as His child, and after the end of the world, he will bestow them everlasting life (Yangwen, 2020).

Later that day, Liang returned back to his room with many questions especially how he would become a child of God and yet he had done many sins and never depended on the merits of Christ. Nevertheless, it was clear to him that his pursuit of being cleansed of the sins he had committed before could not be done through traditional and Buddhist perceptions of Chinese religions. As such, Liang came to believe that only in the missionaries' gospel could he find God's grace and forgiveness of his sins. Therefore, he agreed and was determined to repent and become a follower of Christ and requested baptism. During baptism, Milne asked Liang if he was ready to be a new man who had left his sinful nature and was ready to serve the Lord with all his heart, body and soul. Liang agreed to all the questions and he was baptized, becoming one of the earliest converts for Milner's mission.

In 1819, Liang went back to China to visit his family and to marry. Upon arrival, he realized that his family and neighbors had sunk into idolatry. Liang felt ashamed, took a Chinese Bible, although it was still incomplete, and prepared a short tract that incorporated a few essential portions of scriptures that shed light on God as a creator, the need for repentance, and the sin of idolatry (Wong, 2012). The tract equally incorporated God's ten commandments, prayers, and three hymns. After his visit home, Liang kept the tract and later showed it to Morrison when he returned to Canton. Having been approved for printing, Liang printed 200 pieces of the tract and intended to circulate them among fellow villagers back home. Unfortunately, the Chinese authorities heard about his plans and arrested him before destroying the books and blocks before he could leave Canton (Weinstock, 2019). After two days of imprisonment, Morrison procured Liang's release. However, Liang was badly beaten and tortured, especially on his legs, and was released after paying a whopping fine of seventy dollars, money he had been paid as salary in Malacca, which was meant for his family.

Notably, the beating, fine, and torture never stopped Liang from his ambition of spreading the word of God. In 1820, he went back to Malacca with the same mission, considering there was so much to be done there. Morrison had already translated the New Testament and by late 1819, in collaboration with Milne, he concluded translating the Old Testament (Wong, 2012). The greatest task was carving the respective Chinese characters together with printing the complete bible. However, the process was interrupted following Liang's return to Canton in 1820. While at home, his wife, Li-Shi, gave birth to a baby boy, Jinde, and Li-Shi confessed Jesus as his personal savior, making her to be the first Chinese protestant woman. This was to be followed by her baptism, which became a tough hustle since Morrison was in Macao and the child was too young to travel with. At last, Liang baptized her but it remains unclear on how the decision was reached (Wong, 2012).

In 1821, Liang went back to Malacca on a mission of being enrolled as an Anglo-Chinese College student. To enhance his dreams he brought with him three employees to expedite the work. According to Kilcourse (2014), the text of the Chinese Bible, incorporating 21 volumes, had to be reduced and re-printed in three phases. By mid-1823, the printing of the first phase was done. Milne and Morrison then proudly concluded that the work of the Chinese Bible was complete. Unfortunately, Milne died in 1822, barely three years after Cholera had claimed the lives of his wife and two children (Sun, 2018). Additionally, Liang felt that it was time for him to go back to his home, where he reunited with his wife, son, and father, and presented his son, Jinde, to Morrison for baptism later that year. The same year also came with a lot of uncertainties as Morrison decided to go back to England after 16 years without visiting his family. Unfortunately, his wife had also died in 1820. However, before leaving, he appointed Liang as the new evangelist of LMS and left all mission affairs of Canton in his hands.

Morrison later returned to China in 1826 after re-marrying. His stay strengthened his bond with Liang, whom he later ordained as a preacher and the LMS happily welcomed him. In an 1827 letter to LMS, Liang expressed great thanks to the mission and God for entrusting him to oversee God's work in China. Prudently noting, from his stay in Malacca, that he had a special role and obligation that small Chinese Christian writings could play. For instance, they could compose to sensitize people on the word of God through essential verses and through the comprehension of the Ten Commandments. Five years later, Liang had written and distributed

many of the tracts in most parts of the country. Most people came to learn about the word of God, especially the fall of human beings, the resurrection of Jesus, teaching about creation, and the second coming of the Messiah.

### **Taiping Belief System**

The Taiping belief system was based on social reforms, incorporating strict separation of male and female, abolition of foot binding, suppression of private trade, and land socialization. Worth noting, in matters of religion, Taiping tried replacing Chinese folk religion, Buddhism, and Confucianism with the Taiping Christianity version, which was based on God Worshipping and argued that Hong was Jesus's younger brother. As a result, in all places the kingdom conquered, the libraries and other religious stipulations of the Buddhist monsters were completely destroyed and all other Confucianism, Daoism, and other religious beliefs were usually defaced (Weinstock, 2019). Additionally, the system was set in a way such that it was military-oriented as its main target was facing the Qing government, whose representatives were widely depicted as devils that desired death for China's peace and stability.

Prudently arguing, the Taiping army formed the rebellion's key strength in its belief system. Moreover, the army was marked by a high level of fanaticism and discipline. The army representatives, regardless of their ranks, always wore red jacket uniforms and never shaved their hair to unify their identity (Sun, 2018). In the beginning of the movement, the large numbers of women who were a part of the army equally differentiated it from other 19<sup>th</sup> century militaries. Nevertheless, after 1853, the number of army women drastically reduced. However, other women such as Su Sanniang and Hong Xuanjiao remained loyal and devoted to serve the army and even held leadership positions.

The Taiping armies believed that killing their opponents was a great achievement that deserved praise from their leaders and followers. As such, their wars were extremely brutal and bloody, with huge number of forces equipped with different arms (Wong, 2012). Due to the belief of fighting a holy war, many Taiping soldiers who died in action or were fatally injured were less attended to as they were considered victorious in their journey of fighting a holy war and serving under the leadership of Hong, Jesus' self-proclaimed brother. Hong also normally instructed his army leaders to recruit new soldiers every other month, especially when they were planning a combat. For Hong, it was crucial to have high numbers of soldiers to conquer his enemies, especially since he didn't have the support of Western governments like the Qing government had. However, the army had modernized weapons, such as muskets and rifles, which they acquired through black markets.

Economically and socially, the Taiping Kingdom had followers from the lowest classes, who had been undermined by the Qing government. Many of the members who came from the south were mostly miners, more so the ones from Zhuang. According to Killcourse (2020), Hong imposed a tactic that made the recruits believe that they were fighting to go to heaven, and even went as far as creating a visionary heaven in his followers' minds, which they claimed to reach physically during prayers. However, the illusion was Hong's goal of gaining more followers, especially new recruits who would be loyal to his army (Weinstock, 2019). As such, very few Taiping followers came from the imperial bureaucracy, even those in the leadership caste. This is because the Qing government had been loyal and helpful to them and Hong's

ideologies would not fit their social and economic classes since they hardly lacked essential life basics such as clothing, luxury, food, and housing.

On the other hand, the Taiping belief system incorporated sobriety. At the time of its formation, drug and substance abuse was common in China. However, Hong made his followers believe that substances such as opium, which was illegally smuggled, was not good for use as it was against his readings and against Christ's will. Furthermore, the rebellion equally believed that women should have a chance of enjoying equal rights and freedoms in the country like their male counterparts. As a result, during the early years, many women were recruited as members of the movement and were even offered leadership roles in various departments, including the army. Also, equality was a strong belief in the movement especially economically. Food was produced and distributed equally among members and individual businesses were burned (Boer, 2016). According to Hong, it was against the will of God to have food while a neighbor was dying of hunger.

The Taiping belief system also incorporated the urge for leaving the sinful nature and following the righteous way through Hong's teachings. Additionally, Hong usually mentioned that as a brother of Jesus, he had every right to make changes in his kingdom provided he had been shown and directed by Christ. For instance, his move to outlaw individual business and propagate war was on the belief that the Qing dynasty was reaping too much from the Chinese citizens, and much of their income had been hugely contributed by citizens from the low socioeconomic class. As such, in summation, the movement's belief system was based on Hong's personal thoughts of his Christian teaching, Liang's readings, and hallucinations about God and Jesus Christ.

### **The Taiping Rebellion Perceived as a New Religious Movement**

The phrase new religious movement shrouds various forms of NRMs and groups that have come up worldwide over the last decades. These religions were introduced to communities by missionary representatives sent by foreign world religions, for instance, Christian groups in China, Asian-based religions, as well as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). NRMs are defined as "new" since they provide ground-breaking religious responses to the situations of the contemporary world (Geoffroy, Dagenais & Palmer, 2020). These movements are also highly syncretistic, pluralistic, and eclectic in that they unrestrictively integrate practices and doctrines from various sources in their belief systems. These movements are often founded by a highly authoritarian and charismatic leader who is perceived to have extraordinary insights or powers. A lot of NRMs are also closely-knit and they address in followers special needs that have not been satisfied through modern secularism.

The Taiping religion started at the helm of Hong Xiuquan (1814-1864), a disenchanting civil service assessment candidate who, led by Christian ideals, had different visions. Hong believed that he was the son of God, Jesus' younger brother, sent to commence reformations in China (Sugirtharajah, 2018). The Taiping religion was stirred up by Anglo-American Protestantism which led to a new dynamic Chinese religion. Most importantly, the new religion's conception of the position and title of the ruler disputed the authenticity of the imperial order. Hong Xiuquan portrayed this new religion, Taiping religion, as a restoration and revival of the old traditional faith in Shangdi, the supreme deity of traditional texts.

Due to their faith in Shangdi, the Taiping rebels condemned the divine deceptions fostered by the imperial title Huangdi. Huangdi referred to the leader of the Qin dynasty which he chose after conquering all the kingdoms during the traditional era and unifying China. Taiping religion condemned the divine nature of the regal office. The imperial office and title were perceived as irreligious usurpation of the position and title of Shangdi. This led to the Taiping rebels calling for the traditional system of worship and kingship of Shangdi to be restored (Swain, 2017). Earlier rebellions had stated that the dynasty was corrupt, thereby requiring a renewal of the entire system. Taking that sentiment further, the Taiping rebellion declared that the ruling imperial order was sacrilegious necessitating a complete replacement. In the Taiping religious movement, we can see the radical transformation in popular thought concerning the legitimacy of the imperial order and power of the emperor. The Taiping religion became the first movement to suggest not only the removal of the standing emperor, but also the abolition of the whole dynasty system.

The Taiping religion was not based on the classical appeal of a sectarian rebellion. On a similar note, the Taiping religious leaders never perceived themselves as rebels. They associated their faith with the Chinese traditional religion instead of the popular types of sectarianism. Their aim was to instigate a revolution. Hong, together with his Taiping religious followers believed that the Chinese culture, the Qing dynasty and the founder of the empire was on the wrong path. The leaders of the Taiping religion perceived their movement as more of a revolution to restore the religious orders of the traditional past which existed before the empire was founded.

An important mission of the Taiping religious movement was to restore the traditional political order (Jin, 2018). Religion was at the heart of the movement and the Taiping culture was used to physically express these religious convictions. The Taiping religious movement would be a failure if they had not attained their political goals. The greater ambition of Hong Xiuquan was to change the Chinese culture with regards to his vision of a reinstated worship of Shangdi. This premeditated religious change would present itself in all the dimensions of cultural life in Taiping.

The religious vision of the Taiping religion fostered the need for political rebellion. It entailed the worship of a new god that required that a new king. Hong's religion varied since it did not allow for the role or position of emperor. Taiping Christianity directly opposed and challenged the imperial office and the emperor, as well as the imperial cultural system. The Taiping religion believed that the emperor had blasphemed the title and abused the office of Shangdi (Ter Haar, 2019). Since the Taiping started a rebellion and attacked the emperor, scholars have developed wrong perceptions that the movement was just a political rebellion. Hong's justification to target the imperial office emphasized the cultural and religious aspects of the institution, rather than its political aspect. His movement started by launching attacks at the temples of the city gods, as well as targeting the magistrate's yamen. In a poem he wrote on the temple wall, Hong publicly announced himself as the Heavenly King.

In the study of the Taiping religious movement, there is a need to look at the achievements and career of Matteo Ricci, an early Catholic missionary who was also successful in China and pioneered the method that Protestant missionaries and the Taiping later followed (Sun, 2019). Ricci became the first Westerner to use the term Shangdi to refer to the Christian sense of God

(Sun, 2019). In addition to the name of China's highest traditional god, the Jesuits borrowed the traditional perception of the Heaven's controlling mankind. Hong Xiuqan used his imaginative mind to develop a central idea of associating oneself with the established traditional religion. This helped him create a new model for Chinese culture and thought. The contribution of Protestants to the efforts of Hong was significant. He translated the word "God", as well as other terms. Additionally, the missionaries also assigned Hong a high level of Protestant iconoclasm, which assisted him to reconceptualize the landscape of Chinese religion. According to Hong, the emperor had instilled himself as an idol greater than Shangdi and that he was to be worshipped (Hodges, 2017). Hong argues that it is these actions that intensified the rage of the Taiping and Shangdi.

Hong also speculated a dualism between the Taiping traditional order and the traditional imperial order. He showed his faith as a more faithful and orthodox successor of the old traditional religion in comparison to the teachings of the master. Hong contested the imperial system which was supported by the Confucians. Nonetheless, aside from the way different studies of Christianity in China have described the events, one cannot dispute the fact that the history of early Chinese Christianity never ended with the proscription of the faith during 1724 (Sun, 2017). The period of imperial interdiction was significant just like the growth of Chinese Christianity as well as the period of the early Jesuits and Matteo Ricci. This is because it was during these periods of persecution after the imperial decree that Chinese Catholicism transformed into an Indigenous Chinese sect known as the Heavenly Lord. In this essence, whereas the Jesuit strategy might have been unsuccessful the general Catholic mission to develop a Chinese Christianity can be regarded a success. Using the term "indigenous" to explain a religion with origins out of China may seem atypical. However, laying down the developments as they transpired during the early Chinese Catholicism period assists to explain the application of the term.

By the time of the Opium War, as well as the treaties that ended it, the Heavenly Lord faction had become identical in some of its practices, rituals, and language as seen in other common Chinese sects. As a result, people were not familiar with Catholicism. The main problem for the Catholic missionaries, more particularly in the years of proscription was to differentiate the name of the Christian God with the other deities' names (Introvigne, 2020). The missionaries tried to distinguish themselves from Buddhist sectarians particularly in their doctrines and beliefs. However, they still tried associating these doctrines with the traditional religion even when they applied Buddhist terminology to express these beliefs. The Heavenly Lord faction did not fit in the sectarian mold. Matteo Ricci reached China in 1583 and while he was among many Jesuits who reached the shores of the Middle Kingdom, he is still considered the pioneer of the mission since he played a part to initiate the advance taken by the consecutive Jesuit missionaries. Ricci, as well as the early Jesuits had the aim to develop Chinese Christianity. The most significant contribution of these individuals in the development of Chinese Christianity was translating the Christian doctrinal teaching, liturgy, and apologetic literature into Chinese, importing the most significant Christian concepts into China.

The early Catholic converts strongly backed the views of Ricci. The connection of the Christian God with Shangdi was accepted by the Confucian elite, and a lot has been written concerning their maintenance of the Jesuit strategy. Much of the studies that assess the effect

of the early Catholic missionary's center on the response of the highest-degree elite, more particularly the 3 pillars of the Chinese church: Yang Tingyun, Li Zhizao, and Xu Guangqi (Clark, 2020). The Ming dynasty grand secretary was given the responsibility of presenting the four-character phrase *buru yifo*.

The similarities between the Bible concepts and the Taiping religious concepts are very fascinating. The Taiping supported the belief of one god, who they perceive as the creator. They also believed he should be given respect and no one should use his name improperly. Everyone was supposed to worship him and it was important that sacrifices were paid to him. Additionally, *Shang-ti* was used to refer to the god of the Chinese (Liu, 2019). Nonetheless, until the ruling dynasty was conquered, the Taipings perceived him as their special sponsor since his main intention was to restore the previous relationship he had with the Chinese. God's covenant with the rebels was not similar to the vision he had with the Hebrews. However, with regards to some visions that Hong had during 1837, the self-proclaimed Younger Brother of Jesus and Heavenly King was assigned a commission to restore the worship of *Shang-ti* and "slay the demons." Both Jesus and God were in the topics of discussion of most Taiping host leaders and even intervened during crucial moments such as the Hebrew Jahweh.

The Ten Commandments were redeveloped and became an integral component to morally instructing the rebels. Some changes were made to allow for local circumstances to fit. The second commandment against idolatry was made the topic and employed vigorously. The rebels perceived the keeping of the Sabbath as something serious. Also, the idea of honoring one's father and mother appealed to the Chinese naturally. Evidently, one can see how the Taiping religion was hugely influenced by the Old Testament (Wu, 2017). Certain New Testament perceptions are also present in the Taiping religion. God is perceived as father of all and as it is evident within the New Testament, the Taiping religion employs Heaven and Hell as places of reward and penalty. Evil spirits, the Devil, and active principles of evil are often mentioned just like in the New Testament.

With regards to Christian doctrines and practices, the Taiping observed the practice of baptism, both immersion and sprinkling. The Christian beliefs of sin, atonement, forgiveness, and incarnation were followed, as well as the use of the term Holy Spirit. The idea of the Holy Trinity was maintained expect that it required turning into a quadripartite to encompass the Heavenly King. The New Testament section of the movement's ideology could have been obtained from the four Gospels. The Taiping religion progressed after the arrival of Christian tradition in China. During the moment, there were radical Biblical interpretations which aimed to counter the underlying structures of standing power, a communistic way of living and development of different new religions.

Starting in the southern provinces of China during the mid-nineteenth century, the Taiping religious revolution organized enormous regions in China for more than a decade. The religious movement included more than 1 million peasants conquering Nanjing and menacing Beijing. The movement astounded the Qing dynasty and was conquered only after assistance from foreign intervention and higher weapons technology (Patterson, 2019). There was no recognized peasant revolution in China since no dynastic change would encompass peasant uprisings. Nonetheless, these uprisings introduced a new dynastic system that proceeded with the ways of the old regime. The problem in such cases was that the dynasty would often become

corrupt and veer off course. Therefore, a change was required to restore the proper dynasty with emperors that had the true command from heaven. In this essence, the essentials of the dynastic system remained intact. On the contrary, the Taiping religious movement radically disputed the assumptions and justifications of the dynastic system, declaring the imperial system as idolatrous and demanding the need for abolition. The Taiping religion was decisive with intricate historical impacts and appeared as a heterodox or an unorthodox type of Christianity.

Hong is also a special character. Through visions and dreams, Hong received the message that he was the ruler of the heavenly kingdom on earth and demolisher of demons. Due to such a unique deviation of theology, it is no surprise that Hong still has legions of cynics. The churches and missionaries in China denied Hong's theology as "heresy." Moreover, a lot of people persist to discharge this theology by arguing that Hong was possibly mad. Nonetheless, this disapproval of revolutionary religious leaders is a monotonously common feature in anti-revolutionary pundits. His theological advancement made Hong and the Taiping religious followers enter a revolutionary position. Most importantly, as mentioned above, the movement was based on a different interpretation of the first three Commandments. According to their teachings, the commandments directly referenced the Qing dynasty, as well as the entire imperial system that aimed to place the high God, Shangdi after the other gods (Meyer-Fong, 2018). This was done by creating idols and having blasphemy through the different symbols that were used to show imperial rule in China. These were their reasons why the imperial system had to be obliterated. This began with the smashing of the symbols, buildings, icons, and statues of the imperial power. Hong and his collaborators might have been justified by the Bible which also outlined the way they should follow. For them, this way of life entailed not only stopping private property ownership but also practicing common ownership of property.

### **The Taiping Rebellion as a social movement**

During the time changes in Japan were under way, China was still being run by the same dynasty which ruled for more than two hundred years. Led by the Manchu people who were the ethnic minority, Qing rule was having a hard time maintaining China's prestige and wealth in East Asia. Following the opium wars, the first emperor to take power was Emperor Tongzhi. At 5 years old, he had little authority, mandating that his mother largely controlled the empire. Tongzhi's mother instigated a movement known as the Tongzhi Revolution to stop the decline of Qing power through strengthening the Confucian culture and restoring the classical sociopolitical order (Kayloe, 2017). The detrimental defeats by the British during the opium wars were partly what led to domestic instability. Even though Qing leaders never submitted to Western imperialism, they gained power as the colonial powers of the West gained political and economic traction in China. Consequently, the effectiveness and legitimacy of their rule, as well as the authority of the Manchu people was weakened.

Whereas frequent conflict over its trade and opium addiction persisted, China's imperial court became confronted with clashes between modernity and tradition. This created a foundation for the bloodiest civil war in history, the Taiping rebellion from 1850s until 1864. Up to when China lost to Britain during the opium wars, Western traders were allowed to conduct business and trade only through Cohong, an association of 13 authorized Chinese

merchants who were permitted by the Chinese central government (Pedersen & Nielsen, 2019). This system, however, ended after the Treaty of Nanking was signed following China's defeat in the opium wars. This allowed for new opportunities for American and European traders, shifting most of China's economic activities from the south to the north. There were huge job losses in the south, leading to severe economic depression and famine. Most importantly, China was looking for a leader who would guide them. These conditions are what made Hong emerge as a leader.

During the Opium Wars, the British aimed to expand its trade networks by making the Chinese increase the number of ports for their ships. Nonetheless, the Chinese only wanted silver from Europe, while Europeans wanted several products from China, for instance, ceramics, silk, and tea. Economically, this implied that China benefited from the silver trade whereas European countries never gained any profits. Eventually, the British introduced opium, something they knew many Chinese would not do without (Chen, 2017). Despite its application as a medicine, opium was highly addictive with most of it being grown in India. Within no time, Chinese merchants became convinced by the British to trade opium for products like grains, coffee, and tea. Buying less silver and more opium played a key role in destroying the Chinese economy. This led to the emperor to halt the trade of opium. Chinese officials deposited huge loads of opium into the Pearl River, after which the British responded by sending modern warfare ships. The Opium Wars ended with a treaty that left the Qing emperor devastated, losing lots of money and Hong Kong. The British also mandated more ports were for British ships and it is worth noting, British citizens were not obligated to follow the Chinese laws (Simner, 2019).

It was during the Opium Wars that the Qing emperors dealt with a concurrent internal conflict of the Taiping Rebellion. Many of the people who were mobilized by Hong to engage in the rebellion were dissatisfied peasants, highlighting the deep divisions within China. Most of the rebels were peasants who suffered economic losses due to the rising European control over trade, mismanagement by Manchu landlords, and land shortages (Desplanches, 2020). Hong incorporated Christian and Confucian beliefs into a doctrine that promised a better life and salvation to those who would follow his course. In his proposal, Hong outlawed opium because it had ripped communities and families apart. Despite the Taiping Rebellion being a Chinese civil war, American and European powers were also involved (Chatterjee & Banik, 2020). American soldiers were employed as mercenaries by the Qing to fight the Taiping. The French and British military also partook in the war but they were on loan instead of being loyal to the Qing dynasty. Additionally, the French and British just wanted to safeguard the trade agreements they had recently entered into with the emperor. During this period, China was faced with different environmental and political issues. Manchu misrule and European intervention made governing very hard. On a similar note, recurring natural disasters made the land susceptible to famine. People were angry and hungry which intensified the tension between the various groups and communities across China. Coastal regions suffered from the mass influx of European merchants and missionaries, whereas the interior areas were faced with increased friction between rival beliefs and ethnicities (Chen, 2017).

After losing the Opium Wars to a modern British army, China perceived that modernization was very important. Coastal cities were flooded by Western influences. The

military developed more advanced weapons and constructed new railway lines. The Chinese first tried counterbalancing this foreign influence with traditional Chinese practices like relying on Confucian ideals. During this period, traditional Chinese values were strengthened with some innovations. This started with the Empress Dowager Cixi who ruled China for about 50 years and applied vast power. Whereas the strategies she used appeared extreme in comparison to today's standards, Cixi assisted in leading China during a period that saw positive reforms (Schwegler, 2017). After being defeated in the Sino-Japanese War, China went into a Hundred Day's Reform, an ambitious effort to modernize the country through different reforms, most of which focused on adopting the practices and laws of the Europeans. Nevertheless, some Chinese preferred modernizing without being westernized, and this infuriated traditionalists, as well as the Dowager Empress. Despite being in semi-retirement, Cixi still practiced control and influence over the Guangxu Emperor, as well as the court. After launching the reform movement in 1898, Cixi started a revolt against the emperor. While she was successful in re-asserting her authority, the coup merely motivated other groups to finally get rid of the Qing dynasty.

In the 10 years following Hong's multiple imperial examination failures and subsequent fever-induced visions to overthrow the emperor through military power, Hong studied Christian texts, sharing knowledge with friends and family, as well as teaching people in village schools. In most cases, his message was not warmly received. However, in Southern China, Hong was among the *Hakka*, a sub-ethnic group who were singled out by the ethnic majority (Yan, Wong & Lai, 2019). Since the *Hakka* were economically marginalized, they became more receptive to the message from Hong and he unexpectedly became the leader of God worshippers. An important aspect was that they all shared Hong's religious, economic, and political beliefs. His followers grew in number and in no time, they not only wanted to heed Hong's message from God, but also assist him in forming an army.

The Taipings employed their fanaticism in exploiting the uncertainty brought by the economic and social conditions during that time. In the early years, the Taiping religion formed their militia and continued training and teaching other people into their doctrine. Consequently, they developed a full army, recruited families and forged alliances, and joined together intellectuals and peasants who perceived the Qing dynasty as weak and the reason for the decline of China. Taiping's militia had outstanding success and they realized that they were even stronger and more organized than the Qing dynasty armies (Orbach, 2021). After enduring a large-scale assault in 1850 by government troops, Hong declared that he was the king of the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace and launched the Taiping Rebellion.

The Taiping course had far-reaching appeal. The movement was appealing to the poor peasants and climate of the anti-Manchu rule both economically and politically. It was not long before the Taiping managed to quickly occupy a huge piece of land, including Nanjing which they made their capital. The Taiping rebellion gained power through spreading of their political and religious messages via printed page (Shu, 2020). Borrowing from Christian missionary practices, Hong together with other Taiping leaders availed a total of forty-four books, different religious and political tracts, as well as policy proposals. In spite of the early success of the movement, the Taiping Rebellion eventually faced extreme religious dogma, autocratic

leadership, lack of cohesion, and internal strife. In the last battle where the Taipings fought over the city of Nanjing, many people were killed and the rebellion collapsed.

The Taiping is a social movement that shaped the development of China as a country. The destruction left behind following the Rebellion led to a new lease on life for the densely populated areas during the years of restoration. Nevertheless, historians' attention has been drawn to the revolt since the Taiping Rebellion was a watershed moment in the history of China. To combat the rebellion, the Qing dynasty was forced to decentralize, thereby placing public finance and regional armies under the management of the local leaders (Shaoyang, 2018). This essentially altered China's evolution. Strong provincial leaders surfaced to become warlords who started segmenting the country.

There is a need to assess the long-term impacts of the Taiping rebellion and the mechanisms liable for them. One of its biggest impacts is that it permanently changed the development trajectories in the rebellion areas. In the areas where it was present, the post-war population growth remained less than in the regions that were not affected by the war. During the late Qing dynasty, China faced a lot of problems, both externally and at home (Xia & Radio, 2020). As presented by Modern Communist Chinese, this was the era when the foreign dynasty started agreeing with the disadvantaged treaties commanded by the British. These scholars state that the illegitimate Qing rule led to disaster after disaster, including humiliating defeats, natural disasters, poor management, famine, and foreign influence from "barbarians" like the Japanese and the British. Additionally, the tracts based on socio-economic, religion, and ethnicity status led to disunity in China, making it susceptible to foreign impositions. Their argument stresses on the internal challenges that made it easy for western powers to meddle into the affairs of China. On the contrary, western historians perceived this as a period where foreign influence in China was a success, thereby leading to the modernization of the country. In real sense, it was both external and internal issues that led to China's period of transformation and struggle.

As noted by Ho-fung Hung, popular movements like the Taiping rebellion never became mass movements to counter the dynasty until the late eighteenth century. Whereas number of large-scale rebellions reduced, a lot of Chinese were unhappy about the injustice and corruption practiced by public officials. This led to many representatives being sent to Beijing to submit their petitions to denounce them. Scholars attribute this to the successful efforts of Jiaqing to restore the moral legitimacy of the throne which led to the desire to revitalize the Qing dynasty (Ye, 2017). While forming his army to counter the emperor's forces, Hong introduced the "Five Articles of military discipline." Within these rules, there was no phrase to warn against legal actions. The rebels were directed to eliminate all of them. Among the orders given by Hong Xiuquan was that both women and men should stand up and kill all the demons (Kilcourse, 2020). The betrayers of the Taiping rebellion were captured and publicly executed. On a similar note, any person taking advantage of the situation to commit robbery would be executed.

Many different factors led to the Taiping rebellion throughout Chinese history, for instance, corruption, defective local administration, and social injustice, others were unusual for the Qing. These other factors were huge population growth in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the contact with western religion and ideas, as well as the large-scale internal migration. There was widespread social disruption within the coastal provinces and the

control of the community was in the responsibility of opium smugglers, triads, and bandits. The Guangxi province, mostly inhabited by minority groups like *Hakka* and *Yao* was dazed by different sectarian uprisings during the 1830s and 1840s (Hu et al., 2020). Their leaders Li Yuanfa, Lei Zaihao, and Lan Zhengzun lost their ability to combat the authorities. Nonetheless, the community of Guangxi was highly militarized as the locals took steps to safeguard their villages and assets against the high number of skirmishes and bandit attacks between local Punti and immigrant *Hakka*.

It was at this moment that Hong started to ponder on the significance of Christianity for China, and integrated the elements of the foreign religion with traditional concepts of morality, such as homicide, gambling, unfiliality, and licentiousness. The early social life in the Taiping was typified by rigid Puritanism. They banned prostitution, opium, tobacco, and wine. There was also the strict segregation of women and men. The theocratic status of the Taiping started a new field system where land was allocated to every family in relation to the number of heads (Michio, 2021). The Taiping administration stood in the way of the imperial government that tried solving economic problems with heavy-handed bureaucracy. Yet for poor families, the Taiping rebellion acted as a social revolution that promised better things. Whereas the privileged Taiping occupied important positions, the other posts in the administration became occupied by civil servants chosen in the same manner as the Qing. Even if the system was the same to that of the traditional structure, the tests comprised of Christian panegyrics and themes of the Taiping leaders - and were easy. Since no difference existed between military and civilian ranks, all civil servants could be given any task.

### **Contemporary reactions and later perceptions of the Taiping movement**

It is fascinating to see the way Europe's well-renowned revolutionary, Karl Marx perceived the Taiping movement during the nineteenth century. Scholars have argued that the poor peasants of the Taiping Heavenly Army were motivated by the underclass interests of their emperor. Nonetheless, this is not the case as Marx explains. The Taiping movement was huge in every possible manner; the whole duration of the war was long, the soldiers fighting were many, and there more than twenty million deaths (Fagan et al., 2020). The American civil war occurred just at the same time the Taiping rebellion took place. In his piece that he wrote in 1853 known as "Revolution in China and in Europe," summarizes his comprehension of the Taiping movement, as well as what it caused. He begins by noting the significant role played by the impact of the Opium Wars in leading to the rebellion. On a similar note, the financial and trade penetration by the Western powers happened in ways that bring detrimental effects to the policy and economy of China. Forced opium trade resulted in Chinese textile workers being dislocated (Hoerder, 2019). Marx proceeds to note on the nature of the rebels and the rebellion. In his description, there is no mentioning of agents or the agenda for change, but rather destruction and blind violence. Through Marx's analysis, it is evident that he did not establish the nature of the Taiping movement. He fails to ask the social basis that made the poor Chinese join the rebellion. Nonetheless, the Taipings are presented as a cipher. Many have mistakenly perceived the Taiping movement as a cult movement. Following the founding of the rebellion, it became a mass movement of the Chinese people interested in starting a

revolutionary storm to eradicate the hated regime. The Taiping rebellion is also considered as an unfinished revolution since it entailed the overthrow of a foreign house.

### **Conclusion**

The Taiping movement was the result of several important factors, forming an almost perfect storm; from the arrival of Protestantism, ethnic and socio-economic inequality, the dominance of British traders undermining the authority of the government and the development of the printer for distributing printed materials. There is also the charismatic leader with a special connection to God and the promise of salvation to his followers. It has the markings of a new religious movement, a revolution and a social movement.

During the Opium Wars, the British aimed to expand its trade networks by making the Chinese increase the number of ports for their ships. Many of the people who were mobilized by Hong to engage in the rebellion were dissatisfied Chinese, showing how there were deep divisions in the nation. Most of the rebels were peasants who suffered economic losses from the rising European control over trade, mismanagement by Manchu landlords, and land shortages. Hong incorporated Christian and Confucian beliefs into a doctrine that promised a better life and salvation to those who would follow his course.

Contemporaries like Karl Marx often perceived the Taiping Rebels as a revolutionary movement. They went through a bloody revolution against their foreign oppressor, the Qing emperor. During this time, Hong controlled up to a third of the nation and established a Taiping Kingdom based on reformist thought and religious ideologies. On a similar note, Mao Zedong also perceived the Taiping insurgents as proto-communists in relation to their policies conducted throughout their reign.

The Taiping rebellion is also recognized as a social movement. Since conflict over its trade and opium addiction persisted, China's imperial court became confronted with clashes between modernity and tradition. All this created a foundation for the bloodiest civil war in history which took the lives of approximately 20 million civilians. In modern times, the Taiping rebellion is considered an unfinished revolution because it promised the eradication of a hated regime, which it never accomplished. However, it forever changed the course of Chinese policy, modernization and political beliefs.

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# **The reconstruction of ancient Greek religion: Practicing Hellenic religious tradition in contemporary Greek society**

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## **Abstract**

Ancient Greek religion has primarily attracted the attention of historians and archaeologists in order to understand its structure and place within the ancient Greek polis. The purpose of this article is to present and analyze the reconstruction of the ancient Greek religion in contemporary Greek society through a series of questions: Who are the people who are self-defined as followers of the ancient Greek religion? Through what kind of trajectories did they select this religious path? Which are the main aspects and types of participation? Which are their relations to the broader Orthodox Christian society and the state? Through a qualitative approach and building on the concepts of tradition and memory this article aims to understand the reappearance of the ancient Greek religion and stimulate further research on a neglected academic field.

## **Keywords:**

Reconstructionism, ancient Greek religion, Hellenic religion, Greek society, religious memory, tradition

## **Introduction**

The structure and place of religion in ancient Greece has primarily attracted the scientific interest of historians, archaeologists and anthropologists. The endeavor of the Roman Emperor Julian, who was stigmatized as an Apostate by the Orthodox Church, to revive ancient Greek religion in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, or a later similar effort by the philosopher George Gemistus, Plethon during the Renaissance,<sup>25</sup> have been also extensively studied. Despite the wide interest in ancient Greek religion or the historical efforts to restore it, there is practically no attention paid by the academia in Greece to a gradually emerged phenomenon of the 1990s, which has led to what has been called the reconstruction of ancient Greek religion. This lack of interest

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<sup>25</sup> Plethon is a key-figure in the milieu of the Hellenic religion. He was one of the most renowned philosophers of the late Byzantine time and a pioneer of the revival of ancient Greek scholarship in Western Europe. Plethon moved away from Christianity favoring a return to the worship of the ancient Gods, mixed with Eastern elements from Zoroastrianism.

contradicts to the international developments and the great number of studies and publications regarding the revival of paganism and the numerical rise of pagan groups around the world (Pike, 2001; Strmiska, 2005; Rountree, 2015; Schnurbein, 2016).

It is true that there is a heated debate about the terms used in the research field and before I proceed with the description and analysis of this particular case some clarifications are crucial. Firstly, in this article the term 'reconstruction of ancient Greek religion' is adopted. I acknowledge that the people I spoke to do not fully accept the terms 'ancient' and 'religion'. They argue that their beliefs should not be considered as ancient, because they were practiced through the centuries, sometimes secretly, and that they are still alive supporting the argument of continuation. They also mostly prefer not to call their beliefs and practices as a religion, but as religious tradition, cult or worldview, from the moment they lack sacred texts and dogmas. Even between them, though, one can find a variety of terms used: 'Hellenic religion', 'Hellenic tradition', 'Hellenic polytheism', 'Hellenic cult', 'Hellenic national religion'. Although I fully understand their critical reflections of the terms used I will adopt 'ancient Greek religion' in order to differentiate it from the Orthodox religion which is also sometimes presented as the 'national religion'. I have to admit that Hellenic religion is another term that could be equally used and that is why sometimes it also appears in this article as an alternative of ancient Greek religion. Secondly and related to the above, since 'reconstruction' is the most common term deployed in the literature to describe the reappearance or simply the growth of the ancient religious traditions I will also incorporate it in my approach. Finally, I endorse the term religion, because I contend that 'Hellenic tradition or cult' is actually a religion regardless of the lack of dogmas and sacred books.<sup>26</sup> I agree, though, that this lack of a dogmatic background critically differentiates ancient Greek religion from the monotheistic ones.<sup>27</sup>

The purpose of this article is to briefly present and analyze the landscape of ancient Greek religion in contemporary Greek society trying to fill an existing gap in the academia asking a preliminary set of questions: Who are the people who are currently the followers of the ancient Greek religion? Through what kind of trajectories did select this religious path? Which are the main aspects and types of participation, individual or collective? Which are their relations to the broader Orthodox Christian majority society and the state? Which is the role of tradition and religious memory in this process of reconstructing Hellenic religion? Through a qualitative approach and building on the concepts of tradition and memory, this article aims at understanding the reappearance of ancient Greek religion. It further aims at setting the first steps for further research in the field and at stimulating discussions that will be mostly scientific and less prejudiced.

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<sup>26</sup> Following Dobbelaere I agree that a functional definition applied to any meaning system performing so-called religious functions that would be called religion is not practical and effective. Instead a substantive and exclusive definition is more appropriate. Based on that and as a starting point religion according to Dobbelaere (2011: 600) is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to supra-empirical, transcendent reality codified by a religious authority that unifies all those who adhere to it in a moral single community. Such an approach does not necessarily include dogmas and sacred texts.

<sup>27</sup> I have reflected quite a lot on which terms to adopt, but at some point, the researcher needs to make a final decision, although they might understand that the choice they made is not the most appropriate and that it could lead to reasonable objections by their participants. However, this selection was made exclusively on scientific grounds.

### **The religious landscape of Greek society**

It is a truism to argue that Greek society is a majority Orthodox one and that Christian Orthodoxy has been playing a very crucial role for the last two centuries after the Revolution of 1821 and the formation of the Greek state. According to all the available survey data the vast majority of the population still self-identifies with the Greek Orthodox religion. However, the widespread argument of the 1990s that 99 per cent of the population is Greek Orthodox does not stand still anymore. Nowadays, many opinion polls have shown that Greek people, especially younger generations, seem to move away from the Orthodox religion and the Church declaring themselves as atheists, agnostics, non-believers and non-affiliated. Despite this recorded turn with regard to religious beliefs and practices it is still true that at least more than 85 per cent of the population situates itself in the Greek Orthodox religion and follows its teachings and rituals (Sakellariou, 2021).<sup>28</sup>

Apart from the above it has to be underlined that the numerical domination of the Orthodox does not imply the lack of other religions. Jews, Catholics and Muslims, for example, are among the oldest religious communities found in the Greek territory and their presence is documented even before the establishment of the Greek state. In addition, from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Protestants also arrived in Greece and today most of the main currents of Protestantism can be found in Greek society. Then, of course, one has to count other religious communities like Jehovah's Witnesses or Eastern religions, like Buddhism. The rise of immigration which started in the 1990s, but became wider during the 2000s, added another stone in the religious mosaic of the Greek society. Higher numbers of Muslims arrived from countries of the Middle East, Africa and Asia (Tsitselikis and Sakellariou, 2021), but also Hindus and Sikhs have formed significant communities (Papageorgiou, 2011). Having the above in mind it could be argued that especially in Athens, the Greek capital, a polymorphous religious landscape has been in the process of formation and in many cases is visible in the public space through rituals and sacred places (Vrettos, 2015).<sup>29</sup>

In order to present an accurate perspective of the religious landscape a few words about the place and role of the Orthodox Church of Greece are necessary. Despite the existing but limited number of secular steps incorporated by the state, the Orthodox Church continues to be a powerful and influential institution, with a significant impact upon the Greek political sphere. After the formation of the Greek state in 1830, the Orthodox Church was declared a national Church (1833) and became the state's ideological apparatus reproducing the national ideology. This means that the Orthodox Church and the Greek state established close and collaborative relations. On the one hand the state supported the Church considering it as the 'mother of the nation' and the Church on the other, always supported the state's national policies and ideology. It could be argued that the Orthodox Church of Greece is a Church that functions under the auspices of the state and this is proved by the existing legal framework, which defines the relations between the two institutions and the legal status of the Church (Sakellariou, 2013). According to Article 3 of the Constitution, the prevailing religion in Greece is the religion of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ. Further to that, the Constitution starts with the phrase:

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<sup>28</sup> For some recent opinion polls see: [https://www.dianeosis.org/2017/03/tpe\\_2017/](https://www.dianeosis.org/2017/03/tpe_2017/), <https://www.dianeosis.org/2018/03/greeks-believe-2018/>, <https://www.dianeosis.org/2020/03/ti-pistevoun-oi-ellines-to-2020/> and <https://cutt.ly/1fiwKoT> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>29</sup> See also <https://www.athenssocialatlas.gr/en/article/religion-in-the-city/> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

“In the name of the Holy and Consubstantial and Indivisible Trinity”. Some scholars have argued that as long as there are such statements in the constitution, talking about a secular state is quite problematic (Paparizos, 1998; Dimitropoulos, 2001: 70-80), while others contend that they are not substantial and have principally a symbolic and historical content (Venizelos, 2000: 137-138; Manitakis, 2000: 72-74).

It should further be added that in Article 2 of the first chapter of the law regarding the function of the Orthodox Church and its relation with the state (590/1977) it is mentioned that the Church of Greece should cooperate with the state on themes of common interest, for example, the Christian education of the youth; the religious service in the army; the support of the institution of marriage and family; [...] the establishment of new religious holidays; and asks for the protection of the state whenever the Orthodox religion is insulted. Such a provision also exemplifies the close and privileged relation of the Orthodox Church with the Greek state. Overall, the place and role of the Orthodox Church are crucial for the analysis that will follow especially with regard to the stigmatization of the ancient Greek religion.

A final remark is necessary. Through the years, from the establishment of the Greek state onwards, a significant effort took place both from the Church and the state in order to identify Greece with Orthodox Christianity. Through this endeavor the ideologies of Helleno-Christianism or Helleno-Christian Civilization and Helleno-Orthodoxy were formulated (Gazi, 2004).<sup>30</sup> The main purposes were three: First, to showcase the continuation of the Greek nation from Antiquity to modern times; second, to present Christianity as the only religious tradition that Greeks are obliged to follow; and third, to present as the only acceptable identity the one combining the Greek nation with the Orthodox religion. This last point resulted in the construction of a dominant understanding among the Greek society that a ‘true’ Greek should be Greek-Orthodox (Sakellariou, 2016).

### **The reappearance and reconstruction of ancient Greek religion**

Although the vast majority -if not the absolute majority- of the followers of ancient Greek religion would argue that there was never an actual break between the ancient times and the contemporary revival the fact is that it was in the 1990s when a strong presence of the Hellenic religion started to be observed in the public sphere. The beginning took place with the publication of books and periodicals focusing on Ancient Greece, its myths, mysteries, philosophy, religious practices and beliefs.<sup>31</sup> During the same time, in the mid-1990s, the first websites and forums started to appear on the Internet bringing together people of different places and backgrounds.<sup>32</sup> This, through further communication and discussions, gradually led to the first organized groups in the milieu.<sup>33</sup> Among them were the Greek Association of Antiquarians (1996), the Commission for the Recognition of the Greek Religion of

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<sup>30</sup> These synthetic words consist of Hellenic and Christian or Orthodox, but in their synthetic form Hellenic becomes Helleno- in Greek.

<sup>31</sup> See for example the periodicals *Dipetes* and *The Greek Pantheon*. For an overview of the field see Mini 2000 and the only academic paper I managed to find available exclusively online: [https://www.academia.edu/35305341/Neo\\_Paganism\\_in\\_Greece\\_nationalist\\_and\\_pluralist\\_rhetoric\\_in\\_the\\_battle\\_against\\_the\\_state\\_sponsored\\_Greek\\_Orthodox\\_Church](https://www.academia.edu/35305341/Neo_Paganism_in_Greece_nationalist_and_pluralist_rhetoric_in_the_battle_against_the_state_sponsored_Greek_Orthodox_Church) (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Nowadays a great number of groups related to Hellenic religion are active on the social media, most notably on Facebook with some of them numbering hundreds or thousands of followers.

<sup>33</sup> The milieu could be defined as the people, the physical conditions and events in which someone acts or lives.

Dodecatheon (The 12 Gods) (1996) and the Supreme Council of Ethnic Hellenes (YSEE), which is the legal body of the Hellenic Ethnic Religion (1997). Later in 2000s other groups also appeared e.g. Ellinais (Sacred Association of the Greeks who practice the ancient religion) (2006) and Labrys, a religious community for the resurgence of the sacred hearth of Hellenism (2008).<sup>34</sup> When it comes to numbers and since census data on religious affiliation are not available, only estimations can be made. These bring the number of the followers of the Hellenic religion to a few thousands, while the most recent report (2006) on religious freedom of the U.S. State Department that includes data numbers them at approximately 2,000 people.<sup>35</sup> This number seems quite small since some of the abovementioned groups, number between 6,000 and 12,000 followers in their Facebook official accounts.

The above organizations are mainly based in Athens, but some of them are expanded to other cities of Greece as well or even abroad, e.g. in the United States and Cyprus. They also hold offices and lecture rooms to meet, organize discussions and lectures,<sup>36</sup> e.g. on religious and philosophical issues and to practice religious rites.<sup>37</sup> They additionally practice their rituals either in ancient Greek temples, e.g. of Zeus in Athens city center or they organize excursions to celebrate, for example in Mount Olympus in Macedonia, Northern Greece.<sup>38</sup> This public ritual presence has attracted the attention of the media, the state authorities and the Orthodox Church. The media started to present these rituals, publishing articles and interviews of the main group representatives and this also raised the interest around their beliefs, practices and structure. This interest passed the Greek borders and foreign media (e.g. the BBC, the Guardian and DW) also started to present stories on the topic.<sup>39</sup>

This resurgence and the claim of the public space through rituals in ancient temples or other sacred places made state authorities feel uneasy and sometimes react and oppose to such activity. As one of my interviewees (Dimitris)<sup>40</sup> mentioned in one of those public rituals the police arrived in order to push them out, but the Chief Officer was reporting to the headquarters that such a push back would be impossible since on the one hand the number of the participants was high and on the other hand many families with small children were among them. It was also mentioned that in the past if a group of people would like to make offers to Gods or sing hymns in an ancient place (e.g. Delphi) could be easily arrested by the police (Epicurus, Themis).

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<sup>34</sup> For more information about the abovementioned communities one could look at their websites, some of them also in English <https://www.ysee.gr/about-eng.html>, <http://dodecatheon.blogspot.com>, <http://dodecatheon.blogspot.com> and <https://ancienthellenicreligion.gr> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>35</sup> For this report see <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71383.htm> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>36</sup> For some examples see the book presentation on household worship <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nL932Dx366k> and a lecture on the Greek nation and the Hellenic religion <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhvIMqNNmCU> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>37</sup> Some groups have been granted a permit to function a religious place. For the rituals taking place indoor see <https://www.ysee.gr/nouminia-oct20.html>. For other activities, e.g. a mythological workshop for children, see <https://www.ysee.gr/mythologiko37.html> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>38</sup> In Olympus there is an annual meeting taking place every summer called 'Prometheia', after the mythic figure of Prometheus, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZQFrp3IkTI>. A variety of photos and videos from groups' activity can be found in the following links <https://www.ysee.gr/photo.html> and <https://www.youtube.com/user/KoinotitaLabrys> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>39</sup> See for example: <https://www.dw.com/en/greece-exploring-the-revival-of-ancient-religious-traditions/a-2786954>, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/feb/01/religion.uk> and <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22972610> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>40</sup> These names in parenthesis are not the original names of the interviewees, but pseudonyms.

Another crucial aspect that needs to be mentioned is that of the legal recognition. Some of the groups have tried to achieve a legal recognition by the state on religious grounds, while others haven't taken that step forward. For example, in 2006 a Greek court decided that the group Ellinais practices a 'known religion', i.e. a religion with no secret teachings, ideologies and rituals, according to the Greek Constitution and decided that its offices could function as a religious place recognized by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs.<sup>41</sup> In another case, after the law 4301/2014 on the recognition of religious legal bodies was voted, YSEE applied in order to be recognized as a legal Religious Organization. According to the group the application is still pending at the Supreme Court, after being twice rejected on the grounds that the word 'Ethnic' in the religion's naming could confuse the population, i.e. be confused with the Greek Orthodox religion, which is considered as the prevailing religion in Greece.<sup>42</sup> Despite that, since February 2017, YSEE has been officially recognized as practicing a 'known religion' (Hellenic ethnic religion) according to article 17 of the above mentioned law, followed by a permit granted by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs to operate an official place of worship in Athens.<sup>43</sup> As all of the interviewees mentioned state authorities seem to have become more mild in their reactions and more tolerant towards their beliefs and practices although they argued that the relation between the state and the Orthodox Church continues to put obstacles in their effort to make ancient Greek religion known to the broader public. This change in state's attitude, though, was not considered genuine, but it was due to the country's participation in the European Union and the following need to comply with the Union's religious freedom instructions (Epicurus, Artemis, Themis, Ira).

Following the above, a short note is necessary with regard to the reactions of the Orthodox Church against the ancient Greek religion. After the appearance and gradual rise of the Hellenic religion in the 1990s and the 2000s the Orthodox Church perceived it as a major threat and decided to establish a special synodical committee 'on the study of ancient cult and neo-idolatry' with the participation of Orthodox Metropolitans, priests and University professors from the Divinity Schools.<sup>44</sup> Into the same direction conferences were organized, publications made, articles written and Internet texts uploaded by Orthodox Metropolitans, lower rank priests and theologians. The main arguments discussed and presented could be summarized as follows. Ancient Greek religion is a dangerous idolatrous cult, related to strange beliefs and practices (even implying Satanistic connections and rituals) and Greek people should avoid it by all means. Further to that, the only true and accepted traditional religion in Greece is and should be that of Orthodox Christianity, the religion of the forefathers (e.g. Conference Proceedings, 2004; Vasileiadis, 2014; Skontzos, 2018). This argument relates to the abovementioned 'Helleno-Christian civilization' and 'Helleno-Orthodoxy', and as it is going to be presented later it has been greatly refuted by the followers of Hellenic religion especially when it comes to the notion of tradition.

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<sup>41</sup> For this decision see: <https://ancienthellenicreligion.gr/diarthrosi-tou-ellin-a-i-s/> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>42</sup> It is important to note that both for Ethnic and National the same word ('εθνική') is used in the Greek language.

<sup>43</sup> For more details see: <http://www.ysee.gr/about-eng.html> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>44</sup> For the committee and some of its texts one can see: <http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/committees/ancient/ancient.htm> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

### **Theoretical background and methodology**

The most common research approaches when it comes to the study of the people who change their religious beliefs are those of religious conversion and/or religious identity. Although in this article implicitly both approaches are somehow present, there is no particular theoretical focus either on identity or conversion. The two main theoretical drivers of this research are tradition and memory. Their selection was decided because tradition and its preservation through memory seem to be crucial in the re-construction of ancient Greek religion. Tradition, it will be shown afterwards, plays a crucial role in people's narratives and in communities' discourse. For tradition the seminal work of Edward Shils (1981) is illuminating. In Shils's approach (1981: 12-15), tradition could mean a variety of things, but in its most elementary concept means simply a *traditum*, i.e. something transmitted or handed down from the past to the present. Further, to that he added that traditions develop because of the desire to create something better, truer or more convenient.

Related to religious tradition the concept of religious memory was also considered appropriate for the analysis. In order to transmit religious traditions memory seems fundamental. In other words, tradition could be defined as the sum of objects, practices, ideas and teachings transmitted from generation to generation. The preservation of tradition takes place through the practice of remembrance in order to construct memory and avoid oblivion. Remembrance and memory are extremely important when it comes to the reproduction of religious faith and religious tradition, among families and societies (Halbwachs, 1992; Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Bengtson, 2013). This chain of religious memory (Hervieu-Léger, 2000) is basically reproduced through the family channels. Sometimes this chain breaks up and interruptions in the religious continuity are observed when the younger members of the family stop following and embracing their parents' religious convictions and either convert to other religions or are totally disengaged from religious beliefs (Bengtson 2013: 131-164). According to this approach, family reproduces the memory of the religious group it belongs to and passes it on to the younger members, contributing this way to the construction of their religious identity. According to Assmann (2017: 38-45), who builds on Halbwachs (1992, 1941), there are three types of remembrance: First, the reference to place and time. With regard to Hellenic religion this could include sacred places, the nature, the city or the village, in terms of the place and the festivities calendar when it comes to time; Second, the reference to the group. In this case, this means that memory and the acts of remembrance take place within a particular group or the milieu of Hellenic religion and contributes to the construction of the group's identity; Third, the possibility of reconstruction. That means that the past can't be preserved as it was and it is always related to the society's context and conditions each time, something that was supported by a number of interviewees as it will be discussed later.

Regarding the methodology it was the qualitative approach that was selected. A number of fundamental texts, online and printed, and a series of videos and photos were systematically collected and analyzed. Further, to that nine semi-structured interviews (6 males, 3 females) took place with younger and older members of the communities in the milieu with their ages varying from 23 to 60 years old. One of them was a university student, one a pensioner and seven in full-time jobs. However, two of those in the job market were also studying either on graduate or post-graduate level. Five of them were born and raised in Athens, while the rest four were born in small towns and villages in other places around Greece and came to Athens

for studies, around 18-19 years old. All the participants were of lower- or middle-class socio-economic backgrounds. The interviews were very informative and added a more personal and experiential aspect and information on the already collected material. They were conducted from January to June 2021 and their duration was from one to two hours. All the interviews took place online due to the Covid-19 restrictions and the participants were given pseudonyms.<sup>45</sup>

### **The role of tradition in contemporary trajectories**

The resurgence of Hellenic religion at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is described by the people in the milieu as a return to the roots, a revival of tradition. Tradition then becomes a central notion in groups' and participants' narratives and self-presentations. The Supreme Council of Ethnic Hellenes (YSEE), in its official website mentions that it was founded in June 1997 in order "to provide moral and material support and work towards the restoration of the Ethnic, Polytheistic Hellenic tradition, religion and way of life in Modern Greek society which is dominated by spiritual stagnation, irrationalism and theocracy". In addition, in the first official press release of the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 1997 regarding its foundation it was mentioned that:

"For years, we the Ethnikoi [Ethnic] Hellenes, i.e. contemporary Greeks who still respect and honor the rites and beliefs of our ancestors, the Hellenes, remained stoically patient when faced with the systematic, and not at all coincidental, negligence and degradation of our monumental and living ethnic heritage by a 'Greek' State, which is obviously enslaved by an economic-religious giant whose cultural and logical interests promote the open scorn for our real (i.e. pre-Christian) ethnic Tradition. [...] Under this new and terrifying reality that we all see being formed against real Hellenism, [...] personalities from the community of the Ethnikoi [Ethnic] Hellenes have decided to found the Council of Ethnic Hellenes, which shall aim at the protection and restoration of the real (pre-Christian) Hellenic Tradition. We shall work by all legal means necessary towards awakening the Greek people and securing respect, survival, natural and moral protection, restoration and honor of our monuments, symbols, ideas and living forms of ancient Hellenic Tradition [...]"<sup>46</sup>

Tradition and its protection is a major goal of other groups as well. Labrys religious community, for example, "aims to preserve, promote and practice the Hellenic polytheistic religious tradition through public rituals, lectures, publications, theatrical and musical events, and other forms of action". In addition, the group's vision is "to restore the Hellenic polytheistic religious tradition and by extension the Hellenic worldview and lifestyle to its rightful place, as a respected, acknowledged, legally recognized and fully functional spiritual path"<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The initial design of the research started in autumn 2019 and included face-to-face interviews and participant observation. However, the Covid-19 pandemic had a direct impact on the research process and the participant observation had to be reluctantly abandoned.

<sup>46</sup> For the above see: <https://www.ysee.gr/about-eng.html> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>47</sup> See <http://www.labrys.gr/en/about.html> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

The abovementioned importance and protection of tradition was mentioned by all the interviewees, with continuous, direct or indirect, references to the ancient tradition and the ancestors. With regard to the relation of the contemporary resurgence and the ancient tradition all the interviewees renounced that there is a gap between the two time periods. It was argued that one way or another, the ancient religious tradition survived through the centuries and was preserved by groups of followers pertaining close relations to antiquity. This approach supports the definition of reconstructionism as a methodology for developing and practicing historical forms of paganism in the modern world, beginning from the twin assumptions that the religious expressions of the ancestors were meaningful enough in themselves and that forms of religious practice remain valid across time (Campbell, 2000: 21). Such a definition, though, would probably not be fully accepted by the participants, most notably because of the use of the term paganism.<sup>48</sup> Otherwise, the rest are very close to their views with regard to Hellenic religion.

Ancient religion is characterized as the religion of the forefathers with which it is very difficult to cut ties, because it is “my descent” as one interviewee openly stated (Artemis). This clearly distinguishes it from a foreign, as it was characterized, religion, like Christianity, which is perceived as a current of Judaism (Pericles). Further to that, it was mentioned that “all the monotheistic religions are one-dimensional, they are flat and all nations are the same within them, contrary to what takes place in traditional [i.e. ethnic] religions” (Athena). As a consequence, when they mention the word tradition they mean the religion of Ancient Greece and not the Orthodox religion which is considered as imposed upon the Greek society.

Two points should be underlined with regard to tradition. The first relates to the authenticity of the ancient tradition. From this perspective, Orthodox Christianity is not the ‘true’, the authentic, religious tradition of the Greek people. This argumentation dominates the field and almost all the groups who are active in it. This is contrary to what is found in other cases, e.g. in Malta (Rountree, 2014: 96), where the local Catholic religion is accepted as the indigenous religion by pagan groups. The second has to do with their endeavor to change this dominant perception, and at the same time to protect and preserve the ancient Hellenic religious tradition. One of the main debates in the literature (Gallagher, 1994; Anczyk and Vencálek, 2013) on pagan studies is that ancient religions are religions without converts, because their followers argue that they have not been converted to another religion, but returned to the religion of the ancestors breaking a forced religious memory chain within Christianity. In almost all the interviews this implicitly came into discussion. It was mentioned that listening to the ancient myths in their infancy (Athena), visiting or living close to ancient temples (Artemis, Dimitris), or establishing contacts with other people in the milieu (Plato) woke up something in them which is described as an internal tendency, an attraction, an aptitude, something that spoke to them or even a calling in the Weberian sense when they decided to become more active in a group and overtake a series of responsibilities.

One crucial question is how this tradition has survived and has become a living memory for those who follow ancient Greek religion. There is a variety of trajectories, i.e. individual pathways shaped by structural, group and individual factors that led people to ancient Greek

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<sup>48</sup> The terms pagans, neo-pagans, heathens, wiccans have been at the center of heated debates (Strmiska 2005: 4-10) and they were all rejected by the interviewees. Especially, the terms wiccans and pagans were almost considered an insult to some of them.

religion. As it was expected all of them grew up in a Greek-Orthodox family environment - with one exception of a Spaniard who has lived in Greece for thirty years and grew up in a Catholic family- in some cases stricter compared to others, but no one had any exact and clear idea or knowledge of ancient Greece's religious tradition. What was also interesting was that those who grew up in the periphery of Athens, small towns or villages (Dimitris, Athena, Artemis), or abroad (Plato), were fascinated by the ideal of ancient Greece, the myths they learned at school, visits or indirect contacts with archaeological places and of course the arrival to Athens was a cornerstone in this process towards the formation of the Hellenic religious identity. Athens with its historical and archeological significance exercised a symbolic influence over the newly arrived. In addition, as they admitted in the big city one can have access to material (books, periodicals), meet people and of course one can visit archeological places of great historical importance. For those over their forties the first contacts with the ancient Greek religion took place through the thematic periodicals published in the 1990s and only on a second level the Internet played a role in this process. Apart from the periodicals the reading of ancient texts were mentioned as another important part of their trajectories. Ancient texts familiarized them with the ancient thinking, religion, everyday practices and philosophy and influenced their approach of the rituals. Overall, it seems that as it has been argued (Reid 2009: 180) reading, mainly books or periodicals, and contact with people are playing a central role in the first communication with the milieu, while for the younger ones the Internet also played a significant role (Cowan, 2005).

Three final points with regard to trajectories should be discussed. The first is that as it comes out and verified by one interviewee (Dimitris) there are two main trends with regard to the family environment in the milieu that could explain their trajectory to Hellenic religion. One includes environments which were very devoted to the Christian religion. This religious element, the piety, was mentioned as crucial in their religious quest, because this close connection to the divine created a fertile ground for their ending to Hellenic religion. As two interviewees mentioned "the positive was the pre-existence of religiosity, the emotion of religiosity, and the repetition [of the rituals]" (Athena) and "I was enjoying the devoutness in the Church, [...] this shows a relation with the divine" (Artemis). Another trend refers to more open and liberal environments offering them the opportunity to open up their minds and select another religious path (Aris, Epicurus). The second point is that puberty is a crucial time for religious as well as other quest in people's lives and this is totally verified by all the interviewees. The third is that, some participants broke the family religious chain in a short time of one or two years after the beginning of their quest (Pericles, Epicurus), while for others a longer time, five or even ten years, was proved necessary in order to take that step further (Artemis, Plato, Ira).

Apart from the religious background another issue was the reactions from their family, professional and friendly environment. Although, in some cases liberal reactions and openness were mentioned, in others negative and stereotypical comments were also present. As one interviewee mentioned:

"At the beginning when I was telling my friends and boyfriends that I am a follower of the ancient religion they were 'oh, she is very alternative'. But when they were watching it in practice, as something that was repeated, for example

‘every Sunday I will go there’, meaning that this is something on which I will dedicate my free time, they were saying, ‘come on my friend, you will spend all this time on this thing? It becomes weird’” (Athena).

All of them agreed that compared to twenty or thirty years ago Greek society has become more tolerant towards ancient Greek religion. As elsewhere (Pike, 2001: xi-xii) in the past there have been threats and physical attacks against them, e.g. the burning of a bookstore publishing books about ancient Greece in Athens city center,<sup>49</sup> but this is not the case anymore. There are still people who would stop them on the street if they see them practicing a short ritual, offering to a small altar, arguing that the Greeks were and should continue to be Greek-Orthodox (Plato), but overall in their opinion the society seems to be more open and interested in who they are and what they do.

### **Theology, values and ideology**

When it comes to the discussion about theology the opinions vary. On the one hand there are those groups and people who argue that theology is a strong part of the ancient tradition and is basically part of the ancient philosophy. As one interviewee argued, “the great power of the ancient Greek religion is its theology. If a Christian theologian wants to be good enough, he needs to study Neo-Platonism” (Dimitris). The main argument of this approach is that all the philosophical texts of the ancient philosophers discussing about religion and the existence of Gods are basically forming the theology of Hellenic religion. Some groups, e.g. YSEE, have published brief booklets about the ancient Greek religion, including a generic theological section on “Greek national religion: Theology and praxis”,<sup>50</sup> where they describe the broader theological context, but with no specific reference to philosophers or philosophical currents.

Not all they agree that theology is a central part of the ancient religion and practice. Some argue that since they don’t have any dogmas and holy books, theology only relates to philosophical currents (Epicurus), but on the community level they oppose any identification with specific philosophical paths. Any such choice is considered a personal one and not one that should be endorsed by a group or the whole milieu as it is the case with monotheistic religions. Any member could select Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Epicureanism, etc., but similarly as selecting a political ideology or any other ideological system. As it was mentioned, “when it comes to philosophy, politics, theology, every person can hold different tastes, for example, I like the mountains, you prefer the sea. There is no theology behind [the rituals], just Mythology, the myths are the basis of our festivities” (Plato).

Such an argument does not imply, however, that everyone is free to do whatever they want within the community or in the broader milieu of the Hellenic religion. As it was argued, “you can’t be dogmatic in our circles, because we don’t have a dogma [laughing], [...] there are of course some guiding principles that one needs to follow because they are based on tradition, these are things that you need to follow” (Plato). Values, in that sense, are present and should be accepted by the people. In some cases, they are openly stated in the group’s texts:

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<sup>49</sup> This was an arson attack against the Verettas publications in Athens in 1997. Those who attacked wrote in the bookstore’s walls the word ‘purification’ and threw leaflets of a group named ‘Group of fighting Orthodox Christians’.

<sup>50</sup> See <http://www.ysee.gr/download/YSEE-THEOLOGIA-KAI-PRAXIS.pdf> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

“The values that govern and guide Labrys religious community are: Eusebia (Piety), in our relationship with the Gods; Organikotis (Kinship), in our relationships within the Community; Dikaiosyne (Justice), in terms of members’ relations within the Community and also as a guiding principle in the conduct of the community as a whole towards third parties. The members of Labrys religious community also aim at achieving Eudaimonia [happiness] through attaining freedom, autonomy and self-sufficiency”.<sup>51</sup>

As one can observe values are shared within the community and should be accepted by members but there is no similar provision for theological or philosophical currents. In the words of one interviewee, “it doesn’t matter if you have read Homer or Hesiod. The most important is piety. To be possessed by Gods and be pious is the A and Z” (Pericles). Piety was mentioned by almost all the interviewees as one of the most if not the most important value that people should follow in their everyday life (Ira, Aris).

Morality is a crucial aspect of the values debate, especially when it comes to the milieu of ancient Greek religion. Most of them have faced such arguments, in fact accusations, that they are immoral, that they participate in orgies, that they accept polygamy, etc. (Athena). As one interviewee has put it, “morality is a social phenomenon, and not a religious one. Society formulates morality and I think that the ancient religion is more moral compared to Christianity. In the later you have ten commandments, while in the first you have 100 Delphic maxims” (Aris). From the discussion about theology and values it comes out that these are not necessarily related and that the lack of a theological framework does not lead to the lack of values and moral guidelines. Further to that, an interesting point made by the majority of the participants was that modern societies have undergone a long time of moral decay and that the return to the ancient values could be a refreshment and effective response to this decadence.

Although not directly related to theology and values the role of politics and political ideology is an important parameter when it comes to the ancient Greek religion milieu. All the interviewees mentioned that they are aware and many times had to confront accusations of being related to the extreme-right or even neo-Nazi groups, like Golden Dawn.<sup>52</sup> A careful search on the Internet offers a number of people and groups in the Hellenic religion milieu to be situated close or identify with extreme-right views and ideas. However, this is not the case for the milieu as a whole. As all the respondents argued such people did and still do exist among them, but they are a minority and shouldn’t characterize the communities. In some cases, they mentioned extreme-right figures who tried to appropriate Hellenic religion for political purposes.<sup>53</sup> To support that they also mentioned UFO fans among them or conspiracy theorists who also gave a bad name to Hellenic religion (Artemis, Dimitris, Themis, Ira). The closer study of the milieu does not reveal any special ties with the extreme-right verifying Berger’s conclusion (2019:123-155) that among contemporary neo-pagans extreme-right ideology is not dominant, although exceptions to this could be found, especially in Eastern countries, e.g. Russia (Pilkington and Popov 2009: 300). Some interviewees also argued that this

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<sup>51</sup> See <http://www.labrys.gr/en/about.html> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

<sup>52</sup> For Golden Dawn, see Psarras 2012.

<sup>53</sup> For the role of religion, including neo-paganism, in the extreme-right see the interesting volume of Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy 2016.

stigmatization of the Hellenic religion and its identification with the extreme right took place because the political Left in Greece confronted Ancient Greece as a taboo and ‘offered’ it to the extreme-right (Epicurus) creating an open space for fascists to take advantage of that (Themis). It was also argued that it sounds very strange that a Hellenic polytheist could be a fascist (Ira).

Overall, and as already supported by scholars studying paganism worldwide (Berger, 2019: 153-155; Rountree, 2015: 10), the followers of Hellenic religion are not indifferent about politics and in many cases, they engage in social and political issues. They are organizing blood donations, they have publicly expressed their views on social and political issues (e.g. immigration, foreign policy), they are involved in environmental initiatives, they support gender equality and they hold their own political ideologies. The main outcome from this section is that while theology and politics are actually present in many perspectives among the broader milieu and in some cases seem to play a crucial role in the identity formation it is values and rituals which are considered as more important. These are the values and practices coming from the ancestors and memory plays a crucial role in their preservation and continuation nowadays and in the future.

### **Practices and participation: Individual and collective**

Through the observation and analysis of the collected material and the conducted interviews the rituals are one of the most, if not the most important, elements of ancient Greek religion. As already mentioned, theology and philosophical currents are an issue of private choice, while the rituals and celebrations are not. According to one interviewee, “if there is no act [i.e. ritual] we talk only theoretically about religion, not about real religion” (Aris), meaning that “you can’t just read some books and place yourself in Hellenic religion you also need to practice the rituals” (Epicurus). The rituals are considered the A and Z of the Hellenic religion (Themis),

“They weight more [compared to philosophy]. To those people who want to come today and follow the Hellenic religion, you don’t give them a book with ten rules...If someone does not come to the rituals, to feel, to learn, there is no way...there is this feeling during the ritual, it is not a theory” (Epicurus).

The ritual was described also as a catalyst in order for the participant to decide to get into the religious practice even further with an emphasis put on some particular rituals of Dionysian character which are described as very interesting, especially for women, implying a crucial impact upon their mood.

“The ritual itself was determinant for me, the experience. It is very different to stand outside and just discuss over a topic and very different to participate. [...] the religious sentiment can’t be transmitted by anyone. [...] A woman who hasn’t participated in a Dionysian ritual ... [she misses a lot] otherwise she has to pay visits to psychologists and receive medication ... [if you participate] afterwards you feel better (Ira).

One preliminary division between the practices is that some of them are taking place indoor, at home or in offices and sanctified altars, recognized as sacred places by the state. However, as it came out, the outdoor rituals in the nature and sacred places are in some perspective more important. The relation with the nature, the earth, was mentioned by many interviewees as a key-point for their beliefs and the broader religion (Artemis, Epicurus), and emphasis was added in order to signify that “in nature is where a ritual should take place and not just at home” (Pericles). Such rituals include those dedicated to Zeus, Apollo, Dionysus, Athena, and other Gods and Goddesses and they take place in Athens and elsewhere in Greece (e.g. in Mountain Olympus, in the temple of Zeus in Athens city center, in the hill of Philopappos in Athens). A final point with regard to the rituals is that they are organized based on the ancient calendar which is lunar and which in many cases was different between the various regions of ancient Greece. From this point of view those who reside in Athens they tend to follow the ancient calendar of Attica, i.e. of the broader region of Athens. It is also important to mention that although the people in the milieu are mainly following the ancient tradition when it comes to ritual they argue that there are also differences with the past. For example, they don't sacrifice animals and in some instances, they have established new rituals in order to strengthen the bonds among them and create more opportunities to meet.<sup>54</sup> The above brings in mind the first and third types of remembrance described by Assmann mentioned above, i.e. the reference to place and time and the possibility of reconstruction.

Another division that could be made regarding the rituals is between those practiced at home and the public ones. The community of Labrys has published a book (Labrys, 2014) - also translated in English- on household worship and home rituals, describing them and offering guidelines to those interested in practicing them. Household rituals are considered important but the public rituals are those considered building bonds within the community and the broader social environment. As it was mentioned by one interviewee:

“Household ritual is a fundamental dimension for the development of the Greek religion from down to top. [...] In order to have a complete experience of the religious phenomenon you need to practice both, the household and the collective, the public. Internalization, making something completely private, is not positive, you need both. The collective helps for the openness towards the society. You need to go out in order to alter the climate against you. [...] If you don't go public you can't change what people think about you, you can't do that individually” (Aris).

As it was expected, participation relates to a variety of parameters. For example, those living in Athens are easier to participate compared to those who live in smaller towns or villages around Greece. Examples of people who had to move from Athens and participation became difficult were given by the interviewees. As it was underlined this primarily relates to the public

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<sup>54</sup> One such example is the ceremony of Helioidites which is a modern ceremony performed on the first day of the week of the solar calendar, i.e. Sunday. This is a ceremony in which due honor is given to the Sun, not only on a physical level but mainly on the mental level. Helioidites was established as a good spiritual exercise to be followed unfailingly each week on a particular day which is a resting day for most people. For more details see [http://www.labrys.gr/en/text\\_helioidites.html](http://www.labrys.gr/en/text_helioidites.html) (last accessed 27 December 2021).

rituals and not the household ones, which are still practiced by them. This is another example similar to the one mentioned earlier in the section on trajectories with people moving from the periphery to the big cities, in this case describing the opposite direction from Athens to small towns and villages. This verifies the argument that the city, especially Athens, was and at some point still is an open and fertile ground for the ancient religion to flourish. Apart from the distance, time is another reason that has an impact upon participation. There are people who participated for a couple of times, but then they disappeared due to lack of time or others who participate very rarely. As it came out women do participate much in the communities and the rituals taking leading roles, e.g. as priestesses. When it comes to new members there are still newcomers although there seems to be a stabilization of the rise that took place in the 1990s and 2000s. As one interviewee put it, “the active participation in groups has been diminished, but the social acceptance by the society has been raised as well as individual interest” (Aris).

When it comes to rituals two words seem to appear as crucial: *Emotion* and *experience*. The emotions of and from participation, especially the collective one, are considered very important. They can't be described with words unless someone experiences a ritual. This kind of experience is presented as unique and more important from any theology or book reading. As it was mentioned, “no matter how much you read, if you don't meet someone with experience [in order to participate] you can't reach a desirable level” (Pericles) and that “books are good, but it is not only reading, it is also if this is inside you” (Plato). In her seminal work on solitary pagans, Berger argues that there is a sharp increase of solitary practitioners leading to the conclusion that the primary face of contemporary paganism is that of those who practice alone (Berger 2019: 156). Although statistical data do not exist for Greece it came out that solitary practitioners do exist for the reasons mentioned above (e.g. distance from a large city and group, lack of time, etc.). In fact, some interviewees argued that people now practice more individually compared to the past (Aris, Epicurus), but this relates to the broader developments (e.g. way of life, individualism, etc.). However, and contrary to what seems to become a mainstream trend in the pagan field around the world, solitary practice is not the ideal in the milieu of ancient Greek religion. When the interviewees were asked about this possibility, they disagreed with such an approach. They all understood people's difficulties to participate collectively, not necessarily in organized groups, but in public, collective rituals, however they argued that without the collective there is something missing. From this point of view, it could be argued that such a solitary path does not exactly follow the ancient tradition contributing this way to the loss of memory and the oblivion of public rituals and this is identified with the second type of remembrance as presented by Assmann, with regard to the reference to the group and the formation and/or strengthening of its identity and internal bonds.

Apart from the religious rituals, cultural festivals and commemoration services are also organized. For example, an annual celebration of Attika Dionysia dedicated to Dionysus has been established promoting the Hellenic worldview with the participation of artists, musicians, composers, actors, directors, choreographers, dancers, music and dance groups, sports, cultural and other associations who reflect with their work on this part of Greek tradition.<sup>55</sup> Others, have been also organizing ceremonies to commemorate the battle of Marathon or the battleship

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<sup>55</sup> For details see <http://www.labrys.gr/en/events.html> and <http://dionysia.labrys.gr> (last accessed 21 December 2021).

of Salamis against the Persians.<sup>56</sup> Overall, it is clear that memory and remembrance practices are at the core of the Hellenic religion including both religious rituals and cultural and historical events and ceremonies.

### **Conclusions**

After the above brief analysis with regard to Hellenic religion in contemporary Greek society could we end with some conclusions? Although further research is necessary the findings could be summarized as follows: First, the reconstruction of ancient Greek religion that begun in the 1990s is still active although perhaps not flourishing as in the 2000s. Secondly, both the state and the Greek society have become more tolerant and open towards Hellenic religious tradition, although the Orthodox Church is still very negative and stigmatizes its followers. Third, tradition is a key-term in peoples' narratives and official texts. Tradition and its preservation form a goal of great value in the milieu and in many cases is preferred compared to the term 'religion'.

Fourth, this tradition is preserved through the cultivation of memory. From this, perspective memory becomes central in the analysis. On the one hand, the followers of Hellenic religion are breaking the chain with the Christian memory they were brought up with and on the other they try to establish a new religious memory or from their perspective to restore the ancient chain of religious memory. This memory includes the cultural memory of ancient Greece and the memory of the myths and rituals as part of the Hellenic religious tradition. That said, the types of remembering are the reference to place and time (ancient temples, sacred places and festivities calendar of ancient Greece as a time frame); the reference to the group (memory practices within the group); and the opportunity of reconstruction (adjusting to the modern context, establishing new celebrations).

A final but important aspect is that memory seems to act as a kind of resistance within a dominant Greek-Orthodox society. In this memory construction through acts of remembrance, rituals play the central role. According to Assmann (2017: 9, 14), all rituals contain this dual character of repetition and evocation to the present, an evocation of the cultural meaning. These rituals include both those practiced at home, alone or in small groups, and those in public, which are considered as equally or even more important.

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<sup>56</sup> For more information see <https://www.ysee.gr/Isimeria2020.html> and <https://www.ysee.gr/Salamina2020.html> (last accessed 27 December 2021).

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# Revealing Patterns: Darek C. Barefoot, Satanic Images in Jehovah's Witnesses Publications, and Biblical Typologies

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## Abstract

The article reconstructs and analyses the writings of author, ex-Jehovah's Witness (JW), and YouTuber Darek C. Barefoot. Barefoot wrote his first book in the early 1990s to explain how his attempt at demonstrating and denouncing the existence of satanic images in Jehovah's Witnesses publications led to his disfellowshipment. Later, he published philosophical articles including discussions of Clive Staples Lewis's "argument from reason." Finally, he specialises in an exegetic method called "typologetics" that he popularizes by blogging and vlogging. This study shows how the narrative about satanic images sent, and is still sending, ripples throughout global conversations about Jehovah's Witnesses, also in directions that Barefoot would not have suspected nor welcomed, and how Barefoot's writings, although at first glance heterogeneous, display methodological unity and continuity.

## Keywords:

Argument from reason, Biblical typologies, conspiracism, C. S. Lewis, Darek C. Barefoot, disfellowshipping, Jehovah's Witnesses, occult images, satanic images, subliminal images, Satanism

In May of 2014, Darek Clark Barefoot (b. 1956) began uploading a series of videos on his *YouTube* channel, called *Typologetics*, a portmanteau of "typology" and "apologetics," in which he discussed particular correspondences in the Bible's narratives and language as highly suggestive of its divine origin.<sup>57</sup> This, however, wasn't his first attempt at communicating with a large public. The videos drew upon, and extended, the discussion that he had published five years prior in a book (Barefoot 2010 [2009]) illustrating *typologetics*, a form of Biblical exegesis which he expands upon in pieces and audio-essays published through his web page, also called *Typologetics*, launched in 2009 and including a blog called *Four Faces of the*

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<sup>57</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCfw5uTA1FO2zpmzKJjRIWvA>. At the moment of writing (Spring 2021), the channel has 35 subscribers and includes 60 videos; his most popular video has reached 369 views. (All web pages have been accessed for a last check on 4 June 2021).

*Gospels*, launched in 2014.<sup>58</sup> Prior to publishing the book on scriptural interpretation, in the early 2000s, Barefoot had authored several texts that he self-published on the web including some about that very exegetical method, as well as others that discussed a philosophical theory advanced by Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963) known as *argument from reason*. Barefoot's debut as a writer, however, dates back to 1991, when he published *Jehovah's Witnesses and the Hour of Darkness* (Barefoot 1992 [1991]).<sup>59</sup> The author, who had been raised a Jehovah's Witness (JW), had grown strongly convinced that Jehovah's Witnesses publications were systematically hosting sinister images that he characterised as "satanic," "occult," and "subliminal."<sup>60</sup> Upon pointing out such an anomaly to JW authorities, and presenting plenty of material as evidence along with experts' opinions, Barefoot, his family, and other close relatives had been disfellowshipped. The 1992 book documented and discussed the images and reconstructed the author's expulsion. While Barefoot's videos have yet to reach a large audience, the idea that Jehovah's Witnesses publications have contained satanic images, almost thirty years after the publication of Barefoot's first book, continues being spread and discussed by different parties.

Barefoot's work, narratives, and ideas can be approached from different angles. One may examine the images for which he claimed satanic origin and nature and, so to speak, re-open the case, weighing evidence for their actual existence, as well as advancing and assessing different interpretations of their origin, purpose, and effect on viewers. One may discuss Barefoot's interpretation of Lewis's *argument from reason* from a philosophical or theological standpoint. Finally, one may engage in a theological and scriptural evaluation of Barefoot's "typoetics." This article assumes a somewhat different and overarching perspective. It is based on a meticulous examination of Barefoot's written production, which I discuss in chronological order. I do not engage in a criticism of the author's views, but I reconstruct and contextualise his work. In other words, I explore how Barefoot discussed the presence of satanic images in Jehovah's Witnesses publications, how this topic was, and is being, discussed (indeed, re-conceptualized) by participants in multiple conversations about Jehovah's Witnesses, and I examine similarities and continuities across Barefoot's work.

Barefoot recalls that in the summer of 1983, during a convention in San Diego, he heard from another Witness about "hidden figures, including astrological symbols" in the February 1, 1983 issue of the magazine *Watchtower*; when he looked for himself, he not only found such images but also grew convinced that they could not be coincidental; another Witness had written to the Society's headquarters about the matter and received a denial that Barefoot found "unconvincing" (Barefoot 1992, 6). The September 1, 1984 issue of the magazine published

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<sup>58</sup> The book was first printed in a "pilot" edition in 2009 then released the following year with a new cover and minor edits (D. C. Barefoot, personal communication, 3 June 2021). The blog can be reached at: <https://www.typoetics.com>.

<sup>59</sup> Also, this book was first printed in a "pilot" edition in 1991 in a few hundred copies then released the following year with a new cover and minor edits (D. C. Barefoot, personal communication, 3 June 2021).

<sup>60</sup> Obviously, such terms are not interchangeable; additionally, not all the images discussed by Barefoot are, strictly speaking, hidden, and he includes linguistic messages. Furthermore, such images are defined in different ways across different conversations (including controversies). Instead of offering a preliminary list of definitions, I let each author's characterization of the images in question emerge from my reconstruction, including, when available, their explicit definitions of the concepts they use. In order not to clutter the exposition, I refrain from using the term *satanic* in quotes, or to constantly specify "according to the author's perception" and the like.

an official statement that briefly tackled the topic while rejecting rumour mongering (p. 7). Barefoot explained the occurrence as an artist's whim and did not give it more thought until the discussion was tackled again in the March 1, 1987 issue of *Watchtower* reassuring Witnesses that a member of the Governing Body had scrutinised the material (p. 8). However, in the fall of that year, while conducting a "Bible study" at someone's home, Barefoot noticed a face in the illustration of a waterfall in the 1982 book *You Can Live Forever In Paradise On Earth*. That night, he began a systematic examination of illustrations in JW publications, finding more and more hidden figures (p. 9). He regarded the meticulous collection of evidence as the only way he had to convince someone in a position of authority to see "the truth of the situation"; this activity, that he called "the project," occupied him for the following two years (pp. 11-12).

Barefoot discusses the existence and presence of such images as one facet of a general, contemporary phenomenon. He makes reference to satanic and occult elements in songs (both explicit and hidden), singers' performances, and album covers, as well as in movies and in new age self-help tapes (pp. 83-86). "Occult images," he writes, "circulate through the whole of modern culture like viruses in the blood" (p. 89). For instance, he recalls "watered down" satanic signs in Walt Disney's (1901-1966) 1940 film *Fantasia* (p. 94). However, he explains that "no conscious conspiracy exists among artists, musicians, writers, and advertising consultants" since most of them "resort to occult coloration as a professional habit without much forethought" (p. 86). He points out: "I have never seen an example of disguised occultism in popular entertainment that compares with the deviousness of the Watchtower pictures" (p. 84).

Barefoot believes that "the Devil and the demons are real beings of tremendous intelligence whose goal is the mental and spiritual manipulation of humans" (p. 13). He takes paranormal experiences as the sign of the power of demons, but he is also convinced that such power is not really available on demand, so that "even psychics who are not out-and-out frauds have to accumulate a stock of tricks and foolery to fall back on" (p. 92). He writes that "Satan is immaterial, conscious energy without visible forms"; however, demons can manifest themselves as "monsters and freaks" (p. 93). According to Barefoot, "occult influence" is a threat to society (p. 1). He thinks that "planting demonic symbols in biblical literature is the equivalent of spitting on Christ" (p. 102). "The most potent and the most blasphemous affront," according to Barefoot, is in a February 15, 1990 *Watchtower* picture in which the very name of Jehovah was mocked by inserting the syllable "Jah" (interpreted as a shortened form of *Jehovah*) in the teeth of a monstrous face hidden in a figure's sleeve (pp. 127-128).

"Once the mind is given a strong cue to see a picture one way," writes Barefoot, "it is hard for it to change perspective to see it differently" (p. 9). He specifies, however, that he carefully considered the hypothesis that the figures he had identified were coincidental, or that he may be the only one seeing them. He tested whether his children (then nine and seven years old, respectively) could also see the images (p. 26). A fellow Witness pointed out that one can see faces in otherwise casual agglomerates like a rock, but to this he counter-objected that a work of art is not the same thing as a rock and that, in Witnesses' literature, the resemblance between the effigies of the Madonna and of pagan goddesses like Isis was taken as proof of the former's continuity with the latter (p. 43). Additionally, Barefoot states that subliminal images are not accidentally there, but deciphering them "is a matter of guesswork all the same" (p. 79).

and yet he points out that the images he found cannot be casual; they cannot be found in fashion catalogues or comic strips (p. 101).

In the book's *Appendix*, Barefoot publishes several documents that back up his interpretation. One is a 1992 letter from a professional photographer stating that the figures identified by Barefoot were there "not by coincidence, but by clear and conscious efforts by the originators of the artwork" (p. 156). Another document is a 1990 letter from a professional freelance illustrator explaining that those very figures had been "deliberately incorporated into many of the illustrations [he had] examined" (p. 157). Finally, a university art teacher (chair of the art department at Mesa State College) and artist sent a letter in 1992 stating that "the imagery is there and is intentional" (p. 158).

Barefoot identified over a hundred sinister images (p. 111). In regard to their structure, the figures fall under at least three categories: *symbols* (like a moon or a pentacle), *faces* and *silhouettes*, as well as *letters* and *words*. The first category comprises symbols that are either in plain sight (like a ram's head on a plaque in a domestic scene) or hidden, blurred, and confused, especially in the representation of shadows, nuances, greenery, and the like. Faces and silhouettes, as well as letters and words, are usually hidden, too. To such categories two special cases can be added. On one occasion, Barefoot advances an interpretation of an entire illustration in a July 1, 1989 issue of *Watchtower*, that of a black goat that seems to be leading a flock, which he sees as a reference to the very satanic infiltration of the organisation (p. 78). Furthermore, he focuses on the apparently haphazard phrases *jest tups / thru daily* in an illustration representing a cinema's sign that anagrammed yields "jests put through daily"; Barefoot interprets such phrase as a sarcastic reference, on behalf of the authors of the satanic images, to their own activity (pp. 79-80). Barefoot does *not* identify satanic references in the publications' *texts*.

Barefoot reports that while working on the "project" and afterwards, he noticed satanic signs also around himself, such as symbols painted in red and yellow on a bridge near his house, where people in hooded red robes had been spotted (pp. 103-104). He found an "A" circumscribed by a circle in a basketball court during a walk with his children (p. 109). Someone had been looking up the word "Satan" in the library database that he perused and on the same occasion he occupied a cubicle where someone had left stacks of books about mysticism and the supernatural (pp. 111-112). Finally, Barefoot recalls one of the last congregation meetings he attended, after which he was approached by a mysterious, tall, dark-complexioned, soft spoken man. A few days later, he was targeted by obscene phone calls (pp. 107-108).

In the summer of 1989, Barefoot, his brother and their respective families moved from San Diego to Colorado (pp. 22, 103).<sup>61</sup> During this time, he was exchanging letters with an editor of *Time* magazine concerning his "project"; one employee who also was a Jehovah's Witness stole such correspondence, reported him to elders, and left the job (p. 23). The letters would be later described by JW authorities as "public criticism" of the Society, which is considered apostasy (p. 44). Barefoot made repeated attempts at addressing JW authorities on the satanic

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<sup>61</sup> The book is rich in personal information, including Barefoot's background and family; additionally, he often expands on his and his relatives' feelings as well as on the dramatic repercussions of the "project" and the disfellowshipping. Here, I only cite essential information.

images, yet to no avail. In late December of 1989, he mailed copies of his portfolio to the members of the Governing Body; eventually, he did the same with “key overseas offices of the Society” (pp. 21-22). In early spring and winter of 1990, he sent the evidence to the Watchtower Society (p. 18). A typescript letter (also included in the *Appendix*) he wrote to the Governing Body in January 1990, in which he states that Satanic imagery had multiplied having been kept unchecked, suggests that the literature had to be replaced and that an official apology would be “in order” (pp. 159-160). This letter anticipates the arguments and the style of the 1991 book; among other things, Barefoot specifies his view that “at most, a small number of individuals are to blame for the figures inserted into the illustrations” (p. 162).

Barefoot had to face a judicial committee in July 1990 (p. 3). The manuscript that he put together for the committee comprised more than seventy pages, and included photocopies of images from JW publications and enlargements of those very images, as well as clippings and other documents (p. 5). He was challenged by being asked why he would think that, if these images were genuinely satanic, God would operate through him rather than the Governing body (p. 25). He emphasised that the very exposure to those images burdened him with responsibility, to which the Committee replied that his responsibility ended upon reporting the issue to the Society (p. 44).

Barefoot’s brother was disfellowshipped with his family after a congregational meeting that took place on June 17, 1990 (pp. 31-32). On June 18th and 19th 1990, Barefoot’s brother’s disfellowshippment and his own were made official and they were announced on June 28th and July 19th, respectively; Barefoot’s own took some more time since he had registered an appeal (pp. 55-56). The *Appendix* includes Barefoot’s appeal in which he emphasised that the letters he addressed to *Time* magazine did not qualify as “public criticism” since he wasn’t blaming the organization or the Governing Body for inserting or leaving the satanic images in the magazines, but only pointing out circumstantial facts that he ascribed to one or more artists (p. 167). His parents also had to face a judicial committee; their disfellowshippment was announced on August 1, 1990 (pp. 59-62).

Barefoot states that while only the artist could be blamed for promoting occultism, he blames the Society for leaving the artist room to do so and refusing to admit the issue (p. 28). He specifies that his book is not meant to disparage Jehovah’s Witnesses, but only to expose that part of their teaching is “corrupt” (p. 1; cf. also 13). He emphasises that he and his family are “witnesses of the God of the Bible, whose name is Jehovah, and of his Son” (p. 2). His intention, he metaphorically describes, is to “knit together some fabric of meaning without discarding threads either of truth or faith and make sense of a situation fraught with heartache” (p. 132).

Barefoot states, however, that even before the facts recalled in the book, he would “see a contrast between the Witness organization and Christianity as presented in the Bible” (p. 145). Additionally, he is critical of the Governing Body’s disinclination to admit error (p. 10). He points out, based on first-hand anecdotal evidence, that the Witnesses are very reluctant to admit even small mistakes on behalf of the Society (p. 35); also, on the basis of first-hand anecdotes, he describes how Witnesses’ answers to theological questions can be robotic and acritical (pp. 51-52). Barefoot explains that entertaining doubts and engaging in thorny debates are misconstrued as symbols of spiritual weakness and are therefore avoided (pp. 37, 41, 65). He describes the embarrassment and loss of credibility caused by the fact that certain years

identified as the end of the world simply passed normally (p. 38). He points out that the Bible just becomes a “stamp” for what the Society teaches (p. 39). He describes psychological dynamics among Witnesses as being characterised by *suppression* (i.e., conscious avoidance) as well as by *repression* (i.e., unconscious denial) of threatening facts, which, in his interpretation, are induced by the teaching that salvation depends on blind faith in the Society (p. 48). He regrets that people may give up “sound” Biblical doctrines in case the Society’s credibility collapses (p. 50). Witnesses, in his opinion, are in for “disillusionment, depression, and resentment” (p. 51). “I can sympathise to a degree,” he writes, “with the repugnance former Witnesses feel toward the rampant authoritarianism and dogmatism of the Witness organization” (p. 124). He criticises the Witnesses’ way of holding non-public hearings, comparing them to the kind of trial that Jesus underwent; inspired by public judgements that Gospels refer to as held in daylight and in the open, he suggests the introduction of observation (or tape recordings) and accountability; he suggests as well publishing the names of people who produce written material, and reporting on meetings of the Governing Body (pp. 63-65). He is critical of the Society’s exclusive right to “modify, declare, or interpret the divine law” or to “overrule” it (p. 70). Finally, he explains that he has chosen the image of “darkness” for the title of his book since, in the Bible, it is equated with secrecy (pp. 66, 93-94). He clarifies, however, that the scandal told in the book “is not the whole story of [the] organization” (p. 152).

“At stake were human lives as well as ethics” writes Barefoot, while looking retrospectively at his “project,” judgement, and disfellowshipment (p. 106). He thinks that his “personal journey” will be successful if his book “arouses within them not bitterness but simply a thirst for truth” (p. 150). “When a Christian has followed the dictates of his conscience in obedience to Bible commands, he may then trust God for a resolution” he writes, and adds: “if he violates his conscience by hesitating to obey, he is not waiting on God, but rather making God wait on him” (p. 151).

Asked to retrospectively assess, in 2021, the presence of satanic images and its implications for Jehovah’s Witnesses, Barefoot stated:

Inappropriate images, some of which have disturbing occultic associations, were incorporated into illustrations in publications of the Watchtower Society from the early 1980s through at least the 1990s. That statement is supported by the evidence presented in my book. Going beyond it involves speculation. It seems improbable that one individual acted without the notice of anyone else involved in the creation of these illustrations, which suggests a degree of complicity on the part of some others. It also seems safe to describe what occurred as spiritual vandalism, the psychological motives for which could be complicated. I stopped researching this subject as the 1990s came to a close, so I’m not in a position to say what has transpired in the years since then. To my knowledge the Watchtower Society’s presumptuous claims to unrivalled spiritual authority have never been abandoned.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> D. C. Barefoot, personal communication, 23 May 2021.

Asked about the theological views he currently subscribes to, Barefoot explained:

I am a follower of Jesus Christ as my Savior and the Lord of creation. I hold the Scriptures to be fully inspired while communicating divine truth in various ways, therefore I see no conflict, generally speaking, between them and the historical sciences. I do not see my faith as based upon or deferential to the theology of the Jehovah's Witnesses. However, my transition away from the Witnesses toward a more traditional Christian theology in some areas has led to me to adopt a high standard for adherence to biblical truth. I do not find that I fit neatly into a denominational category. I am opposed to any pursuit of governmental power on the part of the church. I further reject the association of the Christian gospel with nationalistic pretensions or the agendas of political factions, or the gospel being used as a justification for violence of any kind. Since the early period of the pandemic my family and I have viewed church services online, but I believe that association with like-minded believers for worship and mutual encouragement is important.<sup>63</sup>

Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963), Irish-born scholar and novelist, famed and celebrated both for his apologetic and literary work, including the fantasy series *The Chronicles of Narnia* (7 vols., 1950-1956), is among Barefoot's sources of inspiration. It is worth recalling that Lewis converted in his early thirties from atheism to Anglicanism.<sup>64</sup> Barefoot mentions Lewis in *The Hour of Darkness* as an author that he enjoyed reading although he did not always agree with him; he explains that he was fascinated by Lewis as an intellectual who not only was not ashamed of believing in God and the devil, but who also showed that the Biblical teaching concerning good and evil "can be argued reasonably and persuasively" in a simple and clear style (Barefoot, 1992: 90-91). He also recalls reading in Lewis about a kind of arrogance typical of religious people that Barefoot identified in himself when he was a teenager (p. 138). Lewis is mentioned as well in *Gospel Mysteries*, as saying that believers "live in rebel-controlled territory" (Barefoot 2010, 109). since they inhabit a post-fall world. Finally, Barefoot uses a reference to Lewis to conclude the same book: "the greatest challenge to his faith was not rational arguments against Christianity, since he thought they were decisively outweighed by arguments in its favour, but rather an emotional feeling of the world's emptiness"; relating to such reflection, as a remedy, Barefoot suggests prayer, and the study of the sacred scriptures (pp. 310-311).

Lewis's book *On Miracles*, originally published in 1947 and, in a revised edition, in 1960 (Lewis, 2012), answers in the affirmative the question whether miracles are in principle possible. Lewis argues that supernatural events are interferences in the universe from a system outside it. The book is notable for containing a defence of the *argument from reason* that Lewis refined in response to the objections on behalf of philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe (1919-2001). *In nuce*, the argument is a challenge to materialism, and takes the very existence of human reason as a good reason for God's existence. To put it simply, Lewis points out that

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<sup>63</sup> D. C. Barefoot, personal communication, 23 May 2021.

<sup>64</sup> For an overview (and scholarly discussion) of Lewis's life, work, and ideas, see Como 2019.

*naturalism*, the position according to which all phenomena are material and random, includes the very thoughts of those who advocate it (considering such thoughts as phenomena in the brain), and is therefore self-defeating; naturalism being self-defeating, as Lewis suggests, one can regard the alternative position, *supernaturalism* as reasonable (see Como, 2019: 66-67).

In 2001, Barefoot posted on the Internet page *The Secular Web* a response to Nicholas Tattersall's critical review of *On Miracles* by Lewis. The author questioned Lewis' methodology. Tattersall argued that the number of "miracles" that were exposed as due to natural causes is so high that the initial probability for a miracle to be genuine is very low. He also challenges Lewis' definition of "naturalism" (opposed to "supernaturalism") as entailing determinism, i.e. the idea that each event (except, possibly, a first one) has antecedent causes sufficient for its occurrence. Failure to understand that it is possible to embrace non-deterministic naturalism, according to Tattersall, irremediably invalidates all of Lewis's discussion. Additionally, according to him, Lewis falsely assumes that naturalists are bound to discard the existence of objective values. Finally, Tattersall rejects Lewis' critique of empiricism, according to which naturalists have no justification for relying on inductive reasoning (Tattersall, 2000). Barefoot responds that Tattersall's claim according to which "many" alleged miracles throughout history have been reduced "beyond all dispute" to natural causes suffers from the same ambiguity which Tattersall attributes to Lewis, starting with the very definition of "natural causes" and of the concept of "beyond all dispute." Additionally, Tattersall's critique of Lewis' definition of naturalism is, according to Barefoot, flawed, since determinism is not the focus of Lewis' discussion but rather the idea that reality may be reduced to a combination of natural and supernatural causes (Barefoot, 2001).

A meticulous examination of the Tattersall-Barefoot exchange goes beyond the scope of the present paper. However, I have reconstructed some of its salient elements and passages to show how Barefoot painstakingly engages with Lewis's critic and responds displaying sharp analytical and philosophical skills. Two years later, a lengthy citation from Barefoot's "Response" was incorporated and favorably discussed by academic philosopher, and Lewis scholar, Victor Reppert, in a monograph elaborating on Lewis's *argument from reason* (Reppert, 2003: 118-119). After Reppert's arguments were criticized by another author through a review, once again on *The Secular Web* (Carrier, 2004), Barefoot produced a meticulous commentary and rebuttal, in fact extending Reppert's discussion (Barefoot, 2007). Notably, Barefoot's contribution to the debate is also mentioned by Reppert in a chapter that he contributed to *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Reppert 2009, 362, 378-379). Barefoot was then inspired by Reppert's work to further elaborate on Lewis' argument (Barefoot, 2013a).

In the paper "The Testimony of the Cosmos in a Scientific Age" (Barefoot, 2017b) Barefoot discusses the patterns exhibited by the universe and the ways available to humans to unlock them, inspired by Paul's assertion in *Romans* 1:20 that the invisible attributes of God are known from his creation (Barefoot, 2017b: 1). He argues that Paul's statement is true on at least two levels, and that scientific theories about the origins of the universe or life do not impinge on them. To start with, the cosmos can inspire a sense of wonder and awe that is unaffected by the way in which one explains how the cosmos itself, or some of its elements, came to be (p. 2). Secondly, and on a more intellectual level, science, points out Barefoot, is based on the identification of patterns. Such patterns may be generated by chance instead of by those rules

that scientists call laws of nature; rational people, however, find it impossible to believe that natural patterns owe to chance, although this idea cannot be discarded; after all, some predictions do fail (and we rationalise them as mistakes of some sort) and, most importantly, it isn't illogical that all the regularities observed so far are just accidental, like rolling a series of "1s" with a standard pair of dice; one viable hypothesis is that of a divine mind, which encompasses the physical world, its very laws, as well as human minds; Barefoot finds support for this idea in scriptural passages (*Acts* 17:28; *Colossians* 1:17; *Hebrews* 1:3) (Barefoot, 2017b: 2-3). In other words, the laws of nature may be, argues Barefoot, thoughts in God's mind, according to which he sustains the universe from moment to moment (p. 5). Barefoot completes his discussion with a caveat: "no argument amounts to a 'proof' of God, if by proof we mean a statement with the logical force of a mathematical equation. In front of us lie clues pointing in a Godward direction" (p. 7). Additionally, he points out that even the value of science cannot be justified with a strictly *scientific* argument: "God, therefore, can be a rational explanation even if not a scientific one" (p. 8).<sup>65</sup>

In his second book, Barefoot recalls how in the 1990s Israeli mathematicians claimed the discovery, through a computer, of a secret biblical code. He points out that, given the great number of letters in the Bible, the chances of finding alleged "references" to topics that the interpreters are interested in, are very high; furthermore, the existence of such codes is not something that the Bible explicitly indicates. Barefoot observes that such sensationalist work discredits the Bible (Barefoot, 2010: 1). He, however, is in favor of reading the Bible while looking for *typological prophecy*: "a method of foreshadowing in which characters and circumstances early in a narrative portray what will occur later" (p. 2). While acknowledging that this too can be overstated, Barefoot identifies criteria that guarantee that the identification of typologies does not become arbitrary and vague: the presence of "encrypted narratives" in the Hebrew scriptures, "decrypted messages" in the New Testament, and "symbol identifiers" that relate the former to the latter (p. 2). This correspondence, he argues, can be found in the Bible but not in other works, and can only be explained by divine inspiration. Barefoot does acknowledge that this study cannot reach mathematical precision and that "judgements are involved" (p. 3) yet such judgements are in his opinion reasonable, and liable to be examined by anyone, including those who are not inclined to believe in the Bible. In this sense, the discussion of typology can be, according to Barefoot, common ground for different interlocutors, and the acknowledgment of correspondences can be an element in someone's faith although perhaps not a decisive one. "Faith," he writes, "may not be a cold decision comparable to solving an equation, but neither is it raw emotional heat detached from the facts" (p. 3).

Multiple instances of typology are discussed in detail by Barefoot. A meticulous scrutiny goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, I shall consider at least one example. Barefoot focuses on the Genesis description of Jacob's flock, that included streaked and spotted animals, as he expressly required of his father-in-law Laban. Barefoot points out that *Peter* 1:18-19 conceptualizes sin as a "spot" or "blemish" (p. 10). Jacob thus becomes a symbol of Christ, and his flock symbolizes humanity. "God, having planned in the remote past to send his Son

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<sup>65</sup> Barefoot offered discussions of related topics also in other self-published papers: Barefoot 2013b, Barefoot 2013c, Barefoot 2013d.

to lay claim to the fallen human family, moved Jacob to make his strange proposal to Laban. God then saw to it that the story was preserved, first through oral tradition and afterward in the writing of Genesis. Finally, he inspired later writers to record those clues necessary to unlock the episode's meaning" (p. 13).

Barefoot points out that resemblances across Biblical passages *can* occur by chance; however, he emphasizes that the cases he discusses are characterized by multiple occurrences, but also by "economy of distribution" and "interconnectedness" (p. 27). To these principles he adds that "effective typology must be brief and pointed, not encumbered by excess detail. We can expect minor incongruities. By its very nature it cannot be pressed beyond the limits of illustration, yet it will reveal connections between seemingly isolated facts" (p. 30).

"Purposefulness" explains Barefoot, "is an important means of separating coincidence from consciously created patterns" (p. 88). Special patterns or correspondences between names or historical figures can be easily found, explains Barefoot, if one looks hard enough; such is the case of similarities that have been traditionally pointed out between Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy (e.g., both surnames have seven letters). However, states Barefoot, what could be the purpose of such correspondences? One may claim that it is fate; however, he rejects such an explanation because of its vagueness and "mindlessness": "believers in 'fate' don't conceive of it as a person who consciously plans the scheme for future events. Presumably, fate is an uncanny force occasionally recognizable by the patterns it creates. But this is what blind circumstance does" (p. 89). Purposefulness however, according to Barefoot, is a quality "inferred not just from events lining up in a surprising way, but to their lining up in a way that indicates rational intent" (p. 89). He adds that "for a body of facts to be purposeful does not require that everything about it be understandable" (p. 89). To the features of typology listed so far, he thus adds "purposefulness of type coding within the tradition" (p. 90).

Barefoot also responds to two possible objections. One may emphasize that, for a given type, more than one symbolic association is possible; the choice, however is not arbitrary, according to Barefoot, in the sense that it is guided by the context, that for instance tells the reader whether a certain type should be read positively or negatively (p. 93). Concerning the objection that the authors of the Gospels may have conspired to interpret Old Testament stories symbolically and to fulfil them in practice, Barefoot explains that this would require an implausible degree of coordination, organization, and ability to influence the course of the events (p. 94). "The case for biblical inspiration," he concludes "-or for something equally removed from natural causes- looks incredibly formidable" (p. 95).

Barefoot recalls that an unspecified skeptical reviewer "chalked up [his interpretations] to the human mind's 'amazing ability to make connections'" (pp. 251-252). He objects, however, that the system of connections that he is highlighting is unlikely to have been conjured and "common sense tells us we are looking at something extraordinary" (p. 252). Barefoot also references sceptic Michael Shermer's idea that evolution has shaped human minds in such a way that they are strongly inclined to see patterns; Barefoot points out that such an ability does not seem to be particularly useful and that Shermer's claim "is itself based on observations of patterns in human behaviour and might therefore be imaginary according to Shermer's own reasoning" (p. 253). Barefoot, who even cites Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905-1980) famous idea that human beings are condemned to choose, adds that when it comes to vital questions like the ones about faith and salvation, "we cannot afford the luxury of fence-sitting" (p. 253) and that

“it seems that under some circumstances having a lower threshold of belief than others can be a mark not of credulity but of insight” (p. 254).<sup>66</sup>

The claim according to which satanic, or Satan-inspired, agencies resort to subliminal images and messages, as a form of debasement of the media in which they are inserted, or as means of manipulating the consumers of those very media, has often surfaced in relation to rock or heavy metal songs, and album covers. For instance, this kind of allegation was used in the “Judas Priest Case” in 1985 to argue that the band’s music had induced a pair of young men into making a suicide pact. The accusation, according to new religious movements scholar and jurist James T. Richardson, was based on a

simplicistic psychological theory about how such messages affect the human mind. Supposedly, such messages enter the mind without the subject’s awareness, but can then ‘surface’ later, as ideas that the person thinks are his or her own, and therefore may be more prone to act on. Such invasion of a person’s mind is viewed as a major violation of personal privacy that should be disallowed. In short, the constitutional protection for privacy overcomes the constitutional protection afforded speech, if that speech is subliminal in character, because subliminal speech is assumed to be invasive by definition. Those who embedded the alleged subliminal messages should be liable for damages, especially if the embedding was done deliberately (tortious conduct that could even result in punitive damages). However, they might also be found liable even if unaware of the possible impact of such messages, or if they placed messages inadvertently (relying on product liability theory) (Richardson, 2017 [1991]: 212).

The judge, however, ruled Judas Priest not liable: “He agreed that there were some subliminal messages on the records in question, but did not find that they were placed there deliberately. He also ruled that a case had not been made about the effects of subliminal messages on behavior, although he explicitly left the door open for further scientific research on the issue” (p. 213).

As discussed in detail by Massimo Introvigne in his monumental *Satanism - A Social History* (Introvigne 2016), the conversation and controversy about subliminal images and “backmasked” messages in rock songs drew upon ideas that were advanced as early as the 1950s, and most notably in journalist Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (Packard 1957);<sup>67</sup> such a debate, however, was a relevant component of the “Great Satanism Scare” that erupted in the United States in the 1980s and was exported to other countries to decline in the mid-1990s (Introvigne 2016, 437-443). One may regard Barefoot’s case and story as part of

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<sup>66</sup> Barefoot also expanded on typologies in several self-published papers, including some whose discussion overlaps with his more philosophical discussions: Barefoot 2000; Barefoot 2013e; Barefoot 2014a; Barefoot 2014b; Barefoot 2014c; Barefoot 2014d; Barefoot 2015a; Barefoot 2015b; Barefoot 2015c; Barefoot 2017a; Barefoot 2018; Barefoot 2019.

<sup>67</sup> In fact, Packard offered an investigation of how advertising companies had started researching and exploiting the non-rational (or in any case unstated) motives behind consumers’ choices in order to increase sales; however, he also offered a nuanced discussion of whether such research was ultimately scientific and whether the methods at stake were ethical.

such “scare” (or controversy). This seems to be confirmed by the timing (early 80s-early 90s) as well as by the references and influences reported by Barefoot. He namely mentions pieces, in *Watchtower* literature (that was apparently receiving and elaborating on discussions from the “Scare”), of Satanism as a “growing menace,” and of satanic messages, explicit as well as implicit, in rock songs and music albums (Barefoot 1992, 77, 82-84). Additionally, he mentions newspaper stories of murders that were described as resulting from satanic messages (pp. 14-18, 88-89).

Decades after Barefoot first heard about hidden images in JW publications, the narrative was still being propagated and was incorporated in different conversations about the movement, being globally re-conceptualized also in ways that differ significantly from Barefoot’s original thesis, in directions that he would have hardly suspected and that he explicitly disapproves of.

Italy is the European country with the greatest number of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Introvigne and Zoccatelli, 2021). In 1998, a Parliamentary Question was presented by twenty Italian Senators of different parties (both governmental and belonging to the oppositions), in the framework of a negotiation for an agreement (*intesa*) between Jehovah’s Witnesses and the government,<sup>68</sup> while raising concerns about Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Senators pointed out how they had received “plenty of unanimous information” according to which, among other things, Watchtower publications “according to experts, contained subliminal messages, liable to facilitate the readers’ manipulation.”<sup>69</sup> In an official response the same year, Jehovah’s Witnesses addressed such concern pointing out that “manipulation” (*plagio*) had been abolished as an offense in Italy in 1981 due to the concept’s vagueness. Additionally, they emphasized that the Senators had not been precise as to the nature of the “subliminal” messages, whose efficacy was questionable anyway; in order to strengthen this last point, they made reference to the writings of New Religious Movements scholars Massimo Introvigne, Eileen Barker, and James T. Richardson.<sup>70</sup>

The Italian *Centro Culturale San Giorgio*, a conservative Catholic association founded in 1990 and based in Ferrara (Centro Culturale San Giorgio, undated a), published, through its website, extensive discussion of subliminal images in various products including JW publications (Centro Culturale San Giorgio, undated b). One of the sections about Jehovah’s Witnesses that widely and positively cites Barefoot’s work is in fact the translation of an article in French originally written by former Jehovah’s Witness Jacques Luc<sup>71</sup> (“Les techniques subliminales et la Watch Tower,” undated) and the Preface to it is written by Paolo Baroni, the Center’s president (Centro Culturale San Giorgio 2015).

The claim contained in the 1998 Parliamentary Question, as well as those made on different pages of the Centro Culturale San Giorgio, were discussed in 2014 on an unofficial site of Italian Jehovah’s Witnesses called Testimoni di Geova Online, whose authors self-

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<sup>68</sup> The agreement (available here: [https://www.cesnur.org/testi/geova\\_it99.htm](https://www.cesnur.org/testi/geova_it99.htm)) was approved but never ratified and it was redrafted and approved in 2007 but again not ratified by the Parliament.

<sup>69</sup> Point 14: “Che nei testi delle suddette pubblicazioni, a detta di esperti, sarebbero contenuti messaggi subliminali, atti a favorire il plagio dei lettori”; document available here <http://www.kelebekler.com/cesnur/txt/geova1.htm>.

<sup>70</sup> The document is available here: <http://tdgonline.altervista.org/risposta-ufficiale-della-congregazione-cristiana-dei-testimoni-di-geova-allinterrogazione-parlamentare-del-12-novembre-1998-seduta-485/>.

<sup>71</sup> See [https://twitter.com/Jacques\\_Luc/](https://twitter.com/Jacques_Luc/).

identified as a “small team,” claiming competence in different scientific fields (Testimoni di Geova Online, 2021). While pointing out the inefficacy of the subliminal messages, along with the aforementioned scholar Introvigne, the authors cite Silvano Fuso, a chemist, known author and “debunker,” notably active in the skeptical Italian organization CICAP (Committee for the Investigation of Claims of the Pseudosciences); Fuso pointed out in an article that a famous narrative about the efficacy of subliminal advertisements turned out to be a false claim made in the late 1950s by an advertisement expert as a publicity stunt. The Testimoni di Geova Online extensively referred to Barefoot’s 1992 book as being Centro San Giorgio’s only source, discrediting him as being solely interested in tarnishing the Witnesses’ reputation; the images that Barefoot identified were described as ‘fuzzy’ (unlike alleged “subliminal messages” inserted in films for advertising purposes), de-contextualized, and overinterpreted; following the same process, the authors point out, one may even identify satanic images in those that decorate the website of the Centro San Giorgio. Finally, among other critics who explicitly rejected Barefoot’s ideas as far-fetched, the Testimoni di Geova Online cite Catholic priest don Ernesto Zucchini, who in a 1994 article about Freemasonry and Jehovah’s Witnesses, stated that “Barefoot’s arguments are, often, frankly incredible; by breaking down apparently harmless images- perhaps with the aid of a computer- one may find sinister, demonic symbols almost everywhere” (Testimoni di Geova Online, 2014). Incidentally, Zucchini did confirm the influence of masonic symbolism and language on Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916), founder of the International Bible Students Association from which Jehovah’s Witnesses stemmed; however, he did not push his conclusion to claiming institutional or doctrinal continuity (or identity) between Jehovah’s Witnesses and Freemasonry (Zucchini, 1994).

Social media and a platform like *YouTube* (launched in 2005) have opened unprecedented possibilities for the production and dissemination of material on behalf of ex-members of religious organizations interested in criticizing such organizations in various ways.<sup>72</sup> Presently, discussion and criticism of Jehovah’s Witnesses on behalf of ex-members include the examination and denunciation of hidden figures in their publications. For instance, the Italian Giuseppe Longo (b. 1974), who disassociated in 2014 (Longo, 2015), discusses multiple symbols in several videos, linking them to Freemasonry, described as devoted to the Devil and financially supported by “Jewish Freemasonry” (Longo, 2018).<sup>73</sup> Multiple figures that Longo shows and interprets correspond with those identified by Barefoot in his “project.” Another *YouTube* channel features a lengthy interview with Longo and his wife who clearly explains how the discovery of satanic images (through online sources) played a major role in her decision to disassociate (Dio-ti-cerca !!!, 2016).

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<sup>72</sup> At the moment of writing, a *Google* search for videos related to the combination “ex Jehovah witness” yields 21,700 results, 4,190 for the Spanish equivalent “ex testigo de Jehová,” and 1,740 for the Italian equivalent, “ex testimone di Geova.” To the best of my knowledge, this important phenomenon has not been yet made the object of scholarly examination.

<sup>73</sup> To be sure, in the videos I examined, Longo does not elaborate in detail on the *exact* connection between Jehovah’s Witnesses and other agencies and organisations, nor does he explain whether the images are just a form of spiritual vandalism or mockery, or an identity-marker, or if they have any *effect* on the viewers. His presentations are quite crude and “factual”: he shows pictures and symbols, claims their masonic/satanic origin, and makes statements like: “Freemasons worship the devil,” “this organization [Jehovah’s Witnesses] is led by the devil” (Longo, 2018).

Another example is that of the French ex-Jehovah's Witness, author and YouTuber Sylviane Nuccio, who offers coaching for "women with toxic relationship issues" as well as for former Jehovah's Witnesses (Nuccio, undated). In one of her videos, she discusses "subliminal images" in Watchtower publications, describing them as "meant to affect the subconscious mind"; focusing on 2016 publications, she explains that subliminal messages cannot affect one's actions but they do have an impact on one's thoughts (especially in children) and emphasizes the presence of pornographic images. Challenged by some viewers who suggested that the images could have been inserted without the knowledge of Jehovah's Witnesses Governing Body or that they may only be a prank, Nuccio replied that the images were too numerous and too obvious, and that creating them can be no form or expression of humor (Nuccio, 2016).

In regard to the discrepancy between the ideas expressed through his project and his 1992 book, and the way in which the hidden images are currently being perceived and discussed, Barefoot stated:

I reject conspiracy-mongering in all its forms. I in no way endorse unsubstantiated and inflammatory accusations directed at any religious group including Jehovah's Witnesses. Further, I reject in the strongest terms the persecution of anyone, including Jehovah's Witnesses, for their peacefully-held opinions and the non-violent practice of their religion. Peaceful missionary activity by the members of any religion ought to be opposed only by the equally peaceful means of discussion and persuasion, never by violence, harassment, derision, or intimidation.<sup>74</sup>

Barefoot, who has no college background and describes himself as an "autodidact,"<sup>75</sup> states that since childhood he was "blessed with a combination of curiosity and tenacious memory" (Barefoot, 1992: 13). He recalls learning "the value of the written word. For as long as I can remember," he adds, "I have loved books" (p. 134). He also writes about his English teacher in high school encouraging him to cultivate his aptitude for writing (p. 138). It seems safe to state that such qualities and inclination are mirrored in his texts. They are punctuated with scriptural references as expected from someone who was shaped through intensive Biblical training within Jehovah's Witnesses, but they also contain multiple references to world literature. For instance, Barefoot compares his story with that of the protagonist of Henrik Ibsen's (1828-1906) play *An Enemy of the People* (1882) (Barefoot, 1992: 1).<sup>76</sup> Barefoot also demonstrates love for structured and meticulous argumentation. While not everyone will be convinced by Barefoot's theories, they are undoubtedly constructed and presented with subtlety and nuance; for instance, he is fond of carefully considering and refuting objections and

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<sup>74</sup> D. C. Barefoot, personal communication, 23 May 2021.

<sup>75</sup> D. C. Barefoot, personal communication, 3 December 2020. At the moment of writing, Barefoot works in the engineering department of a small manufacturer. He has several patents to his credit, but not having a degree in engineering, he does not refer to himself as an engineer. He instead sometimes describes himself as a "product designer" (Barefoot, personal communication, 28 May 2021).

<sup>76</sup> Other literary references include: L. Frank Baum (1856-1919) (Barefoot 1992, 73), Robert Bolt (1924-1995) (p. 91) Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) (p. 97), John Milton (1608-1674) (p. 121), William Blake (1757-1827) (p. 122), Arthur Miller (1915-2005) (p. 128), Fyodor Dostoevskij (1821-1881) (p. 130).

alternatives to his own claims. Such qualities and virtues aren't always instantiated across most of the conversations that currently echo, or draw upon, his original denunciation of the satanic images. In regard to the quality of Barefoot's style, arguments, and analytical skills, it is also highly telling that his writings about Lewis's *argument from reason* have been judged worthwhile by professional philosopher Reppert and incorporated in his scholarly discussions of the topic.

Barefoot's discussion of the satanic images, his elaboration on the *argument from reason* (as well as on related philosophical topics), and his "typogetics" may seem to cover different topics and they have found different (and not equally extended) audiences. However, I contend that they are characterized by a strong continuity. I am not only referring to the aforementioned formal qualities of Barefoot's texts, but to the fact that, on close and deep scrutiny, all of his discussions seem to reference, and rely on, a particular concept of *reason*. Reason (or mind), be it divine, satanic, or human, is characterized by the production of *patterns*. Patterns can therefore be taken by the human mind as a strong clue (although never univocal) as to the existence of a reasoning purposeful agent (although possibly an evil one).

Discussing why, if God is the universe's superintendent, catastrophes happen, Barefoot argues that "our cosmic discomfort is evidence that a rupture has occurred between us and the Source of life," concluding that "each of us must decide whether to cooperate with God's ongoing project to repair this breach through Christ" (Barefoot, 2010: 301). The imperfection of human reason contributes to such "discomfort" and also explains why absolute certainty is impossible, except perhaps in mathematics. Barefoot himself did experience a moment of uncertainty; he states that after high school, he started questioning religion, following a bereavement (Barefoot, 1992: 140-141). In a blog entry, he writes that "faith does not always mean belief that is unquestioning and immediate" (Barefoot, 2014b). Barefoot's work can be overall interpreted as an attempt at "repairing the breach," cooperating with God. The writer finds himself pushed by his curiosity to constantly use his reason to recognize patterns (both in reality and in the scriptures) indicative of other forms of reason, be they evil or good. In each and every act of "recognition" and in each and every argument made for the existence of such forms of reason, no matter how well and logically conducted, there always will be room for doubt, due to the aforementioned imperfection of the human mind. However, there is no alternative for the researcher and writer but to keep investigating, extending and refining his analysis, and communicating his results. In other words, in Barefoot's work, epistemology, exegesis, ethics and engagement as an author converge. Once a pattern is revealed, it calls not only for analysis and contemplation, but for action as well. In particular, the recognition of an intentional non-human agent through the patterns that it produces entails a strong moral obligation: denouncing and fighting satanic plans, or announcing, and adjusting to, divine ones.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Yves Mühlematter and Helmut Zander (eds), *Occult Roots of Religious Studies: On the Influence of Non-Hegemonic Currents on Academia around 1900* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021); xi, 283 pp.; ISBN: 978-3-11-066033-3; EPUB, Open Access.**

This volume consists of an introductory chapter and eight case studies. In “The Occult Roots of Religious Studies: An Introduction” editors Yves Mühlematter and Helmut Zander posit that the early academic discipline of religious studies has strong connections to esotericism that have been neglected by scholars. A focus on the start of the twentieth century permits the analysis of links between Tibetology and Theosophy, and Kabbalah and the thought of Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem, for example, and reveals the somewhat arbitrary nature of disciplinary boundaries. Moreover, the separation of the “scientific” study of religion from theology is revealed to have concealed the relationship of esoteric currents to emergent religious studies. As religious studies was establishing itself, other disciplines including archaeology, anthropology and sociology were also forming, and many subdisciplines resulted. Finally, an important source of information regarding these currents is to consider the biographies of scholars, which often reveal occult or paranormal preoccupations. The first chapter is Helmut Zander’s “What is Esotericism? Does it Exist? How Can It be Understood?” which reviews the beginnings of esotericism in the academy with the work of the late Antoine Faivre (1934-2021), critiqued for being content dependent and also favorable to insider views. Von Stuckrad’s idea of esotericism as a discursive formation, taken further by Michael Bergunder who views the term as an “empty signifier” (p. 20), and Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s characterization of esotericism as “rejected knowledge” (p. 22) excluded from the academy, are examined and criticized. Interesting problems that arise from the separation of research *fields* and of research *practices* are canvassed and the current push toward global esotericism is outlined. Zander concludes that esotericism as an open concept is the best way forward.

The second case study, Marco Frenschkowski’s “The Science of Religion, Folklore Studies, and the Occult Field in Great Britain (1870-1914): Some Observations on Competition and Cain-Abel Conflicts,” covers early scholars of religion such as Friedrich Max Müller and Edward Burnett Tylor (who were not theologians), and Julius Wellhausen and William Robinson Smith (who had been but were kicked out on account of their “scientific” research methods and findings. The place of magic, spirits, and other “non-scientific” phenomena in the work of Tylor and James George Frazer (both sceptics) indicates the fascination rationalists felt for such things. Very different participant methods and beliefs are evidenced in the work of Charles Godfrey Leland, primarily a folklorist, and the more respectable Andrew Lang, a believer in “psychic phenomena” (p. 54). Lang’s biography is examined in detail to instructive ends; Frenschkowski concludes that recent surveys of the origin of Religious Studies have elided the links with esotericism to the impoverishment of our knowledge of the discipline. Daniel Cyranka’s “Magnetism, Spiritualism, and the Academy: The Case of Nees von Esenbeck, President of the Academy of the Natural Sciences Leopoldina (1818-1858)” takes the biographical approach to a figure this reviewer had not heard of, giving insights by comparing incidents and interests in his life to later flashpoints of the formation of Religious Studies, such as the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago in 1893.

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Boaz Huss's "Academic Study of Kabbalah and Occultist Kabbalah" is an elegantly written and persuasive study of the labyrinthine connections between academic research in Kabbalah and various esoteric practitioners of Kabbalah-influenced activities and disciplines. Jewish scholars were generally positively disposed to Kabbalah but not engaged with occult interpretations, and non-Jewish authors who were practically engaged were less informed and produced non-academic works. Among the former, Huss covers Gershom Scholem, Adolphe Franck, Moses Gaster, Joshua Abelson, and Ernst Müller. The next chapter is Julian Strube's "Tantra as Experimental Science in the Works of John Woodroffe." This is a study of a central figure (who also wrote as Arthur Avalon) in the formation of Tantra studies in the twentieth century, who merged Bengal perspectives with Western perspectives and spoke equally powerfully to academic and esoteric audiences. This is followed by Jens Schlieter's "A Common Core of Theosophy in Celtic Myth, Yoga, and Tibetan Buddhism: Walter Y. Evans-Wentz and the Comparative Study of Religion." Evans-Wentz, an American Theosophist, identified Fairyland as "a supernormal state of consciousness" and asserted that the concept of rebirth was the "common core" of esoteric traditions (p. 161). Schlieter identifies Evans-Wentz as a neglected figure lacking an authoritative bibliography, and utilizes the biographical approach mentioned above. Evans-Wentz published a translation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, engaged with Native American spirituality, contributed to psychic research, and pioneered esoteric Celtic Studies.

*The final chapters are* Léo Bernard's "Paul Masson-Oursel (1882-1956): Inside and Outside the Academy" and Sabine Böhme's "The Ancient Processional Street of Babylon at the Pergamon Museum Berlin: Walter Andrae's Reconstruction and its Anthroposophical Background." The Indologist Masson-Oursel published in journals run by Julius Evola and Robert Linssen, an associate of Krishnamurti. Bernard traces his relationships with *René Guénon and the Traditionalists, the Ramakrishna Order, and Theosophy, among other groups*. Böhme's contribution is an analysis of the presentation of archaeological material to the public by Walter Andrae, a distinguished Near Eastern archaeologist and member of the Christian Community, a church that is part of Anthroposophy, founded by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), who had been head of the Theosophical Society in Germany, in 1912. As one who has been dazzled by the Ishtar Gate and the glorious antiquities held by the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, this fascinating excursion into how esoteric ideas influenced the curation of material culture is a highlight of the volume. After the chapters a selection of short biographies of relevant people from the period under review is provided by various authors.

This edited volume is methodologically interesting and makes an important contribution to the history of the disciplines of Religious Studies and Esoteric Studies (a term that is not generally used, but I think is more neutral than either Western Esotericism or (Global or any other) Esotericism. It will be of interest to scholars and students of Religious Studies in general as well as those in the field of Esotericism. The standard of the contributions is high, and the people and cultural trends discussed are both entertaining and relevant. I recommend it warmly to libraries and scholars alike, and congratulated De Gruyter on making it open access.

**Carole M. Cusack**  
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Steven J. Sutcliffe and Carole M. Cusack (eds), *The Problem of Invented Religions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); ISBN 9781138099036; £42.99.

Within the context of religious studies more and more attention has been paid recently to alternative forms of spirituality which are rooted in pop culture. The volume *The Problem of Invented Religions* investigates the theoretical concept of invented religions proposed by Carole M. Cusack in her *Invented Religions. Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Ashgate, 2010) and is located on the intellectual route which leads to *Fiction, Invention and Hyper-reality*, which she edited with Pavol Kosnáč in the *Routledge Inform Series on Minority Religions and Spiritual Movements* (2017).

This book is a republished special issue of the journal *Culture and Religion* (Vol. 14, Issue 4, 2013) so it is a miscellany of contributions by different authors, who try to expand the concept examining it from a range of perspectives.

The essay by Cusack proposes to link the theoretical framework of invention to Robert N. Bellah's studies on play "which features in language, art, myth [...] is crucial to the human experience of what Bellah calls unitive events" (p. 12), while Danielle Lee Kirby demonstrates how various groups (The Church of SubGenius, Jedism, and Sithism) develop relationships with the fictional texts in their manifold functions (catalyst, proof, reality, practice, and so on). Essi Mäkelä and Johanna Petsche connect "invented religions" to Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity" in an article on Discordianism, a parody religion dedicated to the worship of Eris, the goddess of discord; while Steven Sutcliffe rereads from an historical perspective the heritage of the Rosicrucian manifestos (1614-16) on the Rosicrucian Order, Crotona Fellowship (ROCF).

However, not every essay agrees positively on the validity of using the term "invented religions". The volume is constituted in part by critical contributions, as in the case of Markus Altena Davidsen, who offers a proposal to replace "invented religions" with the term "fiction-based religions". Paul-Francois Tremlett believes that the term "invention" brings an excessive concentration on texts, forgetting that religions are "a product of a specific kind of society and particular types of social relationships" (p. 116). In the last article, Teemu Taira similarly challenges the term, arguing that the invented status is only one of the many criteria to consider in terms of the idea of religion as a whole.

This collection of essays supplies the scholar, as well as the uninitiated student, fruitful insights in the general concept of "religion" and in what constitutes it, both in terms of belief and in practice.

Due to the clarity of presentation and the simple structure of the volume (helped by the introductions and conclusions to each chapter, reflecting their origin as journal articles) I would recommend it to undergraduate students and general readers interested in the significance of spirituality for contemporary human beings and the importance of cultures and religions beyond the Abrahamic and World Religions, as well as to scholarly researchers.

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***Solitary Pagans: Contemporary Witches, Wiccans & Others Who Practice Alone.* Helen A. Berger, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2019, 208 pages, ISBN: 978-1-64336-008-9 Hardcover, \$34.99.**

Contemporary Paganism is a religion which attracted much attention during the 1990s and 2000s after the unprecedented success of television series, e.g. the series 'Charmed' (1998), related particularly to young witches. This has led to a number of publications focusing not only on witches but on other forms of contemporary Paganism as well, like heathens, druids, wiccans, etc. (York, 1995; Pike, 2001). This book focuses on those contemporary Pagans who mainly practice alone without belonging to a Pagan group and maintain few contacts and social bonds with other Pagans. It is the outcome of a large-scale worldwide survey about Paganism that the author conducted together with J.R. Lewis (The Pagan Census Revisited, 2009-2010) as a follow-up of her previous survey (The Pagan Census). The author, Helen Berger is one of the most well-known scholars in the broader field of Paganism, who has been conducting both quantitative and qualitative research during the last decades (Berger, 1999; Berger and Douglas, 2007).

The book elaborates on survey data mainly from the United States, but it also includes comparative data from the United Kingdom and Australia. At the same time, although the book basically deals with solitary pagans, it makes stimulating comparisons with group practitioners as well and this is a value-added element of the analysis. The main themes the book presents and discusses relate to pagan practices (individual or group ones) (chapters 2 and 3), their spiritual practices (chapter 4) and their social and political engagement and disengagement (chapter 5). The author's main concern through this book is to explore which demographic groups practice alone and how being solitary influences their spiritual practice, interconnection with others and political commitments. Furthermore, through this book she contributes to the growing debate about whether or not the new metaphysicals (Bender, 2010) create a type of narcissism, which results in their social and political disengagement (pp. 19-20).

The author argues that solitary practitioners are not socially isolated, although they tend to have fewer contacts with other contemporary Pagans compared to those who are members of a community. However, it comes out that even solitary Pagans tend to be much more politically active than the average Americans and from this perspective contemporary Paganism provides a good case study of the intersection of religious individualism, social engagement and political activism (p. 2). This is illustrated by the data Berger provides with regard to contemporary Pagans' social and political engagement. Despite the fact that contemporary Pagans communicate primarily via the Internet and they construct their identity around significant publications by key-Pagan figures, this does not mean that they do not interact with others or that they are bowling alone according to Putnam's famous book (2001). In her effort to juxtapose Putnam's argument, Berger explicitly shows that what one means by socio-political disengagement should be carefully approached and defined and that solitary Pagans are far from this kind of isolation. On the debate about whether spiritual or religious isolation results in individuals becoming apolitical or that they move from emancipatory to lifestyle politics, she argues that neither is correct. Although group practitioners are indeed more politically active, solitary ones are not withdrawn from political action (p. 154).

A very interesting finding is that contemporary Pagans, solitary or not, should not be identified with the extreme-right or the alt-right, a dominant perception in the public sphere. According to Berger the only sub-group that takes more positively neo-Nazis and racialists is that of Heathens. However, this is only evident when they are compared to the broader group of contemporary Pagans, otherwise the data do not imply such a significant number of positive views that would allow someone to argue that Heathens feel close to racialists and/or neo-Nazis (pp. 145-146). On the contrary and at the same time Heathens are also holding more negative views towards neo-Nazis and racialists compared to other Pagans, probably in their effort to stress their opposing attitude towards this kind of stereotypes that imply their sympathy for extremist views and practices.

The main findings of the book are first that solitary practitioners faced a significant increase between the two surveys conducted by Berger. Second, overall solitary practitioners are somewhat younger, less likely to be married or in a long-term relationship, be female and live in rural areas. Third, solitary Pagans are less likely to share their spiritual beliefs with their romantic partner, spouse or children, compared to those participating in groups. Fourth, an interesting finding was that women, as it is the case in most of the other religions, are more religious and spiritual compared to men, with the only exception being the practice of magic which men seem to practice more. Finally, and based on Anthony Giddens's (1991) approach on emancipatory politics (e.g. voting, writing letters to politicians, demonstrating), Berger argues that solitary Pagans seem to be engaged to social and political issues. It seems to be unclear if such an increased political activity results from the spiritual practices, mythology and rituals of the religion. In any case it is an indication that participation in this religion, even in its solitary form, does not lead in withdrawal from political activity (p. 168).

Overall, the book offers a lucid and in-depth presentation of contemporary Paganism with a special focus on solitary practitioners. Although it focuses basically on the United States, it offers insights from Australia and the UK and makes fruitful comparisons with group practitioners and the broader American society. The last aspect is crucial when it comes to conclusions so that misinterpretations and superficial generalizations about Pagans are avoided. The book is full of very useful survey data presented in tables, although in some cases they could be less. Finally, the book offers insights and ideas for further research with regard to Paganism that could be undertaken in the future.

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